



A PUBLIC STATEMENT OF THE URCSA ON THE WAR IN GAZA

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), at the meeting of its General Synodical Commission on 6-8 November 2023, resolved to issue a public statement on the violent conflict taking place between the Israeli government and Hamas in Gaza. The primary purpose of this statement is to give guidance to URCSA members on how to view the conflict and how to respond to it. It is also a public comment, informed by the Confession of Belhar, on this deeply disturbing conflict. We cannot remain silent in the face of these unfolding events.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

We issue this statement in solidarity with the Palestinian Christians who issued the Palestinian Kairos Document in 2009 and the following recent public statements:

“Kairos Palestine Statement on the War on Gaza” (11 October 2023):
We all say, No, to the War. We all say, Yes, to peace, and to working for a just and final solution to an existing conflict and to the injustice that has been imposed on the Palestinian people for more than 70 years. Israel does not see the Palestinian people as having any right to exist, and the international community is too weak to implement its decisions to find a just and final solution. We all mourn and console all the victims on both sides of the conflict. A human being is a human being, both Israeli and Palestinian, and every human being is dear in the eyes of God, and in the eyes of his family, relatives, and loved ones. No to war, yes to a just and final peace.

“A Call for Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians” (23 October 2023):

We say it with a broken heart, we hold western church leaders and theologians who rally behind Israel’s wars accountable for their theological and political complicity in the Israeli crimes against the Palestinians, which have been committed over the last 75 years. We call upon them to reexamine their positions and to change their direction, remembering that God “will judge the world in justice” (Acts 17:31).

“Joint Open Letter to Church leaders and Christians in the USA, Europe and the Ecumenical Family” (2 November 2023):

We are witnessing a genocide against Palestinians in Gaza unfolding in front of our eyes, not dissimilar to what happened less than 30 years ago in Rwanda and 80 years ago in Europe. Many in the West were complicit in those genocides. We cannot and dare not let it happen again. It must be stopped.

We view the conflict from the vantage point of Kairos Palestine, who are our sisters and brothers. They appeal to us as a worldwide Christian community, and to all the countries of the world, to do what we can to stop the collective punishment that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) is meting out to civilians in Gaza. Their appeal speaks directly to our hearts, since it reminds us of the painful discrimination and oppression we had to endure under apartheid.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

The violence perpetrated in this conflict since 7 October is horrific. We lament and condemn the way in which Hamas soldiers attacked Israeli civilians on 7 October, which led to the death of 1,400 people, injury to hundreds more, and the abduction of more than 200 hostages. We lament and condemn the massive military campaign that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) has launched against Gaza in response, with the stated aim of “destroying Hamas”. In the past month, they have killed more than 11,000 Palestinian civilians in Gaza and wounded more than 29,000. The aerial bombardment and ground invasion of the IDF has destroyed 45% of Palestinian homes in Gaza, rendering around 1,5 million people homeless refugees.

The Israeli attacks on Gaza have not only destroyed (or damaged) homes but also schools, hospitals, mosques and churches, making any normal community life impossible. The large number of women and children who have been killed, and the fact that not nearly enough aid in the form of food, water, medication and fuel is allowed to enter Gaza, makes this a human catastrophe of enormous proportions. Most of the hospitals in Gaza are struggling to stay open or have already closed, due to the bombardments and the lack of water, electricity and medication.

WHY IS IT HAPPENING?

The nature and causes of the conflict are many and complex, going back to the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British government made a commitment to Jews that flatly contradicted the commitments it had made to the Arab leaders of the region in the aftermath of World War I. The Declaration, just 67 words long, was addressed to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the Zionist movement among British Jews:

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty’s Government, the following declaration of sympathy which has been submitted to and approved by the Cabinet. 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 (in Shlaim 2010:4).

Arab nationalist leaders were horrified at the Declaration, since it “was made by an English foreigner who had no ownership of Palestine to a foreign Jew who had no right to it” (Shlaim 2010:8). In 1917 the population of Palestine consisted of around 60,000 Jews (9%) and 670,000 Palestinians (91%), but the British Empire took the daring step to promise the Jews a “national home” within it, viewing the Arab majority (in typical colonial fashion) from the perspective of the Jewish minority, by not calling them Palestinian or Arab, but “non-Jewish”! That colonial decision of the British Empire created a political problem of two competing nationalisms in one small country, which proved unstable from the start. The competition got steadily more intense as the 20th century progressed, especially after the Nazi Holocaust and the formal approval of the State of Israel by the United Nations (UN) in November 1947,

which led to large scale Jewish immigration into Israel. The UN resolution approved the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state with proposed borders, but since the Palestinians did not accept that, war broke out immediately. The Israelis managed to defeat the resistance of the Palestinians and of neighbouring Arab states, expand those borders quite significantly.

