

PRONOUNCEMENT

Middle East Conflict

Accepted: March 2023



THE AFM'S POSITION TOWARDS THE CURRENT CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

1. Introduction

In May 2021 the Washing Post published an article entitled, “The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: A chronology” and the authors Murphy and Taylor (2021) write that “the roots of the conflict and mistrust are deep and complex, often predating the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.” They describe the past 70 years as a time of wars, uprisings and at times a glimmer of hope for compromise. Starting with an AFM response cannot be done without a proper investigation into the chronology of events that have led to the current conflict but time and space do not allow one to produce an exhaustive account and satisfy all viewpoints. However, a Christian response is wanted and more a specific Pentecostal response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to Christianity’s origins as one of the three major Abrahamic religions.

2. Mixed South African responses to the crisis

Recent responses from prominent South Africans to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict lay bare the deep and complex nature of taking a position but also how timeous and relevant such a position is in the light of recent events. One of those events was the statement by the former Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng during an interview with the Jerusalem Post that it was his obligation as a Christian to love Israel and pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

During this interview, the Chief Justice said the following words: “If I curse Abraham and Israel, the almighty God will curse me too. I cannot do anything, as a Christian, other than love and pray for Israel because I know hatred for Israel by me and for my nation can only attract unprecedented curses” (Sidimba, 2021). Later the Chief Justice apologized for his comments on South African policy on Israel, “I Mogoeng Mogoeng, the former Chief Justice of the Republic of South Africa, hereby apologizes unconditionally for becoming involved in political controversy through my utterances at the online seminar (webinar)...” (Mthethwa, 2022).

Reactions to Mogoeng’s apology indicates how deeply divided South Africans are on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In some circles the apology is regarded as a sad day when it becomes controversial to call for peace in the Middle East (Marks, 2022).

The argument goes that the Chief Justice should never be censured for his comments that were seized and politicized by anti-Semitic factions. Its effect on discourse surrounding Israel is negative and extremist voices intent on derailing the cause of peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is thereby bolstered. Ellerbeck (2020) states that the Chief Justice was within his legal rights (of religious freedom and freedom of speech) to make his statements whether it was regarded as contested or offensive by others.

Mokgobu (2022) states that the decision of the Judicial Commission to demand an unconditional apology were welcomed by organizations like Africa4Palestine, SABDS and the Women's Cultural Group who laid the complaint. The fight on the one hand was to keep the judiciary fair and impartial and on the other hand because the Chief Justice condoned the apartheid regime of Israel which they regard as morally repugnant. Ncwane (2022) reports that the apology is a victory for all Palestinian activists because it indicates that South Africa are in support of international law and human rights and that it is incorrect to suggest otherwise.

This brings me to the heart of our question, considering the diverse opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is it possible to take a one-size-fits-all position on such a contentious issue on behalf of a diverse church as the AFMSA? How should such a statement be made? Is it done on purely biblical grounds, should we be taking into account inter-religious and ecumenical positions, keeping in mind the political and human rights aspects to the conflict? This paper endeavors to provide a chronology of events leading up to the current flare of conflict in Israel-Palestine; analyses the nature of the conflict in considering some political, religious and human rights issues; and proposes a balanced AFM position to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

3. Israel-Palestinian Conflict- a chronology of events

3.1 1900-1948

In 1900 the population were made up of 90% Arabs but since the start of the Zionist movement that was formed in response to anti-Semitic persecutions in Europe in the 1800's, Jews were migrating back. After the disintegration of the Turkish Ottoman Empire in World War 1 the British Empire took over in Palestine and reign from 1917 to 1948 by mandate. By 1947 there were 400 000 Jews living in Palestine and 800 000 Palestinians, a mixture of Muslims and Christians. After the bloody war of Independence in 1948, the Jewish forces gained victory and the new state of Israel was formed.

3.2 1948-1978 Declaration of the state of Israel

After the 1948 declaration of Israel as a state a coalition of Arab states with Palestinian factions battled the Israeli forces for control but at the end Israel took control of a large portion of the territory and hundreds of Palestinians fled or were driven from their land. From the 800 000 Palestinians, 700 000 became refugees in camps registered by the United Nations, forced into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The border between Israel and Palestine territories was established, called the Green lane.

After the Six Day War in 1967 between Israel and Egypt, Israel took control of the Gaza Strip, Sinai, the West bank, the Golan heights and predominantly Arab East Jerusalem and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians flee or were displaced. In 1973 a coalition of Arab nations led by Egypt started a surprise attack on Israel but were driven back by an Israeli counter offensive supported by the United States. In 1978 a peace deal was brokered by President Jimmy Carter (USA) between President Anwar Sadat (Egypt) and Prime Minister Menachem Begin (Israel) but it did not last. In December 1987 a Palestinian uprising or intifada Brought clashes and protests in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel with many people killed on both sides.

