

Study Guide: Israel/Palestine. Understanding Conflict in the Holy Land

Introduction

The Israel/Palestine conflict continues to threaten world peace and is the cause of immense human pain and loss. Both Israelis and Palestinians suffer through the ongoing violence and the Palestinian people are becoming increasingly marginalised and impoverished through the harsh conditions of occupation.

The CAII backgrounder, *Israel/Palestine: Understanding Conflict in the Holy Land*, (<http://www.cws.org.nz/Resources/international.asp>) will help you and your church understand the history of the conflict, the current situation especially of Palestinians, the conflicting viewpoints and the role of churches.

World Council of Churches



Girl with candle at demonstration, Ramallah, September 2002.

How to use this study guide

It is recommended that at least the group leader read the document through in its entirety before group study.

Because the situation in Israel/Palestine is controversial and complex, it is recommended that you are well prepared for the discussion and that you take the time to familiarise yourself with the material. As the group leader, it is important to facilitate a conversation where the different perspectives can be heard and understood, including those presented in the study material.

Choose the questions and materials that you think will help your group increase its understanding of the critical issues that lie behind the news reports. You know your group best.

You are welcome to write to CAII c-Christians World Service with specific questions or contact your CAII resource person (see below). You can also refer to the sources mentioned in the reference section of the *Israel Palestine: Understanding Conflict in the Holy Land* backgrounder.

Suggested materials

You may like to give each member a copy of *Israel Palestine: Understanding Conflict in the Holy Land* to read before the discussion

Or

You may like to make copies of the two summary pages: page 2 Section One: What is it all about? and page 4 which outlines the Israeli and Palestinian Claims.

You may like to borrow the video, *Ending Occupation: Voices for a Just Peace*, produced by the World Council of Churches and available for loan from Christian World Service for a suggested \$5 donation to cover postage costs.

About the video:

Ending Occupation: Voices for a Just Peace

Local Christian and other religious leaders, and Palestinian and Israeli human rights activists outline the root causes of violence in the region and the opportunities for a just peace. It has been issued as an invitation to all World Council of Churches member churches and ecumenical partners to join the campaign to End the illegal occupation of Palestine: Support a just peace in the Middle East.

Duration: 21 minutes

Churches' Agency on International Issues:

The Churches Agency on International Issues (CAII) has been formed to give New Zealand churches and congregations sound information on the international issues that affect us all. This Study Guide accompanies *Israel/ Palestine: Understanding Conflict in the Holy Land*. The current CAII member churches are: Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and The Salvation Army. The work of the agency is contracted to Christian World Service.

Resource people: The Reverends Andrew Bell, Kelvin Duncan (Presbyterian), John Roberts, Barbara Stephens (Methodist), Major Peter Thorp (Salvation Army), The Rt Rev David Coles, The Rev Jenny Dawson, and The Rev Canon Hone Kaa (Anglican).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION



The conflict: What is it all about?

(page 2 in the backgrounder)

The Israel/Palestine conflict is a complex issue with many different factors and interpretations. At its simplest, the conflict is over

- competing Jewish and Palestinian claims to the same land
- the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories
- the harsh, repressive living conditions imposed on the Palestinian population in occupied areas
- the continuing growth of Israeli settlements, illegal under international law, in the Occupied Territories
- the need for Israel to protect its citizens
- the fate of nearly four million Palestinian refugees made homeless since the creation of the State of Israel and their contested right of return to the land
- extremists on both sides who deny the other side's right to existence as a nation and state, and sometimes as a people.

Geneva Accord

In early December 2003, more than 300 Israeli and Palestinians launched a new peace initiative drafted by unofficial Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. It includes the division of Jerusalem along religious and cultural lines and a mutual recognition of statehood. While it has been vigorously opposed by Ariel Sharon and has only limited support from Yasser Arafat, it is a significant movement towards peace at a time of escalating violence. Chances of success are slim, but it is always better to be talking peace than practising war.

What the World Council of Churches says:



The WCC

reaffirms, in the context of the Decade to Overcome Violence, the belief Christians share with Jews and Muslims that all human life is sacred in the eyes of God, and that the taking of human life is contrary to the moral and ethical teachings of the three monotheistic faiths.

The WCC

joins its voice with those many Christians, Muslims and Jews in the region and around the world who have strongly deplored all acts of violence related to this conflict, including:

- Israel's military invasion and reoccupation of the Palestinian territories, extra-judicial executions of Palestinian leaders, killing of Palestinian civilians, application of collective punishments, and destruction of Palestinian homes and property in Israel and the occupied territories;
- and all acts of terror against civilians in Israel and in the occupied territories, including especially the growing and deeply troubling practice of organized and indiscriminate suicide bombings

(September 2, 2002)

New resource from the WCC

Security or Segregation: The Humanitarian Consequences of Israel's Wall of Separation by Eva Balslev and Sune Segal.

Available from CWS or directly from the website: <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/palestine/securityorsegregation.html>

New Zealand's Official Position

The New Zealand Government

upholds Israel's right to exist within secure and recognised borders. At the same time, New Zealand considers that the Palestinians have a commensurate right to self-determination and a viable, independent state.

(MFAT)



STUDY QUESTIONS

Introduction

What is your impression of the situation facing Israelis and Palestinians today?

Why is this conflict so important to world peace?

Before reading the backgrounder and/or watching the video, what is/was your understanding of the conflict?

The Conflict

Read the summary: *What is it all about?* from Section One. Identify the points that you would like to learn more about and/or on which you want to focus your discussion. Select the appropriate questions accordingly.

