

## Statement by general secretaries Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit (WCC) and Jim Winkler (NCCCUSA)



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*NCC/WCC Consultation on the Holy Land*

*14 September, 2016*

No people should be denied their rights and, certainly, no people should be denied their rights for generations. The unresolved conflict in Israel and Palestine is primarily about justice, and until the requirement of justice is met, peace cannot be established. As Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza nears the 50-year mark, generations have been suffering

under this reality. The possibilities of a viable two-state solution, for which we have long advocated, are more elusive and, seemingly, more unrealistic than ever.

The crisis in Israel and Palestine has brought together representatives of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA for an important consultation in Arlington, Virginia from September 12-14, 2016. More than 60 representatives of churches and church-related organizations from around the world gathered because we hear the cries of all who are yearning for peace and justice in the land we call Holy. We have particularly valued the participation of Palestinian, Native American, South African, and Israeli participants who have shared their insights and lived experience.

Although this consultation has focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we know it takes place in the context of a region beset by war and violence and are mindful of the various situations throughout the Middle East.

50 years is also a milestone in terms of the Biblical year of Jubilee, reminding us all of the need to seek proper times to reestablish justice so that people can live. “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.” (Leviticus 25:10, NRSV)

We are well aware that no one person or group of people or government is blameless, that crimes and depredations have been committed by many over many years, but the cycle of violence must be broken. Too often the structural and permanent violence against a whole people is ignored. But keeping an entire population under occupation and even in a closed area, such as Gaza, in prison-like conditions is a grave and unsustainable situation. We are also well aware that Israel is the occupying force and has commanding power over the people of Palestine and, thus, bears special responsibility for taking the initiative.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9, NRSV) This is not hollow rhetoric employed by Jesus of Nazareth. Truly, those who follow the path of peace will be blessed in the kingdom of

heaven and we pledge our support for all those who seek to bring an end to this conflict.

We call for an end to the occupation and to settlements on occupied land, with all its grave and deteriorating dimensions for the Palestinian people, but also for Israel and the whole region beyond. We ask for full respect and protection of human rights defenders, for the rights to tell the truth, to express concern, and to take democratic, non-violent actions for justice and peace. We are deeply concerned by Israeli legislative and other measures to curtail the work of Palestinian and Israeli development and human rights organizations, as well as the lack of transparency concerning investigations into international humanitarian (including faith-based) organizations in the Gaza Strip and the possible negative consequences to delivering critically needed aid to this besieged area.

In this consultation, we have been particularly focusing on the severe effects on children and youth, and particularly the use of administrative detention and the unacceptable use of solitary confinement of Palestinian children.

We have been gathered here in the capital of the USA, and thus we call for the United States to:

- **cease its practice of arming various state and non-state actors in the Middle East and, in particular, to reconsider its proposed \$38 billion military aid package to Israel, for the last thing needed at this time is more weapons.**
- **end the current wave of legislative efforts to penalize the use of non-violent economic measures to influence policy in Israel.**

Churches have used such strategies to advance the rights of people and further the cause of justice both domestically and internationally for many years

including the Montgomery bus boycott, apartheid South Africa and, currently, on behalf of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

We have met in the United States and have met with U.S. government representatives here because the United States holds enormous power to support the status quo or to take bold steps to peace. Similarly, the churches in the United States have tremendous potential, which must be mobilized, to call on the American government to do much more to secure a just and lasting peace for Israel and Palestine.

Indeed, too often religion has been used to justify the occupation. Too often, religion has been used by Christians, Jews, and Muslims to further hatred and violence. We have seen religion similarly misused in countless other circumstances and we see parallels between the crisis in Israel and Palestine and the struggles for racial justice in the United States and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

The World Council of Churches is a worldwide fellowship of churches who follow the call of the Prince of Peace to work for just peace in many contexts of the world. Most often, this means standing in solidarity with people around the world who are suffering oppression and violence. The National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, [www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us](http://www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us), continues to be part of this ecumenical movement for unity, justice, and peace.

The current situation in Israel and Palestine demands urgent action. One cannot keep an entire people subject to pressure and violence for many years and not expect a violent reaction. We do not endorse violence, but we know people are losing hope and faith in the efficacy of nonviolent means.

We encourage our churches to observe the upcoming World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel, September 18-24 ([www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org)), and join in actions for a just peace in the coming Jubilee year.

As followers of Christ and as people of the Abrahamic tradition, we are spiritually wounded by the continuing hatred and animosity between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and yearn for a new era of peace, harmony, and cooperation so that the land we all call Holy will be shared by and cared for by all who live there. “Hoping against hope, he (Abraham) believed that he would

become ‘the father of many nations,’ according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be.’ (Romans 4:18, NRSV).

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-Jim Winkler, president and general secretary, National Council of Churches, USA

Streamed Live: [Press Conference from NCC/WCC Consultation on the Holy Land \(at 12:30 pm ET Wednesday, September 14, 2016\)](#)