It was a hugely destructive war of occupation, which is called the nakba (catastrophe) by Palestinians. Between 1947 and 1949, at least 750,000 Palestinians from a population of 1,9 million were made refugees beyond the borders of the new state and have not been allowed to return. The Israeli forces occupied almost 80% of historic Palestine, ethnically cleansed and destroyed about 530 villages and cities, and killed about 15,000 Palestinians in a series of massacres. Around 430,000 more Palestinians were internally displaced within the borders of the new state and fled to refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank, which have become their permanent homes.

Since 1948 the Israeli state established itself, with large and consistent financial support from the USA and Europe, to become a regional superpower with a large army and a strong economy. The Palestinians did not accept the partition of Palestine, holding to a policy of liberating all of it from the Israeli occupation. For that reason, no parallel Palestinian state was constituted, and due to the strength of the Israeli army, the guerrilla activities of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), led by Yasser Arafat, could not succeed in a military victory. Israel used that vacuum to destabilise Palestinian communities economically and politically, treating them like colonised subjects without any rights in Israel. In 1967, in the Six Days War, Israel further expanded its borders and (contrary to international law) started building homes for Jewish settlers all over the occupied areas, making it increasingly difficult for a viable Palestinian state to be established.

There have been attempts at implementing a two-state solution, like the Oslo Accord of 1993, envisaging an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, but the negotiations kept on breaking down. One reason is that the policies of Likud, the political party of Benjamin Netanyahu, and of other far-right Jewish parties now in government with him, do not support the existence of an independent Palestinian state. They keep on obstructing the negotiations, but there have also been obstacles from the side of Palestinian politicians. As a result, Palestinians are exposed to constant security surveillance and the encroachment of Israeli settlements, living without political rights. Due to living decades in a political vacuum and exposed to constant pressure from the Israeli state, many young Palestinians have become radicalised politically and have opted for military opposition to Israel, having given up hope for a political solution. The effect of this is that Israel has increasingly become a security state, in which Palestinians live without legal rights and protections. In this situation Israel is the de facto political and military authority, which – in its treatment of Palestinians – can only be described as an Apartheid state.

It isn't possible to include more details of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, but there is a list of publications below for anyone who wishes to explore this situation (and its history) in greater detail. To conclude this section on the origin and nature of the present war on Gaza, we quote from a recent statement by Kairos Palestine, in which they explain its root causes as:

the permanent state of terror that we Palestinians live in daily from the rule and tyranny of the Israeli occupation army, and the absolute insistence by successive Israeli governments, especially this government, that there is no Palestinian state, and that the Palestinian people have no right to self-determination. And all the consequences that arise from that.



In other words, the present flare-up of violence is a continuation – and a serious escalation – of the political conflict that started in 1917 and that became a full-blown military conflict since 1947. What is clear is that the attacks flaring up from both sides have created deeply entrenched mutual distrust and hatred. It has produced a cycle of retaliation that is becoming increasingly intense and that could spiral completely out of control.

WHAT DO WE SAY ABOUT THIS AS A CHURCH?

Political parties, NGOs and governments all over the world have made statements on the recent violence of Hamas and the IDF, on the basis of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions. We express our agreement with those statements, but we also look at the conflict through the lenses of Scripture and the Reformed tradition, and wish to add the following:

A time for war?

Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu justified the present war on Gaza as follows in a press conference: “The Bible says: ‘There is a time for war, and a time for peace’. And this is a time for war”. It is always dangerous when political leaders start quoting Scripture, but it shows how political Zionism has succeeded in capturing the Bible. When the tempter started quoting the Bible (“It is written”), Jesus responded: “It is also written” (Matthew 3:7). So we wish to say that the Bible also says that the LORD hates “hands that shed innocent blood” (Proverbs 6:17). The State of Israel may be able to justify its declaration of war on Hamas on military or security grounds, but it is surely blasphemous to invoke the name God to justify the wholesale bombardment of homes, refugee camps, schools, mosques, churches and hospitals, which has caused the death of more than 11,000 Palestinian civilians and the wounding of more than 29,000, while besieging Gaza and preventing adequate aid to enter. This is more than a military operation to “crush Hamas”; it is collective punishment of all Palestinians in Gaza and amounts to genocide. The instruction to the inhabitants of the northern part of Gaza to move to the south is reminiscent of the forced displacement of Palestinians during the nakba of 1947-1949 and is an exercise in ethnic cleansing. Those displaced refugees who manage to survive the war have absolutely no guarantee that Israel will ever allow them to return to their homes. Even if this is a time for war, such military actions cannot be justified in the name of the God of Abraham, who welcomed strangers and prayed for the preservation of unjust Sodom.