Read the Palestinian and Israeli claims on page 4. Which claims do you think are most important? Are there other factors that you think contribute to the situation? Why do you think the situation causes so much violence?

Watch the WCC video Ending Occupation



Use the video or information in the study material to answer the following:

- What are the effects of the occupation on Palestinians?
- What are the consequences of the occupation for Israelis?

Escalating violence

Compare the daily reality for Palestinians (see section 6, p. 18) and Israelis (you may want to refer to An Israeli who lost his daughter in a suicide attack) in this document to with day to day life in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What is the effect of the Israeli settlements? (see section 7, p.21)

What do you believe is the main cause of the violence?

How are the human rights of both Israelis and Palestinians violated? (see section 5, p. 15)

The role of churches

What is happening to Palestinian Christians in particular? Discuss some of the perspectives presented in the video. What stood out for you?

How can your church, at a local and national level, work towards a just peace? (see section 10 p.30)

What can we learn about the other faith traditions? (See section 11 p. 31)

Discuss how Christians might reconsider their understanding of the Promised Land to ensure that it includes everyone and respects all faith traditions.

To share the land?

In the area we know as Israel/Palestine, two ethnic groups claim one piece of land no bigger than Canterbury in New Zealand. As the backgrounder says, a home for the Jews = homelessness for the Palestinians

(p. 2). Many Christians have the impression that the land promised to Moses and the Jewish people was vacant. The reality was that there were people living in the land, the Canaanites. Ultimately the Jewish people took the land by force under Joshua. (cf Joshua 1:1-9)

- Discuss this conquest in the light of the words of God to Abram in Genesis 12:7
it is to you and your descendants that I give this land and what it might mean for the Palestinians resident in modern Israel.

All three religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism adhere to the belief that God/Allah/Yahweh has entered into a covenant with people through the prophets. This covenant is based on justice and a fair treatment of all people.

- How can we as Christians contribute to building a world of justice and peace and an end to the conflict in the Middle East?

In Aotearoa New Zealand?

The issue and history of land ownership and confiscation is a long-standing and difficult element of the conflict in the Middle East. What parallels are there in New Zealand's history and in the current context?

Signs of Hope

Where are the signs of hope? (section 8 p. 24) What can we do in Aotearoa New Zealand, our communities and our families to encourage and support peace initiatives in the Middle East?



An Israeli who lost his daughter in a suicide attack

A report from WCC Ecumenical Accompanier
Marja Anne (Sweden)

On September 4th 1997, at three o'clock in the afternoon, Smadar, 14 years old, was killed in a suicide attack on her way from school in Jerusalem. She and her best friend were killed and a third classmate was badly injured. A total of five people died in the attack. She was Rami Elhanas' daughter.

When such a thing happens to you, you have three choices. The first is to commit suicide, but I still had my family to take care of. The other choice is to hate and take revenge but will that bring my daughter back? The third choice is to ask yourself why this happens, what makes a person so desperate that he chose to blow himself up? says Rami.

Rami is the seventh generation of his family born in Jerusalem. He says the tragedy was an awakening for him, and that today he puts a lot of his time into work for peace, going to Israeli schools and talking about the conflict from different perspectives.

Sometimes I have a Palestinian with me, who has also lost a child in the conflict. It is a fantastic experience and very overwhelming.

Many of the students have never met a Palestinian, and suddenly they have one in their own classroom who speaks Hebrew as fluently as themselves. Sometimes they ask him to leave, and then he says that he has nowhere else to go, and that this is his homeland too.

Rami thinks that blindness to the other side's suffering is the biggest problem in the conflict.

A Palestinian prayer for peace



Oh God, the chest is replete with bitterness...
do not turn that into spite.

Oh God, the heart is replete with pain...
do not turn that into vengeance.

Oh God, the spirit is replete with fear...
do not turn that into hatred.

Oh God, my body is weak...
do not turn my weakness into despair.

Oh God, we wanted freedom for our people...
we did not want slavery to others.

Oh God, we wanted a homeland for our people to gather them...
we did not want to destroy the states of others,
nor demolish their homes.

Oh God, our people are stripped of all things,
except their belief in their right.
Oh God, our people are weak except in their faith
and in their victory.

*The late Faisal El Hussaini
Former Associate of the Middle East Council of
Churches' Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees.*

Take Action

Having reflected on the history of the Israel/Palestine situation you may like to:

- light a candle for peace each week in your church
- seek opportunities for dialogue with people of Jewish, Christian Palestinian or Muslim background in your community. You could find out about the Holy Days of religions other than your own.
- promote the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. New Zealander, The Rev Glenn Barclay from Wellington, is currently serving with the programme, which promotes health, peace and human rights. See <http://www.eappi.org/> or write to CAll for information. For updates from Glenn Barclay see www.presbyterian.org.nz/globalmission)
- organise ecumenical prayers and study groups
- support Palestinians living in poverty by sending funds to Christian World Service for the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees (DSPR) of the Middle East Council of Churches. The DSPR works with Palestinian communities to improve their quality of life. They promote self-reliance, justice and community decision-making. Programmes include emergency aid, food and nutrition, family health services, women's programmes, education and vocational training and income generation.
- write to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hon Mr Phil Goff, C/- Parliament Buildings, Wellington, affirming support for a long term and just peace in Israel/Palestine.
- share what you have learnt with others. For example write an article for your parish magazine or talk to other groups.