

Department of International Affairs

THE HOLY LAND 2000 A Discussion Document

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Introduction

This document explains why the Bishops of England and Wales believe that support from the Catholic community for the Church in the Holy Land is a matter of urgency. This support needs to be expressed in three main ways:

- through prayer for the successful outcome of the peace process
- through advocacy on behalf of human rights and for the upholding of international law
- through financial generosity

The attainment of these aims requires an adequate awareness of the issues involved.

It is a daunting task to explain briefly matters so complex and controversial. Conflicting views are held passionately by the parties involved, especially since the different peoples of this region have endured terrible suffering. One can scarcely hope to be free from all distortion, even by the very choice of what to mention and what to leave out. The need for repentance with respect to a long history of anti-Jewish prejudice among Christians calls for modesty in the essential task of forming and expressing moral judgements about contemporary affairs.

This discussion document is therefore offered as deserving serious consideration, but strictly on its own merits. It is the bishops' hope and prayer that the current process of intensive negotiations between the political leaders of the region will be conducted in good faith, that they might bring about justice, peace and reconciliation, and that they begin to transform a history marked by so much division and violence.

Some historical and political background

Palestine and Zionism

By the Holy Land, we mean the area where the great events of the Gospels took place. Today this area roughly corresponds to Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian territories.

By the First World War, the Jewish people were scattered throughout the world, and there were at most 80,000 Jews in Palestine, compared with some 600,000 Arabs. Palestine, the traditional Promised Land of the Old Testament, had by then been part of the Ottoman Empire for four hundred years and was predominantly Arab and Islamic in culture. But in the nineteenth century a 'Zionist' movement, which aspired to achieve Jewish sovereignty in Palestine, had arisen among Jews, principally in Europe.

In 1917, a letter of the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, became famous as the Balfour Declaration and gave the Zionist movement new impetus. Its most significant passage said:

'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.'

The Declaration carefully referred to a 'home' not a state. But for Arabs, Zionism now became a serious threat; the Declaration referred to Arabs merely as 'non-Jewish communities', and made no mention of safeguarding their political rights. It must have seemed that a simple project of Jewish return to the longed-for land was inevitably tainted by a claim to sovereignty that could only be implemented at Arab expense.

The British Mandate

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, Britain accepted a League of Nations Mandate to govern Palestine, based on the principle of the Balfour Declaration, although that was never accepted by Palestinians. Jewish migration to Palestine increased throughout the next twenty years, especially after Hitler came to power in Germany. This influx affected the balance of population and led to sporadic serious disturbances.

In 1947, Palestine suffered increasing civil violence under the pressure of conflicting Jewish and Arab aims. Britain finally withdrew its troops, and the United Nations proposed a partition plan by which there would be a Jewish state, a Palestinian state, and an international zone to include Jerusalem. This plan also failed, and war broke out.

The State of Israel

In May 1948, as the British Mandate ended, the State of Israel was declared. It was immediately recognised by both the United States and the Soviet Union, although not by the Arab states. Arab armies attacked Israel but were no match for the Israeli forces, and Israel quickly gained control of large tracts of territory which the UN partition plan had allotted to the Arab state. What for the Israelis was the War of Independence was for the Arabs the Catastrophe (al-Naqba). Hundreds of villages were cleared: and partly as a result of the massacre of about 250 Palestinian villagers by Israeli forces at Deir Yasin, there began a massive exodus of more than 700,000 Palestinian refugees. At this time, some fifty to sixty percent of the Christian population became homeless.

To this period, therefore, can be traced two issues that have marked all subsequent events:

- the refusal of many Arab states to recognise the State of Israel's right to exist
- the Palestinian refugees' right to return to their homeland

Israel was admitted to the UN in 1949 on the basis that refugees would indeed have the right to return, but Israel has always insisted that the fate of the refugees could only be considered in the context of a general peace settlement, which has never been achieved.

Further conflict

Since 1948, the region has endured more or less continuous conflict, and occasional war. From 1964, the founding of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) both reflected and intensified the simmering tensions rooted in the unresolved problems of frontiers,

refugees, and the control of scarce water sources. There were many raids into Israel from across its borders, and many heavy Israeli retaliations. The tensions erupted in the Six Day War of 1967, when Israel devastated the armed forces of Egypt, capturing Sinai and the Gaza Strip, and occupied territory previously held by Jordan (the West Bank and East Jerusalem) and Syria (the Golan Heights). A further 300,000 Palestinians were forced from their homes.

The UN Security Council passed Resolution 242, which emphasised that the gain of territory by war was inadmissible and called for Israeli withdrawal from the conquered territories in return for an Arab de facto recognition of Israel. However, this resolution, and Resolution 252 which applied the provisions of Resolution 242 specifically to expropriations intended to change the legal status of Jerusalem, have never been implemented. From 1967, Israel has become the dominant power in the region. It has been able to rely on the decisive and unvarying political support of the United States, although it has remained deeply isolated in the Middle East.

