

An Overview of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and its Contemporary Context

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Although discussions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often commence with the modern Zionist movement and then focus upon the Palestinian refugee problem, in order to understand the modern regional conflict one needs to become acquainted with the wider geo-political background of the preceding centuries. In my limited time, I'll begin by mentioning Israel's connection with the development of the Western democratic tradition, then survey some salient points concerning the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the modern Middle East leading up to the current conflict and some of its key moments. Finally, I will note several of the current theological, political, and social trends relevant to our current Symposium and offer a brief analysis.

Israel and the Path to Democracy

Israel's foundational national experience takes place at Sinai where she encounters God's terrifying presence, and where Moses descends from his communion with God with the Ten Commandments.¹ These core commandments and their expansion in the Law of Moses serve as Israel's Ethical Charter issuing out of her encounter with a Holy God and her call to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”² In spite of Israel's consistent moral failures, the biblical narrative bears witness to the imprint of her monotheistic faith upon the surrounding nations. The moral vision that God gave to Moses and the Hebrew Prophets finds its most sublime expression

¹ Exod 31:18; 34:1—4.

² Exod 19:6.

in Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount.³ This biblical vision of ethical monotheism remains the primary spiritual vision that has shaped the ethos of Western culture.

In the march of Western history, the divine right of kings was challenged by the Magna Carta in the early 13th century, which directly called into account monarchical authority by limiting its powers and claims to privilege. The rise of modern democracies and basic civil liberties trace their beginnings to this charter. The development of this heritage reached its theoretical highpoint in the writing of modern political thinkers like the seventeenth century philosopher John Locke. Locke advanced the idea of natural law that undergirds inalienable civil rights, the separation of powers, representative government, and the rule of law. When founding the state of Israel its leaders adopted this democratic model wherein its citizens are governed by freely elected officials who represent them, in an executive led by the prime minister who is subject to a legislature and an independent judiciary. Later in my paper I'll discuss Israeli civil society, but now I'd like to highlight the rise of the Ottoman Empire that sets the stage for the encounter and subsequent conflict between Jews and Arabs in the modern Middle East.

From the Ottoman Empire to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Israel's experience in the Diaspora began to undergo a new chapter with the arrival of Mohamed and the birth of Islam in the early 7th century C.E. Mohamed's vision for Islam's territorial expansion beyond the Arabian Peninsula began to see a fulfillment at the turn of the 13th century with the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. Under the rule of Osman I, after whom the Empire was named, a version of Islamic-colonialism began to be implemented. In a series of Jihadic conquests, the Sultans, who presented themselves as "the protectors of Islam," led their

³ Matt 5—7.

armies into battle. In so doing they transformed themselves from a tribal clan in western-Asia minor into an expansive empire that lasted for seven centuries.

In the mid-19th century the Ottoman Empire underwent a series of far-reaching Western-type reforms that effected comprehensive changes in all areas of civil society. These reforms also included land reform, known as the Ottoman Land Code of 1858. A basic understanding of this land reform is a necessary prerequisite to understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Up until this period, ownership of land was simply assumed by the peasants who farmed it. The implementation of the new Land Code required land owners to register their land. The reasons behind the law were twofold: firstly, to increase tax revenue for the ailing Ottoman economy, and secondly, to exercise greater state control over the area. The Arab peasants working the land tended not to register their land in order to avoid both military conscription and land taxes.

The net-result of these developments is that often Arab peasant farmers ended up working on land that was owned by absentee landlords in cities like Damascus. During the latter part of the 19th century political Zionism began against the backdrop of the growing secularization of Jewish identity during the Haskalah, the rise of European anti-Semitism, and the birth of European nationalisms. During this period, the first and second waves of Aliyah from 1882 to 1914 collectively added approximately 50,000 Jews to pre-mandate Palestine.