Revenge and retaliation?

The scale and brutality of the IDF's present war on Gaza are unjustifiable and totally out of proportion as a response to the Hamas attack on 7 October. The punishment prescribed to ensure justice in the Hebrew Bible is “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, ...” (Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:17-20; Deuteronomy 19:21). That instruction of the Torah was intended to ensure proportionality in the response to evil, by placing a limit on revenge attacks in the tribal warfare of the ancient near East, where retaliation often echoed the boast of Lamech: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Genesis 4:23-24). Since Prime Minister Netanyahu quoted the Bible to justify this war, we call on him and the IDF to abandon the way of Lamech and to return to the way of the Torah, by immediately ceasing its bombardment and invasion of Gaza. We echo the call by millions of people across the world for an immediate ceasefire by all parties, to allow health services to resume and to get food aid and other humanitarian assistance into Gaza.

The biblical People of Israel and the Zionist State of Israel

There are Christians who believe that it is the duty of the church to “stand with Israel” unconditionally, since they are the chosen covenant people of God. And then they identify the people of Israel, as presented in the Bible, with the present State of Israel, the political entity dating back to 1948. Such a move is not acceptable theologically, since the State of Israel is not based primarily on Scripture but on the ideology of Zionism, which Theodor Herzl, a Jewish journalist and political activist from Eastern Europe, started propagating in 1896. He argued that Jews would never be safe in Europe and therefore needed to find a homeland where they could establish and defend themselves. He first proposed that Uganda should be the place where such a Jewish homeland could

be founded, which means that the return to Palestine was not inherent to his political ideology. It was only later that the Zionist ideology was given a biblical rationale by some Jewish groups and linked to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. Such a reading of the Bible claims that God promised the whole land of Israel to the Jews (ethnic descendants of Abraham and Sarah), that they will return to it, and that they therefore have a God-given right and duty to occupy all of it.

Such a reading of the Old Testament is unacceptable from a Reformed perspective, since we read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. The Old Testament passages that prophesy an end-time gathering of God’s people and a return from exile were already partly fulfilled in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. In the New Testament, those prophecies of a worldwide gathering of believers are interpreted as referring to the inclusion of gentiles worldwide in the Christian church, not to a physical return of ethnic Jews to Palestine. From a Christian point of view, those Old Testament prophecies can certainly not be used to justify the military occupation of Palestinian land and the forced dispersion or oppression of Palestinian people, some of whom are Christians. The movement called Christian Zionism does precisely that, by supporting the present State of Israel unconditionally, as a matter of Christian faith. Such a view undermines the New Testament message of reconciliation between Jews and gentiles worldwide through the cross and resurrection of Christ.

In other words, we should not hesitate to criticise the policies and actions of the State of Israel, particularly towards the Palestinians. The Zionist State of Israel is not identical with the People of God and to criticise their injustices is not to be anti-Jewish (or anti-Semitic, as it is sometimes called). There are many Jews across the world who are severely critical of the policies of the State of Israel, on the basis of their understanding of human rights and their reading of the Hebrew Bible.

Where does God stand?

The Belhar Confession, a confessional document of the URCSA, states

We believe:

- that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; [...]
- that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;
- that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

In the light of this, members of the URCSA have no option but to stand with the victims of this war, particularly the women and children who have been wounded, displaced and traumatised. This applies to the Israeli victims of the Hamas attack on 7 October and to the hostages still held in Gaza by Hamas. But it applies particularly to the Palestinian men, women and children, who have been constantly exposed to bombardment, hunger, thirst, fear and mourning for the past month, and who do not have access to the kind of counselling support and medical care available to the Jewish victims. We conclude with the following appeal from our brothers and sisters at Kairos Palestine:

As Palestinian Christians, we also continue to find our courage and consolation in the God who dwells with those of a contrite and humble spirit (Isa 57:15). We find courage in the solidarity we receive from the crucified Christ, and we find hope in the empty tomb. We are also encouraged and empowered by the costly solidarity and support of many churches and grassroots faith movements around the world, challenging the dominance of ideologies of power and supremacy. We refuse to give in, even when our siblings abandon us. We are steadfast in our hope, resilient in our witness, and continue to be committed to the Gospel of faith, hope, and love, in the face of tyranny and darkness. “In the absence of all hope, we cry out our cry of hope. We believe in God, good and just. We believe that God’s goodness will finally triumph over the evil of hate and of death that still persist in our land. We will see here ‘a new land’ and ‘a new human being’, capable of rising up in the spirit to

love each one of his or her brothers and sisters” (Kairos Palestine par. 10).