3.3 1993-2006 Oslo Accord

In 1993 the first Oslo accord were signed between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) which created the Palestinian Authority to oversee administrative affairs in the West Bank and Gaza, an organization recognized by Israel and the USA as a negotiating partner. Some of the issues that remain unresolved was Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the status of Jerusalem that is regarded by Palestinians as their future capital. In 1995 the Oslo 2 Accords expanded on the first agreement by mandating the complete withdrawal of Israel from 6 cities and 450 towns in the West Bank.

In 2000 a second Palestinian uprising or intifada took place which continued until 2005, killing hundreds of people on both sides. In 2002 the Israeli government responded by constructing a barrier wall around West Bank despite opposition from the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. In 2006 Hamas, a Palestinian militant group won elections in Gaza which led to political strain with Fatah that was controlling the West Bank.

3.4 2008-2022 Israel-Palestinian Conflict continues

In 2008 rocket were shot into Israel by Palestinian militants and three weeks of attacks followed in Gaza leaving dead 1110 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. The same happened in 2012 and 150 Palestinians were killed with six Israelis. After Hamas militants killed three Israeli teenagers in 2014 Israel responded with the military and killed 2200 Palestinians in Gaza, with 67 soldiers and six civilians killed from Israel by rockets. In December 2017 President Donald Trump (USA) recognized Jerusalem as the capital of `Israel and moved the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, stirring outrage from Palestinians.

In 2018 protest took place along the Israeli fence to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Nakba, the Palestinian exodus that accompanied Israel independence. The United Nations reports that a 180 protesters were killed and more than 6000 wounded by live ammunition. In May 2018 fighting broke out between Hamas and the Israeli military, hundreds of rockets were fired into Israel and `Israel responded with more than 50 strikes on targets in the 24 hours flare up. In May 2021 Israeli police raided a holy Muslim site in Jerusalem thousands of rockets were fired into Israel for the first time after 2014, leaving more than 200 Palestinians dead and 10 Israelis killed.

4. Nature of the conflict: Political, Religious or Human Rights?

4.1 Political factor

When people refer to the conflict as a political problem then they come up with a two state or a one state solution. A two state solution implies that both the State of Israel and the Palestinian state should have the right to rule themselves independently in order to be a nation of their own. A one state solution mean that Palestinians should be given citizenship and equal rights in Israel. Zahnd (2015) argues that the demographics that constitute a democracy are not right for Palestinians in Israel for a one state solution to work. He identifies four different political statuses that Palestinians have living in Israel and occupied territories.

Arab Israelis forms about 1.6 million people from the population that have citizenship and passports to travel but are treated like second class citizens due to the Jewish Law of Return. Hereby, they are stripped from their land uneven allocation of resources to Arab population areas. Arab East Jerusalem residents that forms about 200 000 people of the population do not have citizenship or travel passports but green cards, can only vote in municipal but not national elections. They can travel freely in the country but when travel abroad they might not return back. West Bank Palestinians are about 2.8 million people and must have papers to travel in Israel, can only work there with a permit from the Israel military, have no political or civil rights in Israel. People from Gaza forms about 1.8 million of the population and are in Zahnd's words actually "imprisoned" within Gaza because they are only allowed to leave with military approval for extreme reasons, have little access to the outside world and are separated from their families for years.

4.2 Religious factor

Mostafa (2018) states that several factors like the ethnic, national and historical are driving the conflict but that the religious factor as the actual one should thus be included as a solution to it. This is determined by religious factors like the sanctity of holy sites and apocalyptic narratives that is detrimental to any lasting peace for Islam (with Islamic groups that want to liberate holy territories and sites for religious reasons) and Judaism (with extreme religious Zionists who see themselves as the guardians and definers of how a Jewish state should be). Religious radicalism is further enhanced by the worsening socio-economic conditions of the Arab and Islamic world.

Permanent status issues like borders, security, mutual recognition, refugees, the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and authority over Jerusalem is at the heart of the conflict. Settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem, directly affects the faith of Muslims and Jews because both of them including Christians have holy sites there. For Jews, Jerusalem was the capital of the Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King David, the home of the Temple Mount and the Western Wall. These are also sanctified sites to Muslims, the city was the first Quibla, the direction which Muslims face when they pray, the place where prophet Muhammad's nigh journey (Isra' and Mi'raj) happened.