These immigrants labored to establish Jewish agricultural settlements and towns, and worked towards establishing an independent sovereign Jewish state. Jewish land purchases were based upon large uncultivated tracts of land from absentee landlords. However, this changed after a regional economic downturn in the 1930s, which resulted in the sale of land by local Arab peasant farmers who, out of financial necessity, sold their land to Jewish immigrants. As a result,

between 1932 and 1945 more than 60 percent of all Jewish land purchases were from local Arabs farmers.⁴

The period of these developments taking place within the Ottoman Empire, was one of tremendous upheaval among the Great Powers which consisted of two main blocks: the Allies, (Russia, France and Britain, and later the US) and the central powers (Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire). At the close of WWI, the Principal Allied Powers who emerged as the victors conferred mandates to dispose of the territory of the defeated Central Powers, which included the territory of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1920, at San Remo, Italy, the British received the Mandate to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine that was confirmed by the League of Nations (the predecessor of the United Nations) in 1922. Transjordan, however, was removed from the original mandate and given to the Hashemite family in what became present day Jordan. The basis of the mandate, according to the words of its preamble, is in “recognition... [of] the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country.”⁵

This period between the conclusion of World War I and the early part of the British mandate, marks the emergence of Palestinian national identity. Benny Morris, Israel’s leading historian of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, explains in his book, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*,⁶

For most of Palestine’s impoverished, illiterate inhabitants at the end of the nineteenth century, ‘nationalism’ was an alien, meaningless concept. They identified themselves simultaneously as subjects of

⁴ For the neglected aspect of the role of the Palestinian Arab politicians and notables in land acquisition by the Zionist pioneers, see K. W. Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917—1939* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1984), 228—38.

⁵ For the text of the League of Nations “Palestine Mandate,” see http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/palmanda.asp.

⁶ B. Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

the (multinational) Ottoman Empire and as part of the (multinational) community of Islam; as Arabs, in terms of geography, culture, and language; as inhabitants of this or that region and village of a vaguely defined Palestine; and as members of this or that clan or family. There was no Arab national movement and not even a hint, in 1881, of a separate Palestinian Arab nationalism.⁷

Rashid Khalidi, a prominent Palestinian historian affirms in his book, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* that the first emergence of Palestinian national identity surfaced between the outbreak of WWI and 1923.⁸

During the mandate period in 1936, Palestine's Arab population began a general strike and an uprising against the Jews and the British, which resulted in the British sending a committee that concluded that the populations should be separated. The Jews would receive approximately 20 percent of the land, and the Arabs would receive over 70 percent of the land, with the remaining 10 percent under British control. The Jewish Agency (reluctantly) accepted the plan of a largely indefensible state, and the Arabs, under the leadership of Haj Amin al-Husseini, rejected it. The next proposal followed the conclusion of WWII after the failed British mandate, in which the UN recommended partitioning the land into a Jewish and an Arab state, with the Jewish state comprising 55 percent of the territory and the Arab state comprising 45 percent. The Jews accepted the partition plan, and the Arabs again under the leadership of Haj Amin al-Husseini, rejected it.

Al-Husseini's successor, Yasser Arafat, followed Al-Husseini's rejectionism by walking out of Ehud Barak's offer of historic compromise during the Oslo peace process in 2000, choosing instead to begin the second intifada. While Israeli civilians were being blown up by Palestinian suicide bombers, Clinton (with Barak's agreement) improved Barak's Camp David

⁷ Ibid., 5—6.

⁸ R. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 145—76.

offer by offering Arafat a Palestinian state consisting of 94-96% of the West Bank, with some territorial compensation; once again, Arafat rejected the offer of a Palestinian state.

In 2005 following Israel's complete and unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, the Gazan militants began to use it as a launching pad for constant rocket attacks upon Israel's neighboring city, Sderot and Israel's southern coastal cities. Since Israel withdrew its military forces and civilians from Gaza in 2005, Palestinian militants have fired more than eleven thousand missiles, mortars, and rockets into Israel. In 2008 Israel's then serving prime minister, Ehud Olmert, made Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas a comprehensive offer of peace and Palestinian statehood that again exceeded the offer of Ehud Barak's Camp David Offer. Abbas chose not to respond to Olmert's offer.

In 2014 Israel undertook both an air and a necessary ground operation in Gaza in order to put an end to the missile fire upon its citizens and to locate and destroy the Gazan tunnels, nicknamed "the tube" by Israeli journalists. It is truly a tragic social phenomenon that Hamas, rather than using her authority and financial resources to establish a viable economy above ground for her citizens; rather than use endless tons of cement to build schools, Universities, clinics, and cultural institutions, chose instead to develop a vast network of tunnels, some of which extended into Israeli territory with the explicit goal of kidnapping Israelis and carrying out terrorist attacks upon her civilian population. We should not be surprised by this, however, since Hamas' self-declared intention enshrined in her charter, is Jihad against Israel. Thus the actions of Hamas are consistent with its stated Jihadic Islamist goals.

