



Jerusalem 3, 2, 1: Three Faiths, Two Peoples, One Human Family

An action of the 225th General Assembly (2022)



Approved by the 225th General Assembly (2022)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Developed by
The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP)
of the General Assembly Mission Council/Presbyterian Mission Agency
www.pcusa.org/acswp or www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/acswp
See also www.justiceUnbound.org for current discussion



Recommendations:

The 225th General Assembly (2022) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approves the following recommendations:

1. Approve the following statement of concern and recommendations regarding Jerusalem and receive the background paper and documentation for study, submitted in fulfillment of the 223rd General Assembly (2018)'s directive:

Summary Statement of Concern: For the Peace of Jerusalem

The face of Jerusalem has been changing rapidly in the direction of a heightened Zionist-Jewish identity, with intensified restrictions on the movement, residency, and human rights of Muslim and Christian Palestinians. In addition to the ongoing violation of international law entailed by its claims of annexation over East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank, the State of Israel's policies steadily increase interreligious tension with their disregard for the historic claims and freedom of worship of Muslims and Christians. Two factors are alienating moderate Jews, Christians and secular citizens in most Western countries: the suffocation of hopes of a two-state solution by subsidized Israeli settlement growth and the increasingly apartheid-like control over Palestinians by the Israeli military.

[In the view of many observers](#), the release of the Trump Administration's "Deal of the Century" peace plan was an effort to cement these trends in place, while also boosting the reelection chances of Benjamin Netanyahu. While Mr. Netanyahu's re-election bid ultimately failed, the current government has shown few signs of significant change in its policy toward its Palestinian population. The continuing systematic exclusion of Palestinians from historic worship spaces and the enforced neglect or abandonment of religious and cultural sites both poisons interfaith relations and increases disrespect of all religious faiths, ultimately devaluing the holy city.

The holiness of Jerusalem to Reformed Christians is shown in the degree to which it can be shared peacefully and with mutual respect, trying to heal rather than deny or perpetuate the history of tragedy and contention. Exclusivism and fundamentalism make empathy and coexistence impossible; arguably, they make for human beings conditioned to care only for people "like us." The background paper accompanying this resolution identifies such strands of exclusivism and even absolutism in all three Abrahamic traditions, while clearly lifting up the more tolerant strands within our faiths. This resolution is not a challenge to the truth claims of other religious traditions, nor an attempt at false harmony among different understandings of God's will, but it is an open-hearted Christian embrace of equal human rights and religious liberty for all.

Certainly, religious freedom and equality are convictions shared by most U.S. citizens, emerging from many sources including Protestant Christian and Enlightenment traditions, and championed in the 19th and 20th centuries by Jewish ethical teaching and example. We cannot expect primarily or officially Muslim countries and Israel, if it reserves full citizenship rights only for Jews, to follow the Western democratic separation of religion (or "church") and state. But at this time in history, and not only in Israel and occupied Palestine, ethno-nationalism, racism and



denial of rights to less powerful minorities must be challenged, and not accepted or subsidized by U.S. tax dollars. Again, not only in Israel and occupied Palestine, barriers and sophisticated surveillance confine disenfranchised groups in ghettos and bantustans while their lands and cultures are colonized. But why should we accept Jerusalem becoming a paradigm of exclusion rather than a symbol of God's justice and a community of humans at peace?

In response to the assignment of the 223rd General Assembly (2018), the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) and the Racial Equity Advocacy Committee (REAC) appointed a small team to conduct a focused update of the 2016 policy statement, [Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace](#). That 2016 statement, while still respecting the aspirations of genuine peace processes, holds then-current realities against the seven areas of concern named in the Oslo peace accords, finding deterioration of relations and deprivation of rights in practically every aspect. It contains a comprehensive social policy review and substantiates the church's reasons for engaging in nonviolent economic witness against those who profit from the occupation and assist its enforcement.

Just two years later, however, noting the unilateral move of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and the State of Israel's intensified efforts to reshape the city to the exclusive benefit of its Jewish residents and identity, the [General Assembly called](#) for "a report to the 224th General Assembly (2020) that reviews and describes comprehensively ... on the status of Jerusalem (using U.N., WCC, other research)" and makes policy recommendations informed by the original 1947 "United Nations guidelines for the Status of Jerusalem as described in the U.N. General Assembly resolution 181," which called for "administration of the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem independent from Israeli or Palestinian control."