West Bank settlements are dear to Jews because it represents to them the restoration of the biblical land Israel and return of the Messiah while Muslims believe that the whole Palestine should be under Islamic rule, fulfilling prophecies from the traditional sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadith). Interventions to curb religious violence in the conflict proposed by Mostafa (2018) includes interfaith dialogue; remembrance of past fruitful cooperation between Jews and Muslims; focus on religious texts that asserts positive and tolerant religious values that is reinforced in education systems. This can be helpful to achieve a peace deal, mitigate the conflict and secure peaceful co-existence in the future.

4.3 Human Rights factor

Momberg (2020:365), who formed part of a World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel to monitor human rights violations, states that Palestinians (whether in Israel or Palestine) regard the Nakba or catastrophe of losing land, lives, livelihoods and human rights as relentlessly continuing. Momberg (2020: 380) experienced firsthand how the ethnic, militarized settler-colonial project of over 70 years seems to destroy the history, identity, livelihood, presence, civil rights and lives of Palestinians.

The reality is that the separation wall erected in Palestinian territory has turned their towns and villages into prisons which led inhuman conditions; Israeli settlements are controlling their natural resources; daily humiliation at military checkpoints; separation of members of the same families; restriction of religious liberty; emptying of Jerusalem of Palestinian citizens, Christians and Muslims; Israeli disregard for international law; discriminatory policies against Palestinians within the state of Israel; emigration of Christians from Palestine; justification from Israel for the occupation; wrongful portrayal of Israel's occupation as a war against terror (Leonard, 2010: 353).

Momberg (2020:369) chooses not to work with a pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian framework because it perpetuates further othering and exclusion but rather to be concerned with contributions that favor inclusive human rights. This deliberate choice excludes those who want to advance exclusivist, polarized, or fundamentalist positions, but includes views of advocates for a just, peaceful cohabitation through non-violent means, that respects international law that supports the Palestinian campaign for a just peace and self-determination. Participants in Momberg's study rejects the view that the Israel-Palestinian conflict is a religious clash, that it is not a Jewish or a Muslim struggle but rather a human rights struggle. In the context of the Palestinian struggle, all three monotheistic faiths (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) need to repent and recover the justice and humaneness that inspire them.

Participants also regards their involvement in the Palestinian struggle as an expression of integrity, which means being authentic, genuine, whole, undivided and consistent in applying morally sound values. Their shared motivation for activism is not religion but their quest for moral consistency.

Participants link the Palestinian struggle with a greater ethical struggle against xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Zionism and for the rights of refugees, black lives and gender equality (Momborg, 2020: 379). They are not inspired by a national state or a privileged religion but by the moral state between people from different orientations. Momborg (2020: 380) reports on how Palestinians express grace and resilience amidst the rubble of bombed houses, schools and hospitals, dilapidated infrastructure, death, disablement and desolation, interconnecting ugliness and beauty.

Van Heerden (2022) states that the project of occupation, colonization, racism and Jewish supremacy on the part of Israel continues unchallenged. Human rights abuses by the Russians against the people of Ukraine are openly criticized by the international community but the same in Palestine continue unchallenged. Zionists are convincing the world that any criticism levelled against Israel must be seen as anti-Semitic but at the same time Israelis continue treating Palestine's as if they are less than human. Van Heerden (2020) criticizes the fact that the International Criminal Court is on the road to investigate crimes of war in Ukraine after one week but the daily obvious crimes of war in Israel that is taking place for the last 50 and more years after occupation are left unchecked. As long as Palestinian people are not seen as human beings and the suffering ended, like the Ukrainians, a two state solution will continue to be a fantasy.

5. Christian-Palestinian responses

Leonard (2010: 345) reports that Christians in Palestine do not regard the conflict in Israel-Palestine as political but as a policy in which human beings die, which must be of concern for the Church. Zahnd (2018) agree that Christians should not take sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but to imitate Israel's Messiah. Leonard (2010: 353) further reports that Palestinian Christians regard the justification of Israel's occupation and treatment of Palestinians by some theologians and Bible believing Christians as wrong and misplaced, leading to further suffering. Israeli occupation of Palestine is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians (Muslim and Christian) of their human rights bestowed by God.

Christian Palestinians declare that "any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings, because it calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty." This subordinates God to temporary human interests and distort the divine image in human beings living under political and theological injustice.

Bush (2013:98) concurs that a shared identity and a renewed nationalism drawn from Christ's kenosis or self-emptying (Philippians 2:5-) hold possibilities of reconciliation between the communities of Israel-Palestine. It is the nationalistic emphasis that fuels the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, a kenotic approach as a model of reconciliation implies a self-emptying on both sides from the prerogative of power and the consequent rude triumphalism, for the embracing of a radical servanthood. Bush (2013: 100) continues that Christ's kenosis as an affirmation of humanity is a profound response to dehumanization in the context of violence and can become part of the prophetic voice that Palestinian Christians may be in this conflict.