During the second intifada, Benny Morris, whom I cited earlier, came to the conclusion that the war of 1948 was essentially a Jihadic one, and that the primary goal of the Palestinian

leadership was not a Palestinian state, or the betterment of their people, but rather the destruction of Israel. Morris states,

The 1948 War, to be sure, was a milestone in a contest between two national movements over a piece of territory. But it was also—if only because that is how many if not most Arabs saw it (and see it today)—part of a more general, global struggle between the Islamic East and the West, in which the Land of Israel/Palestine figured, and still figures, as a major battlefield.⁹

Having briefly highlighted some key aspects of the historical framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it may be helpful to pause before proceeding, and take stock of how, in our modern world, we receive information, perceive reality and form opinions.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Media War

Prior to modern media, political discourse was carried out through the critical analysis of ideas, and the merits or weaknesses of their principles. In contemporary culture, however, television, films, the internet, google, Wikipedia, social networks, twitter, etc. are the media that determine our regular diet of ‘the news’ as they also rewire our brains. We are continually bombarded by decontextualized images with limited text that seek to form our opinions based upon reductionistic, agenda-driven packaging. The line between real ‘news’ and entertainment, or ‘reality’ and ‘reality TV’ is increasingly blurred. The danger of this phenomenon is that people are more vulnerable to the propagandistic agendas of political spin-meisters, who prey upon their emotions and willingness to form an opinion based upon a decontextualized photograph, video-bite or blog.

We need to think about how this current phenomenon shapes our perception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and our ability, or lack thereof, to properly evaluate its complexity. In

⁹ Morris, *1948*, 394.

recent years, Palestinian Christians have sought awareness, recognition, and support of their cause through conferences, programmatic documents, and films. These initiatives employ powerful symbols by which the Palestinian Christian community has sought to associate themselves and their cause with leaders and movements of social justice from the past. Namely, the struggle of South African blacks against the oppressive apartheid regime of racist white Afrikaners; Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience movement to throw off the yoke of British colonial rule; and the struggle of the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

I think all of us would agree that every believer and person of conscience person needs to empathize with the suffering of the Palestinian people. However, along with a compassionate heart to see their plight alleviated, one also needs to critically assess the appropriateness of the symbols of social justice they employ, discern the root causes of their hardships and pray, support and work with them towards solutions.

Palestinian and International Initiatives in the Context of the Conflict

Let's now begin to review some of the prominent events, organizations, movements and media that seek to publicize the Palestinian Christian's plight and their grievances with the state of Israel. In March 2010 Bethlehem Bible College launched the first "Christ at the Checkpoint Conference," subtitled, "Theology in the Service of Peace and Justice." The speakers included Palestinian Christians and some prominent international evangelical leaders. The conference addressed various theologies and the way that, in the words of the web site, theology "either promotes war and violence, or promotes peace and justice."¹⁰ The conference speakers critiqued dispensational theology and repudiated both Christian Zionism and Anti-Semitism. Participants

¹⁰ <http://www.christatthecheckpoint.com>

were given the opportunity to visit the “Separation Wall” (as the site describes it) a checkpoint at 6:00 am, Palestinian refugee camps, and a Jewish settlement. Subsequent conferences were held in 2012 and 2014, which included some Messianic Jewish speakers and participants. The web site includes the conference manifesto that seeks to address and redress the Palestinian community’s sense of injustice, lack of resolution to the conflict, and the need for a solution to bring relief and justice to the suffering of Palestinians.

Next we have The Palestinian Kairos Document, written by Palestinian theologians in 2009. The document name is adopted from the South African Kairos Document, which was written in Soweto in 1985 by black South African theologians as a vehicle to critique the theological models of the Church’s response to the apartheid system. The document’s name is based upon the specific Greek word for ‘time’ in the NT that connotes an ‘appointed time ordained by God.’ The Palestinian Kairos document: “requests the international community to stand by the Palestinian people who have faced oppression, displacement, suffering and clear apartheid for more than six decades.”¹¹ And that Israel’s “military occupation of our land is a sin against God and humanity.”¹²