By invoking the original U.N. idea, or ideal, we acknowledge the reality that between 1948 and 1967, Jordan, then administering East Jerusalem, prevented most Jews from worshiping at the Western (Wailing) Wall and other sites, while the Israelis let no Arabs back into their properties and many areas of West Jerusalem. Since 1967, Israel has claimed the whole city, operating initially with some restraint, but increasingly using an 18-foot concrete wall of separation (apartheid in Afrikaans) and checkpoints to strangle the Palestinian economy and divide their land into decreasingly viable mini-Gazas. Given the predictable excesses of unaccountable power, perhaps the early U.N. idea of not allowing any single group to control Jerusalem was actually pretty realistic after all.

With U.S. acquiescence and, during the Trump administration, full-fledged support, the U.N.'s ability to protect and provide for Palestinians trapped inside or outside their land was blocked, and during the Trump administration the U.S. ended most of its humanitarian aid through U.N. agencies. While much of that aid has been restored by the current administration, the unbalanced support for Israel's domination of the Palestinians has helped animate widespread and deep hostility to the United States in Arab and Muslim countries, often costing Christians associated



with the United States and Israel dearly, even though Christian Palestinians suffer the same fate generally as their Muslim peers.

Yet all Christians are called to pray for the “peace of Jerusalem,” and the city, as the site of Jesus’ passion, has inspired countless pilgrims. In 1994, the Patriarchs of Jerusalem (bishops and other historic leaders of Christian churches) wrote an eloquent statement insisting on the rights of their communities to help determine the city’s future. They recognized the interplay of past and present with that future hope, which has helped them remain steadfast against the steady pressure to emigrate. There is a deep loyalty in their piety from which we have much to learn, an understanding that traditions need embodiment, not in idols, but in holy places of communal memory. For the world Christian community to allow Christianity to be extinguished in Jerusalem would be a form of Docetism, a disembodied spirituality.

Thus, our recommendations below begin with practical concerns for human rights but then look at the meaning of the Jerusalem for Reformed Christians today, opposing the views of Christian Zionism, repudiating antisemitism and Islamophobia, and commending new theological work and acts of solidarity. That solidarity, particularly in response to communications from the Palestinian Christian community also affirmed by the 2018 Assembly, means standing with and speaking out, “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2).

2. Approve that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):
 - a. Affirms the right of all people to live and worship peacefully in the city of Jerusalem, and hence opposes the frequent exclusion of categories of visiting Muslim and Christian worshipers from entry to the city, even on holy days. More basically, systematic official and subsidized efforts by municipal and other government authorities to disadvantage and restrict the presence and growth of Arab families, to condemn and appropriate Arab communal and private land (sometimes declared “absentee” because owners are prevented from returning), to change boundaries to exclude from city benefits and access, to enforce a “matrix of control” involving the wall and effectively Jewish-only roads, and to otherwise to deprive Palestinians of their homes and rights, are to be resisted as immoral, oppressive and unworthy of a holy city.
 - b. Affirms the historic respect shown places of worship and public worship practices going back to the British and the Ottomans and well before, the “status quo” that prevented tension within as well as among religious communities (as at shared shrines and sites) and allowed for mutual tolerance even when one community was dominant in the city’s governance. This honoring of traditional areas holy to particular communities is particularly needed with regard to the Al-Aqsa compound, held in trust by representatives of the international Muslim community, which has been a place of massive nonviolent resistance when metal detectors were installed at its gates by Israeli authorities. For each faith community, infringement of sacred space is a challenge to God’s sovereignty.
 - c. Commends all those who seek objectively to document the boundaries, histories, architectural



characteristics and practices engaged in at all sacred sites in the city, including those outside (and in some cases prior to) the three main Abrahamic traditions.