WHAT CAN WE AS SOUTH AFRICAN CHRISTIANS DO?

The URCSA joins the prophetic voices who call on the relevant authorities for:

- An immediate ceasefire by all parties to the conflict
- The opening of access routes into Gaza to allow aid convoys to enter
- The release of all hostages held by Hamas
- The release of all the detainees in Israeli prisons who are held without trial, especially youth
- The gathering of information to enable the investigation of war crimes
- A renewed commitment on the part of Israelis and Palestinians to find a political solution to the conflict

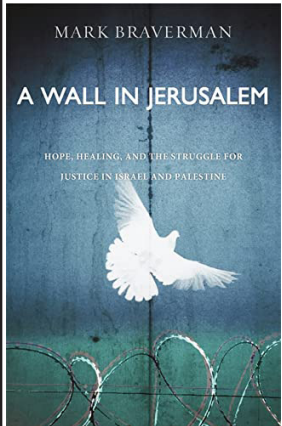
The URCSA joins the priestly voices who call on church members to pray for:

- healing for those who have been wounded
- comfort for those who are mourning the loss of relatives and friends
- protection and courage for those who are fleeing the violence
- perseverance for medical staff who are trying to provide care for patients
- a change of heart among the leaders on both sides of the conflict to stop the attacks
- wisdom for mediating figures negotiating behind the scenes to put pressure on the parties
- people of conscience worldwide to contribute practically to support and relief efforts

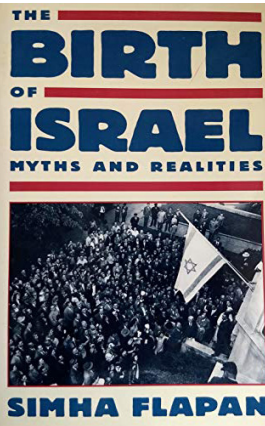
The URCSA urges congregations to join the royal actions of those who commit themselves to:

- celebrate Christmas and Epiphany this year in a subdued spirit, remembering the plight of the people in different countries across the world who are trapped in the midst of war
- “fasting” from certain luxuries and excesses this year to be able to contribute financially to relief efforts, by supporting organisations such as: The International Red Cross; Gift of the Givers; and The Palestine Children’s Relief Fund.

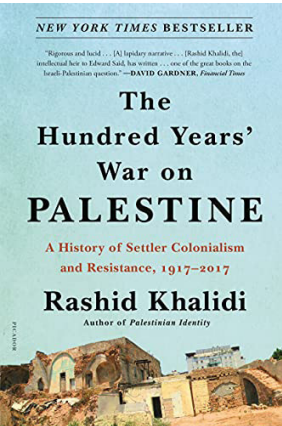
RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING:



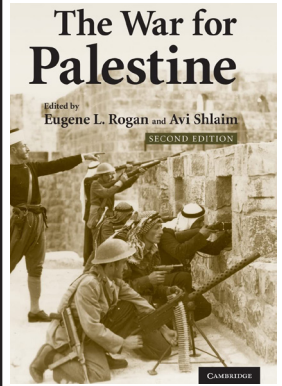
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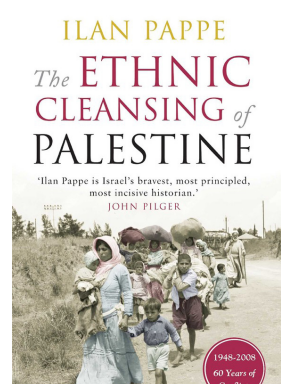
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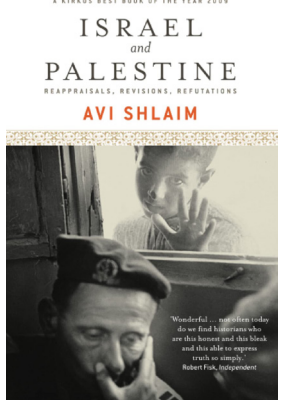
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