Let’s move next to Palestinian Liberation Theology. Liberation theology began as a movement in Latin America and stresses that faith in God necessarily leads to actions that oppose unjust social and political structures. The Bible is read as a history of the oppressed and salvation is understood as a new social order. Reverend Naim Ateek, an ordained Anglican minister, is the most prominent Palestinian Liberation theologian and the founder of Sabeel, an Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center. ¹³ According to the web site the origins of Sabeel came

¹¹ For the full document go to <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/content/kairos-document> and click on the English download option, which will call up: <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/English.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <http://www.sabeel.org>

about during the first intifada, as a pastoral response to their Palestinian congregants who were asking the question “Where is God in all of this oppression and injustice?”¹⁴ Ateek and Sabeel advocate for the “boycott, divestment, and sanctions” movement, known as ‘BDS,’ for which Omar Barghouti is one of the main Palestinian spokesmen.¹⁵ The Palestinian BDS document, states,

We, representatives of Palestinian civil society, call upon international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era. We appeal to you to pressure your respective states to impose embargoes and sanctions against Israel.” The document then calls for these punitive measures to be maintained against Israel until it ends its “occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall,” and the return of the refugees “to their homes and properties.”¹⁶

A denomination that strongly advocates for BDS through its “Israel/Palestine Mission Network”¹⁷ is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the largest Presbyterian denomination in America. The network encourages its various constituencies to become informed and get involved with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a clear emphasis upon advocating for Palestinian rights. The web site includes an 8-episode film series entitled “Zionism Unsettled: A Congregational Study Guide.”¹⁸ Outspoken Jewish academic and community leaders figure prominently in the various episodes. In addition to the film a 74 page lavishly illustrated guide is available to lead congregational discussion groups.¹⁹

The Presbyterian USA’s film series is an example of a growing film genre. A simple Amazon search, let alone a YouTube one, will readily yield a seemingly ever-growing list of the

¹⁴ <http://www.sabeel.org/ourstory.php>

¹⁵ <http://www.bdsmovement.net/> see also, <http://pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=868>,

¹⁶ <http://www.bdsmovement.net/call>

¹⁷ <http://www.israelpalestinemissionnetwork.org/main>

¹⁸ <http://www.israelpalestinemissionnetwork.org/main/component/content/article/70/256-zionism-unsettled>

¹⁹ Controversy over the guide is reflected in the following article which discusses the removal of the guide from the PCUSA’s web site: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/28/zionism-unsettled-presbyterian-removed_n_5540039.html. The guide, however, seems to be still available on the PCUSA’s web site order page.

latest additions in this category. Two such examples are: “Little Town of Bethlehem,” and “Occupation 101: Voices of the Silenced Majority.” “Little Town of Bethlehem,” according to its director “[S]hares the gripping story of three men, born into violence, willing to risk everything to bring an end to violence in their lifetime.”²⁰ The three men are a Palestinian Christian, a Palestinian Muslim, and a former Israeli helicopter pilot. “Occupation 101,” according to the film’s web site is “A thought-provoking and powerful documentary film on the current and historical causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”²¹

Analyzing Palestinian and International Claims Against Israel

Having now surveyed several key Palestinian and International initiatives which seek to advance the cause of social justice for Palestinians and Palestinian Christians, let’s briefly evaluate the basic claims made by these various groups and initiatives, and their charges against Israel.

Before I discuss these claims, however, let me point out, that the various terms used to discuss the issues often assume a moral stance prior to engaging the evidence, e.g. ‘The West Bank,’ ‘Judea and Samaria,’ or the ‘Occupied Territories; or ‘Security Fence,’ ‘West Bank Barrier,’ or ‘Separation Wall.’

In order to gain moral clarity about the issues these terms denote, we first have to carefully examine the evidence to determine if a given term accurately reflects what it claims to represent.

Leaving aside Hamas’ claim that Israel on both sides of the green line is occupying Arab Palestinians’ sacred Muslim land — let’s begin rather with our first question: Does Israel’s presence in Judea and Samaria constitute an illegal occupation of the Palestinian people and their

²⁰ <http://littletownofbethlehem.org>

²¹ <http://www.occupation101.com>

land? I realize that emotions run high on this issue, but all I want to address right now is specifically the legal question. In her recent book, *The Israeli Solution: A One State Plan for Peace in the Middle East*, Caroline Glick succinctly lays out the legal facts that are so often obscured by the term, “the Occupied Territories.” Some of the key legal points that Glick clarifies are: The Jews acceptance of the UN partition plan did not cancel their legal rights to the original territory of the Mandate (although this claim continues to be made).