- d. Commends those groups within the civil society and within the government working for peaceful co-existence and mutual respect among the multiple religious communities for whom Jerusalem is sacred.
- e. Directs all agencies and representatives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to be mindful of the disputed status of Jerusalem, to include encounters with the stories and concerns of Palestinians in any travel itinerary to the Holy Land, and to make use of Palestinian providers of services whenever possible, given the obstacles they face.
- f. Entreats all congregations and members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and pilgrims and visitors of all faiths and none, to be mindful of the disputed status of Jerusalem, to include encounters with the stories and concerns of Palestinians in any travel itinerary to the Holy Land, and to make use of Palestinian providers of services whenever possible, given the obstacles they face.
- g. Rejects the doctrines of Christian Zionism that tend toward idolatry and heresy by binding God to speculative human timelines, portraying a wrathful and arbitrary God, dividing and ignoring parts of the Christian community, and making of the land an idol to be possessed, exclusive of moral conditions.
- h. Repudiates all forms of antisemitism and Islamophobia.
- i. Repudiates the move of the United States Embassy to Jerusalem as an act damaging to long-term prospects for peace in the region and contrary to the U.N. Security Council's 1980 resolution that Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem was illegal under international law (which is why most nations will not move their embassies out of Tel Aviv).
- j. Endorses the direct application of the provisions of the [Foreign Assistance Act](#) known as the "Leahy law" to any and all United States aid to the state of Israel.
- k. Endorses the immediate passage of H.R. 2407, [Promoting Human Rights for Palestinian Children Living Under Israeli Military Occupation Act](#).
- l. Affirms the contents of the paper Jerusalem 3, 2, 1: Three Faiths, Two Peoples, One Human Family, which includes documentation of the steady and now intensified decline of the Christian population of Jerusalem, suggested in the use of countdown-style numerals.
- m. Directs agencies and representatives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to utilize Jerusalem 3, 2, 1: Three Faiths, Two Peoples, One Human Family in their advocacy and policy work surrounding Jerusalem.

Rationale

In the original partition plan for Israel/Palestine in 1947, the status of the city of Jerusalem was considered a special case by the United Nations. Recognizing the religious and cultural significance of Jerusalem to Jews, Christians and Muslims, the United Nations determined that Jerusalem was a *corpus separatum*, neither Arab nor Jewish, and was to be governed by an international regime. According to [U.N. resolution 181](#), the objectives of the governing authorities in Jerusalem would be:

- a. To protect and to preserve the unique spiritual and religious interests located in the city of the



- three great monotheistic faiths throughout the world, Christian, Jewish and Moslem; to this end to ensure that order and peace, and especially religious peace, reign in Jerusalem;
- b. To foster co-operation among all the inhabitants of the city in their own interests as well as in order to encourage and support the peaceful development of the mutual relations between the two Palestinian peoples throughout the Holy Land; to promote the security, well-being and any constructive measures of development of the residents, having regard to the special circumstances and customs of the various peoples and communities.

Such a vision never came to pass. The Civil War of 1947–48 precluded the U.N. partition plan and Jerusalem ended up divided, an Israeli city with a small Palestinian population (West Jerusalem, today) and an Arab city, including the “Old City” occupied and administered by the state of Jordan (East Jerusalem, today). The situation remained in place until the 1967 war when Israeli forces occupied East Jerusalem, along with the rest of the West Bank, an occupation which remains in place, in violation of international law, until this day.

And so, the Arab population of Jerusalem has been a population under military occupation since 1967. The level of legal restrictions and denial of freedom to the Arab population has varied depending upon the Israeli government in place, but military occupation has been the reality for several generations of Arab Jerusalemites.