Subsequent years have seen more outbreaks of war. In 1973, Israel was attacked by Egypt, supported by Syria, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. In 1978 and again in 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon intending to root out Palestinian forces harassing Israel from Lebanese territory. In defiance of UN resolutions, Israel has continued to occupy territory in the south of Lebanon ever since, converting large tracts of land into Israeli security zones. In February 2000, Israel was again bombing military and civilian targets in Lebanon, in reprisal for the killing of Israeli troops by the Hizbollah guerrillas of Lebanon.

There have also been many guerrilla or commando attacks by both sides, inside and outside the region. In perhaps the two most notorious, nine Israeli athletes were murdered at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972 by the Black September group of Palestinian extremists, and in Lebanon in 1982, after Palestinian forces were evacuated under US supervision and Israeli troops had occupied the vicinity, right-wing Lebanese forces massacred the inhabitants of the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. In 1987 the Intifada, a widespread and sometimes violent civil campaign against Israeli rule, which provoked massive counter-measures, began in Gaza.

Peace process

The peace process was given fresh impetus by the Camp David Agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1978. Israel returned Sinai to Egypt - and Egypt became a temporary outcast to other Arab states. The multilateral process has turned on the Oslo Accord of 1993. There, the PLO withdrew its denial of the right of Israel to exist in peace and security, Israel recognised the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and Palestinians gained a degree of autonomy in Gaza and in four percent of the West Bank. In the Wye Plantation Agreement (1998) Israel agreed to return a further eleven percent of the West Bank. However, this territory remains divided into separate pockets of land, joined by roads controlled by the Israeli Defence Force.

International influences

International perspective has been important throughout this history. For a time, the parties seemed to become virtual proxies for the Cold War, since Israel had military backing from the United States, whereas the former Soviet Union tended to be hostile to Israel. In general, ever since the atrocity of the Shoah (Holocaust) and despite the recurring danger of Western anti-Semitism, Israel has been able to count on a deep well of sympathy in Europe and in the United States. It has been moving to see a new (and yet ancient) people recover from such a calamity. However, this sympathy seems to have reinforced Western prejudice against Arabs, so that the West has readily overlooked Palestinian sufferings. Many Palestinians argue that Israel's determination never again to

be a victim has forged their own oppression: to be 'victims of the victims' has gained them little sympathy.

The Christian community, and the pressures affecting it

The regional conflict is often imagined as a confrontation between Judaism and Islam. This notion is misguided, in two main ways. Firstly, within the State of Israel the influence of religiously observant Jews (themselves of very diverse groupings) is offset and contested by secular groups. Secondly, a significant Christian minority is also present in all countries of the region. It is often remarked that Jerusalem is a unique city, holy to the adherents of three faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the subject of competing national aspirations to two peoples, Israeli and Palestinian.

Christian diversity

The Christian community, comprising approximately ten percent of the overall Palestinian population, is complex. The Latin-rite Catholic Patriarchate of Jerusalem is only one of several Catholic Churches, along with the Melkites (Greek Catholics) and others. An important Memorandum of 1994, *On the Significance of Jerusalem for Christians*, was issued by the leaders of thirteen Christian communities, among them Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran. There is also a small but significant community of Hebrew-speaking Christians in Israel, who share the national culture.

Since 1967, forty percent of all Christians have left the country. According to the relevant 1999 Directory, Latin-rite Catholics now number about 72,000 in the whole of Israel, Palestine and Jordan. (By way of comparison, this is less than half the Catholic population of Wales.) Few jobs and little decent housing are available, so even those Christians who become graduates (for example, through the admirable Bethlehem University) experience great pressure to emigrate; and, as few of those who emigrate will ever have the chance to return, the community is further eroded.

Most significant of all, the continued regional conflict profoundly debilitates those who are relatively powerless. In 1992, the Archbishop of Canterbury expressed his fear that within fifteen years Jerusalem and Bethlehem, once lively Christian centres, could become almost theme parks as the number of Christians decreases. Conversely, the best hope for a Christian resurgence is the attaining of a just peace.

Recent tensions

The downward trend is reinforced by disputes such as that in Nazareth in 1999. Christian worshippers were severely harassed for several months by a militant Islamic group, and the Israeli authorities did not intervene. The Israeli Government has now chosen to agree with the militants that a large mosque may be built immediately overlooking the Church of the Annunciation, although (crucially) the project does not have the approval of the most senior Islamic leaders who regard the project as provocative. Some Christian leaders seriously allege a government ploy, dividing and polarising the population of Nazareth - Israel's largest Arab city - between Muslim and Christian.