An article of the UN’s founding charter explicitly preserves the rights of peoples in existing mandates unless a new trusteeship agreement is reached and approved to replace that mandate. Glick cites experts on international law who explain that Israel’s acceptance of the UN partition would only have resulted in her loss of rights to the entire mandate if the Arabs had accepted their territory of the partition. Glick cites law professor Avi Bell, who explains that when Israel declared its independence on May 15, 1948, this situation established Israel’s new borders based on customary international legal principle.

[W]hen formerly non-self-governing territories—such as colonial or mandatory possessions—become sovereign states, their old administrative boundaries become their new national boundaries. As Bell explains, “Under this international legal principle, when Israel declared its independence on May 15, 1948, the administrative boundaries of the British Mandate became Israel’s national borders.”²²

Clearly I don’t have time to summarize Glick’s detailed explanations, but for those interested, her book provides contemporary examples of this principle and its application in the border disputes of modern nations. Suffice it to only further mention here that when the dust of war settled in 1949 and Israel had successfully defended herself and made territorial gains against the Arab armies who attacked her, she then signed a series of armistice agreements with her four bordering Arab states. These agreements established cease-fire lines that continue to be

²² C. Glick, *The Israeli Solution: A One-State Plan for Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Crown Forum, 2014), 174.

misleadingly referred to as ‘the 1967 borders.’ However, the cease-fire lines did not establish political borders. They were merely the boundaries where Israel had succeeded in driving back the Arab armies who attacked her. This distinction is in fact clearly stated in all the armistice agreements.²³

Let’s now ask the next question, “Is Israel an apartheid state?” Based upon the accepted definition of apartheid, as “racial segregation and political and economic discrimination,”²⁴ we need to begin by acknowledging the complex security-related realities beyond Israel’s armistice lines in Judea and Samaria and the reality within Israel’s armistice lines. Israel’s territory east of the green line operates under military rule due to the nature of the conflict, namely; the Palestinian National Charter calls for armed resistance against Israel, and the Hamas charter clearly states, for example in article fifteen: “The day that enemies usurp part of Moslem land, Jihad becomes the individual duty of every Moslem. In face of the Jews’ usurpation of Palestine, it is compulsory that the banner of Jihad be raised.”²⁵

Israeli Arabs within the green line, however, are granted citizenship and the basic civil liberties and social services that all citizens in Israel enjoy. Those who argue that Israel is an apartheid state will need to explain to me, How is it then that Arab Israelis have voting rights, are able to form political parties, and elect Arab Knesset members who freely participate in Israel’s legislative process? Or, if Israeli is an apartheid state, how is it that Arab Israelis participate in Israel’s vibrant uncensored free press in newspaper, radio, and television? And how is it that Israeli Arabs attend Israeli Universities? How do Arab Israelis, who represent approximately

²³ Ibid., 175.

²⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "apartheid", accessed February 1, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/29332/apartheid>

²⁵ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp

20% of Israel's population, constituted 8% of the Boards of Directors of government corporations in 2012?²⁶

In addition, how is it that there are Arab Israelis who have risen to some of the most prominent professional positions. For example George Karra, from a prominent Arab Christian family in Jaffa, graduated from law school at Tel Aviv University, became a senior judge in the Tel Aviv District court, and was the judge who presided over and sentenced to prison, Israel's president at the time, Moshe Katzav. Or how is it that Salim Jubran, another prominent Arab Christian, graduated with a law degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, advanced his career as a judge in Haifa's municipal and district courts, and has served as one of Israel's Supreme Court justices since 2003?

If Israel is an apartheid state, how is it that statistics show that the Israeli Arab-Christian sector has achieved the greatest academic success and professional training per capita of any other group in Israel, including Jews?²⁷ This is due to the success of Arab private Christian schools in Israel, which freely operate in Israel's democratic society. My friend Bortus Mansoor is a shining example contributing to this social phenomenon; Botrus is a lawyer and graduate of Hebrew University, and the director of the Nazareth Baptist School, which has about 1,000 students including some Muslim students who attend chapel with their parents' prior consent.²⁸ In fact, one of the school's recent and outstanding graduates, who is the niece of our brother Azar Ajaj, who is here with us at this symposium, participated in my recent three-week intensive Young Israeli Leaders program this past summer.