In recent years, the situation on the ground for Arab inhabitants of Jerusalem has rapidly deteriorated. Among the most notable developments are:

- a. Home seizure and demolition: In 2019, Israeli authorities seized and demolished at least 140 Palestinian homes, with no end expected. These seizures and demolitions, occurring in illegally occupied territory, are justified by a building code that systematically discriminates against Palestinians, rendering many of their residences in violation. Home seizures and demolitions have continued unabated into 2020 and 2021. On Nov. 4, 2020, 74 structures were demolished and 73 people were displaced including 41 children in the largest single day demolition of the past decade. The spring and summer of 2021 saw the well-publicized forced evictions in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, a flashpoint that triggered an escalation of violence between Israel and Gaza.
- b. Expansion of Israeli settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem: Emerging after the Six-Day War in 1967, the settler movement has created Jewish-only “settlements” in the strategic areas in the occupied West Bank, with a stated goal of creating a Jewish presence in those areas. In Jerusalem, the strategy has been to envelop Arab neighborhoods with settler neighborhoods, limiting the land available for the creation of any Arab community, much less an Arab state. These settler activities, illegal under international law, have seen the tacit, and sometimes explicit, support of the Israeli government. The Netanyahu administration made plans to annex all settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, making them formally part of the state of Israel. While the current administration has backed off of the language of annexation, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is a staunch supporter of settlements and has



promised to support their “natural growth.”

- c. Creation of a Jewish tourism infrastructure in occupied East Jerusalem: East Jerusalem contains the “Old City” that is home to sites considered holy by Jews, Muslims and Christians. Access to these sites has been an issue of contention at least since 1967. In recent years, Israeli authorities have made a concerted effort to expand religious tourism to Jewish sites, including the opening of a tunnel underneath the Old City from the archaeological site called “City of David” to the Western Wall, and a proposed cable car above the Old City, going directly to the Western Wall. The entrance to the tunnel and the archaeological site is located in the Arab neighborhood of Silwan, and houses in that neighborhood have been structurally damaged by the creation of the tunnel. If the plans for the cable car come to fruition, it will be possible for visitors to go to Jewish religious sites by tunneling under or riding over traditional Arab neighborhoods without ever having to see or interact with the majority Arab population of East Jerusalem, rendering their lives and their presence invisible.
- d. Actions by the Trump administration: Until the unveiling of the purported peace plan in early February 2020, the most dramatic actions by the Trump administration were the relocation of the United States embassy to Jerusalem and the closing of the United States consulate in East Jerusalem. The mission of the consulate was to the Palestinian people, while the embassy will deal directly with the Israeli government, meaning that an important line of communication between Palestinian leadership and Washington has been closed. In the larger picture, the move of the embassy is a tacit endorsement of Israeli claims that an undivided Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and that the land of East Jerusalem, under illegal occupation since 1967, is actually Israeli land. The Biden administration has pledged to re-open the consulate, a plan that has been sharply criticized by the Israeli government. The move of the embassy appears to be permanent.

The situation in Jerusalem is likely to get worse, not better, for its Arab population. Current trends suggest a move away from a multicultural city to an Israeli one. The preservation of Jerusalem as a religious center for three faiths is a likely casualty. Immediately building on support from the United States government, [the current government of Israel seeks cultural as well as physical hegemony](#) over the Palestinian residents who have not yet been moved to the other side of its separation wall or sent even further away. Israeli politicians have also been quick to suggest plans to annex the Jordan Valley and other areas slated for Palestinians under the Oslo agreement — but the focus of this report is Jerusalem.

The support of the international status of Jerusalem, and the protection of its identity as Jewish, Christian and Muslim, is the stated position of the PC(USA). The report [Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace](#), approved by the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (2016):

in keeping with the initial intention of the United Nations that Jerusalem be an international city to honor and provide access to the holy places of three faiths, the General Assembly emphasizes the importance of having vital communities of all three faiths present. In practice, this means (i)



calling on the Israeli government to be transparent and accountable in dealing with Muslim and Christian sacred sites, affording them the same protections as Jewish sites, allowing freedom of worship and all necessary permits for properly designated religious personnel, and allowing internationally authorized archeologists to review claims that affect traditional Muslim and Christian areas of living and worship (as World Heritage sites are reviewed); and (ii) inviting Christian, Jewish, and Muslim dialogue groups, congregations and communities, here and in Israel-Palestine, to discuss questions of religious liberty vis-a-vis those practices which highlight Jewish objects and customs in Jerusalem and other locations to the actual and potential detriment of other religious communities.

This resolution affirms this position, while noting the deteriorating and increasingly dangerous situation in Jerusalem. We are called in our policies and in our actions to be peacemakers, even where the hope for peace may seem ephemeral.





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