The Nazareth dispute casts light on the Holy See's belief that Jerusalem, with its unique status in the religious heritage of humanity, requires effective international guarantees for the protection of those of all faiths. Otherwise, Israel has both the means and the will to maintain absolute control of the city. This point will be elaborated below.

Economic situation

The Palestinian economy and the conditions of life for the population have declined, even since the Oslo Accord - an inconclusive peace process deters economic development. The average income of residents of Gaza and the West Bank is estimated at 600 US dollars per annum. It is not surprising that the Church's financial needs are urgent also, especially since it is the Latin Patriarchate which provides the bulk of educational and other social services, widely used by Muslims as well as Christians.

Bilateral diplomatic relations

In 1993, the Holy See and the State of Israel signed a Fundamental Agreement. It affords mutual diplomatic recognition (of the Church in Israel, and Israel by the Church) and lays the foundation for further agreements on all aspects of Church-State relations. Implementation has, however, been very slow: agreement on the fiscal status of the Church (necessary for its economic survival) has not yet been agreed; Palestinian priests do not have freedom of access to Catholic prisoners, soldiers, hospital patients; nor do they or other Palestinians have access to the Holy Places of Jerusalem; measures are still lacking for the necessary provision of churches and other institutions.

In February 2000, the Holy See signed an analogous Basic Agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, as representative of the Palestinian people. The Agreement specifies the rights and responsibilities of each party, and once again calls for a special statute for Jerusalem of the kind explained below.

Current issues and problems

The status of Jerusalem

One indication of the unique status of Jerusalem is its name. To Jews it is Yerushalayim ('Founded by God'); to Muslims it is Al-Quds ('The Holy'). Israel's consistent position has been that a unified Jerusalem must remain the 'eternal capital of Israel', under exclusive Israeli sovereignty. The Palestinian Authority holds, no less firmly, that Jerusalem must be the capital of the Palestinian state, although Palestinians lay claim not to the entire modern city but only to its eastern, Arab part. The almost universal international view, including that of Britain, of the Holy See and of the United Nations, is that East Jerusalem is occupied territory, illegally annexed: as an indication of this conviction, all states except Costa Rica and El Salvador maintain their embassies in Tel Aviv, rather than Jerusalem, to avoid symbolising agreement to the present situation. Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, the senior Vatican official on these matters, has described the situation of Jerusalem today as 'a case of manifest international injustice ... brought about and maintained by force'.

Therefore, the Holy See (with those other Churches which signed the 1994 Memorandum already referred to) calls for a special judicial and political statute for Jerusalem, guaranteed by the international community. In the face of the Israeli claim to sole sovereignty, such a statute is held to be necessary in order to assure to all the city's inhabitants an equal enjoyment of human rights, and the freedom to pursue their spiritual, cultural, political and economic activities. Not surprisingly, Israel rejects the demand.

Residency rights and housing

Since annexing Arab East Jerusalem in 1967, the Israeli Government has sought to establish a Jewish majority there by promoting Jewish movement into the area and by impeding Arab growth. By the Law of Citizenship in 1952, Israel had defined Arabs within its borders as persons of Arab nationality, not as Israeli citizens. Accordingly, in 1967,

Israel decided that Jerusalemite Palestinians, including those born in the city, counted as foreigners not as inhabitants of Jerusalem by right. As such, their residency is subject to the issue of permits which may at any time be revoked; for example, if they leave the city for a certain period.

It has been almost impossible for Arabs (as opposed to Israelis) to get permission to build or extend houses, and to build without authorisation might provoke instant demolition. Growing families are thus compelled to leave Jerusalem permanently. In contrast, Jewish settlements have been expanded in the occupied territories and especially around Jerusalem itself, often through the confiscation of land. Although the new Israeli Government of Ehud Barak has declared a few settlements illegal, the fate of most others, carved out of Palestinian territory with military backing and dominating that territory, remains a formidable obstacle in the peace negotiations.

Israel's opponents argue that both aspects of this expansionist policy are designed to be irreversible: in the phrase commonly used, they seek to establish 'facts on the ground', although the international community insists that such 'facts' will not be allowed to determine the terms of a final settlement. By the same logic Arabs resent and oppose such Israeli policies: but the power is overwhelmingly Israel's.

Meanwhile, to travel from one Palestinian area to another (to work, to visit relatives in hospital, to worship), Palestinians must pass through road-blocks. Securing the relevant permit, perhaps for every single visit, wastes much time, and access is often denied. Every frustration is a harsh reminder that the Palestinian lives in 'occupied territory'.