Someone who wants to convince me that Israel is an apartheid state will also have to tell me why when my son fell and needed stitches, the attending doctor who skillfully sewed up his

²⁶ <http://iataskforce.org/sites/default/files/resource/resource-254.pdf>

²⁷ <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/319/566.html#.TveMi69GSZE> (Hebrew)

²⁸ <http://www.baptist.co.il>

lip was an Arab Israeli doctor. Or how at my special needs son's school graduation ceremony, the Arab Christian and Muslim students sang in Arabic, together with the Jewish students who sang in Hebrew and the Ethiopian students who sang in Amharic, honoring diversity in our culture.

Am I painting a false picture? No, this is a true picture that reflects diversity within Israel and my personal experience of that diversity. Let me be clear though: this does not mean that Israel is a utopia for Arabs. For example, we have a serious disparity in our workforce that needs to find ways to better integrate Israeli Arabs into the economy. In fact, just two weeks ago, our president Reuven Rivlin, met with the Arab heads of regional councils to launch a new cooperative project between the President's Office and the Collective Impact initiative, which works to further the level of employment in Israel's Arabic society.²⁹ The life of Palestinians whose cities are bordered by security walls and check points is not a picnic, especially since the reason they are coming into Israel in the first place, is that they have little viable employment in the Palestinian territories. My defense of Israel also does not mean that there is no room for critique or improvement of our society; nor does it mean that there is no racism in Israel since a government cannot regulate the attitudes of its citizen's hearts.

For example, as an Israeli citizen, I completely renounce and am personally ashamed of the racism among Israel's Beitar Jerusalem soccer team fans known for their racist chant, "Death to Arabs" during soccer matches.³⁰ Also do we have problems with radical fringe 'hilltop youths' and some militant settlers, who commit acts of racist vandalism against Arab civilians in Judea and Samaria? Yes, we do; military rule and the political context Israel faces with Hamas and

²⁹ http://www.president.gov.il/English/Presidential_Activities/Press_Releases/Pages/news_080215_02.aspx

³⁰ See e.g., <http://www.timesofisrael.com/beitars-racism-has-a-long-inglorious-history>

Palestinian militants mixed in with some fringe radical Jewish extremists does not make us one big happy family over the green line.

However, I am proud of my country that upholds the rule of law, so that those who commit incidents of racial incitement and violence are brought to trial and convicted if found guilty. Furthermore, alongside our judicial system we have multiple Jewish founded and led NGO's who aggressively advocate for the defense of civil violations committed against Palestinians. For example, Amona, the largest unauthorized outpost in Judea was ordered by Israel's Supreme Court to be dismantled and pay damages, when, after an Israeli police investigation, it was confirmed that the settlers had forged their documents of ownership.³¹

Let me now mention the charges of discrimination brought against Israel by the Palestinian leader of the BDS movement Omar Barghouti. Barghouti calls for academics to sever funding and ties with Israel's universities and research centers because of her so-called apartheid policies. What I have not told you yet, however, is that Barghouti earned his master's degree in philosophy from, none other than, Tel Aviv University, where he is currently pursuing his Ph.D. studies. Although many students petitioned the board of governors to ban him from the University, the board refused to do so and upheld Barghouti's civil rights to study there.³² The irony of Barghouti's boycott movement against Israel and its Universities and its so-called apartheid state, while at the same time enjoying the fruits its cultural institutions and protections of its liberal democracy, borders on the surreal.

Let me very briefly say something about the trend of anti-Zionist films I mentioned earlier, such as the PCUSA's 8-part film series, "Zionism Unsettled." The film series is highly tendentious. Israel is presented as a colonial power guilty of preplanned ethnic cleansing and

³¹ See e.g., <http://news.yahoo.com/israel-set-date-west-bank-outpost-demolition-203419428.html>

³² See e.g., <http://www.thejc.com/news/israel-news/academic-boycotter-study-tel-aviv>

apartheid, and the Zionist state as an illegal implant upon Palestinian Arab land. The 8 episodes avoid almost any nuanced counter-narrative to their one-sided presentation of Israel as a racist occupier and abuser of Arab civil rights.