A Christian response should be to stand where God stands, to join ecumenical and international efforts for a peaceful solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Bush (2013: 109) concludes, “the wider Christian family must also have the same mind of Christ who emptied himself, moving past the partisan inclinations which erodes the grace of God in the church’s attitudes and actions towards Israel and Palestine.” The question is, what attitude and action should the AFMSA take with regards to the complex and contentious Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

6. Pentecostals and Israel

Sullivan (2013) state that Pentecostals have inherited and modernised the fundamentalist end-time system that believe a number of prerequisites must occur before the end of the world. Some of these requisites are restoration of the biblical borders of Israel; return of the Jews from Israel and Armageddon, the final war between Israel and their enemies. Pentecostals understand future events related to Israel from a prophetic perspective and display their commitment through the planting of trees, political involvement, volunteering in helping with immigration, all night prayer vigils, fasting, evangelism, etc. Pentecostals support the call to prayer for Israel and even organise such events.

Tenorio (2022), state that Pentecostals are fascinated with Israel because of their end-time views, the culmination of history as we know it before the Second Coming of Christ and the role that Jews will play in it. A widespread belief amongst Pentecostals is that Jews must convert to Christianity or burn in hell, therefore the urge to secretly convert Jews in the here and now. Some churches include Jewish elements in their worship which include the blowing of the shofar or ram’s horn, star of David flags in their churches.

Pomerville (2017) argues that the New Testament is against any form of Christian Zionism and its new unorthodox dispensational theology. The emphasis on the nation of Israel in their theology is not supported by the New Testament, instead it was repudiated by Jesus and the apostle’s theology of gospel of the Kingdom of God. Christian Zionism is a retro-theology, a return to the pre-Christian religion of Judaism and a corruption of the ancient faith of Israel. Pomerville (2017) points out the way in which an Israel-influence impacts cultures and argues for a Christian view of the Israel-Palestinian conflict that follows Jesus’s universal gospel of the kingdom of God without an excessive influence from Judaism as true option for belief in the Middle East. Christian mission is endangered by a narrow Christian Zionism, that jeopardises world mission as in the first century when hatred between Jews and Gentiles were supported by a narrow Israel oriented gospel, fuelling hatred between the West and Islam.

7. Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem

Nichols (2006) states that the emotional and at times irrational determination by followers of different faiths to control the soil traces its roots to Jerusalem, a compact city that is home to structures, traditions and the living faith communities of Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

The struggle among these religions led to bloodshed on the ancient streets of Jerusalem, forgetting that they are called to seek the peace- not property, ideological re-assurance or tactical advantage. Psalm 122: 2-3 refers to Jerusalem as a city that is joined together, other meanings is that the city is bound together, knitted together, compact together, solidly joined and solidly united. Jerusalem was designated as an international city by the UN in 1947 and was divided into two after the war of 1948 (Jordan conquered East Jerusalem and Israel West Jerusalem), which was united again in 1967 as city joined together. Today the inhabitants of the city include Jews, Arabs and people from all over the world (Psalm 122: 4-5).

Psalm 122: 6-7 are often quoted as a multilayered asking for Shalom or peace, which means complete and paid for, which is the root meaning of the name Jerusalem. From verses 8-9 the theme of friendship, brotherhood and companionship is continued, a way of being together in tranquility, wellbeing and physical togetherness. It is a prayer for the restoration of relationships in the city. The AFMSA cannot but join this universal call for the peace of Jerusalem.

8. AFM response/position/perspective

The AFMSA acknowledge her roots as a Pentecostal Church that forms part of Christianity, one of the three Abrahamic faiths together with Judaism and Islam, that have her historical origins in the land where the conflict between Israel and Palestine resides.

We the AFMSA pray for the peace of Jerusalem as demanded by Scripture without discriminating against any of the original inhabitants of the land, we refuse to be protagonists or antagonists in the conflict but rather stand where Christ stands: on the side of God's love for humanity in the context of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the right to human dignity and human rights of both groups. We stand where Christ stand with regards to efforts to find a solution as peace makers in a volatile and life threatening situation that have continued for too long. We renounce any form of violence and human rights abuses perpetuated against Israelis and Palestinians.

We the AFMSA calls on the South African government and the International community to apply the same rules of engagement in peace efforts with the people of Israel and Palestine as they apply to other recent conflicts and war like the one between Russia and Ukraine. The AFMSA will continue to pray for peace in the land of our religious origins and support all efforts that work towards securing prosperity for people on both sides of the divide.

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