Refugees

The mass flight of Palestinians since 1948 has already been mentioned. There are large communities of expelled Palestinians in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, as well as world-wide. Arab countries did little to integrate them, perhaps because their political significance was tied precisely to their refugee status. The return of one million refugees, some exiled for fifty years, would obviously present massive problems for one hard-pressed economy (Israel) and one fragile and emerging one (Palestine). It would also shift the balance of democratic representation in both states. Arabs, with the international community, regard such a return as an undeniable human right and a requirement of international law (although hard to effect): the Israeli Government argues that return is utterly impracticable in the foreseeable future.

Water

As a drought in 1999 emphasised, water is a vital regional resource. Many Palestinian towns and villages then had water supplies for only one or two days a week. Such a lack amounts to a serious hazard. In some areas of Gaza, the drinking-water supply has a sodium content ten times that considered safe, leading to such health problems as kidney ailments and hypertension. As Israel controls eighty percent of the aquifers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and consumes around ninety percent of the water from the West Bank, the deprivation is inevitably experienced by Palestinians as oppression.

Water is also at the heart of Israeli negotiations with Syria. These negotiations will determine whether or not Israel withdraws from the strategically significant Golan Heights (conquered in 1967) and hands them back to Syria, in return gaining security guarantees. But the Golan is also the main source of water to the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee which provide Israelis with one-third of their drinking water.

These two points about water exemplify how intertwined - and therefore how difficult to resolve - are the key issues under simultaneous negotiation.

Civil security

Since 1967, despite its military dominance, Israel has been faced with a series of guerrilla and paramilitary movements, which it alleges are sponsored by Arab states: the best known is Hamas, active in Palestine, which has called for a jihad (holy war) against Israel while bitterly opposing peace negotiations. Others have pointed in return to the ruthlessness and outreach of Israel's external intelligence service, Mossad. Such organisations have a sufficient capacity for violence to maintain regional tensions at a dangerous level. Israel's basic stance (no peace, no settlement, without Israel's guaranteed security) is incompatible with that of the Palestinian Authority (no lasting security for Israel without a peaceful and just settlement).

Human rights

Both Israeli and Palestinian authorities have been accused of grave human rights violations by the respected Israeli human rights body B'Tselem. Accusations against Israel concern the practices of arbitrary arrest and the ill-treatment or even torture of a high proportion of those detained; of deportation without due process; of demolishing houses by way of punishment; of repeatedly sealing off Palestinian areas, so stifling all normal life and economic activity. Allegations against the Palestinian Authority concern practices against its own people: the imposition of capital punishment without due process; torture in custody, sometimes leading to death; mass arrests (although these may sometimes result from the Israeli and US pressure to control terrorism); and the violation of free expression by closing newspapers and arresting critical journalists.

Future prospects

A future just order in the Holy Land will depend largely on the outcome of the peace process. The Final Status talks must determine at least the following three crucial issues:

1. the future political structure and control of the city of Jerusalem itself;
2. the extent to which Palestinian refugees will be free to return to the lands from which they have been expelled since 1948;
3. the extent to which citizens of both Israel and the emergent state of Palestine will have the right to freedom of movement within the overall territory; and as a linked issue, the fate of the present Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.

We have discussed how difficult each of these matters is separately, let alone in combination. Compromise is almost unimaginable in such matters as the future of Jerusalem, so close to the hearts of almost everyone involved: any politician who agreed a compromise would be fiercely attacked. Evidently, a resolution would require that complex questions about the precise definition of Jerusalem were tackled and somehow agreed. What is more, the negotiators are working against a deadline set at September 2000. No wonder that the talks sometimes seem far more likely to collapse than to conclude successfully: but what then would be the prospects for a just peace (or any peace) in the Holy Land?

Conclusion

At this critical juncture, the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales believes that the Church here has an urgent responsibility to support the Catholic community in Palestine by prayer, appropriate action and finance. So this analysis concludes by discussing our financial contribution, which so far has taken two main forms.

1. A collection is taken on Good Friday for the Holy Places. These funds are administered by the Holy See's Congregation for Eastern Churches, by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and by the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land. The funds support key pastoral works throughout the Holy Land, as well as the upkeep of the Holy Places themselves. Cooperation by these three bodies ensures an overall view of the needs of the region, the channelling of funds to institutions which need them most, and the proper accountability of recipients.

2. As stated, the needs of the Latin Patriarchate are great and urgent. Currently, it receives exemplary assistance from the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre.

These existing modes of support admirably express our concern, but ought not to exhaust it. This leaflet explains our intention to raise extra funds. Each diocese will decide whether to seek increased revenue from the Holy Places collection itself, or to hold a separate collection. In either case, without our help and solidarity, there is a danger that the Christian community, and with it the Catholic community, will be further marginalised within the Holy Land: that would be a tragic fate for its members and a profound loss to the universal Church.