Episode 1, for example, frames the series with an opening scene of an Israeli attack helicopter, ominously hovering in the sky followed by pictures of wounded Palestinian youth being rushed to medical care by those carrying them. The pictures are of course very disturbing to any person of conscience, however, if one would have expected some kind of acknowledgment of why Israel would be attacking (what I assume is Gaza in the footage), the narrator simply does not provide it. One can only imagine the discussions that follow in the small study groups when cued by the film to pause and refer to the “Congregational study guide,” that reinforces the images and narrative they have just been shown.

The films “Little Town of Bethlehem” and “Occupation101” have both been hosted at Universities all over the USA. I personally agree with one aspect of the film, “Little Town of Bethlehem,” namely that the IDF needs to be held accountable to its own doctrine of “purity of arms.” My problem with the film, however, is that it implies a narrative of Israel as the unprovoked aggressor. The continual juxtaposition of archival footage of the American Civil Rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with footage of Palestinian demonstrators suggests to the viewer that the conflict is essentially a racial one. The film simply decontextualizes and distorts the situation by focusing upon a handful of Palestinians who advocate for non-violence, without explaining to the viewer that the IDF’s primary military engagement is to protect its citizens from attacks by various Islamic militant groups who are not peacefully singing “We shall overcome.”

A central symbol of the film is Israel's security wall. The film, however, does not properly explain to the viewer why the security wall exists in the first place. During the years 2000 to 2005, hundreds of Palestinian suicide bombings and terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians killed nearly 1,000 innocent Israeli civilians and wounded thousands of others. In that context in 2002 Israel's government decided to construct a security wall that would run along its 1949 armistice lines to protect its citizens. By the time of its completion, terrorism had dropped 99% demonstrating its effectiveness.

"Occupation 101's" web site announces, as I noted, it is "A thought-provoking and powerful documentary film on the current and historical causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."³³ However, this is the last resource I would recommend to any sincere seeker of moral clarity to turn to regarding the causes of the conflict.³⁴ The film's framing of the issues makes many of its claims completely false and depicts Israel once again, as the unprovoked and brutal aggressor and persecutor of Palestinian Christians. For example, early in the film, the narrator describes Israel as carrying out a military siege of the Church of the Nativity. What the film does not unpack for the viewer, however, is that Israel's so-called 'siege' of the church was part of an IDF operation against the Al-Aqsa brigade militants in Bethlehem and cities in the West Bank during the height of the second intifada, and only a week after a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up during a Passover Seder at a Hotel in Netanya that killed 30 mostly elderly Jews. The only reason that the IDF had to 'siege' the church in the first place was that about 50 armed Islamic militants with explosives sought cover in the church, knowing that the IDF would not pursue them there, and held 200 priests and civilians hostage for almost 40 days with little food and water. One can be sure that the viewer of "Occupation 101" would be surprised to know that

³³ <http://www.occupation101.com>

³⁴ See the following review, <http://www.adl.org/israel-international/anti-israel-activity/c/occupation-101.html>

it was Palestinian Islamic militants who murdered the Arab Christian director of the Gaza Bible Society, and it is Israel who protects Arab-Israeli Christians from persecution from Muslims within Israel.³⁵

The Middle East without Israel?

In my last few minutes I want to ask a foundational question that we all need to reflect upon, namely, what type of society would there be in mandate Palestine if Israel had not come into being in 1948? Clearly no one can answer that question with certainty. However, what we can do is take a look around Israel at its 22 neighboring Arab States, Gaza and the cities controlled by the PA, and get an idea of their governing models and societies that have resulted from those models. An article that appeared in the Economist in 2014 entitled, “The Middle East: The tragedy of the Arabs,”³⁶ begins by acknowledging that Islam enjoyed a renaissance of learning in the Middle Ages, but then goes on to discuss how modern fundamentalist versions of Islam are at the heart of the Arab peoples troubles; how the development of independent political institutions is stunted by a lack of separation between mosque and state. Commenting upon the fact that most Arab countries are relatively young nations, the editorial notes, that since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire:

Arab countries have not yet succeeded in fostering the institutional prerequisites of democracy—the give-and-take of parliamentary discourse, protection for minorities, the emancipation of women, a free press, independent courts and universities and trade unions. The absence of a liberal state has been matched by the absence of a liberal economy. After independence, the prevailing orthodoxy was central planning, often Soviet-inspired. Anti-market, anti-trade, pro-subsidy and pro-regulation, Arab governments strangled their economies. The state pulled the levers of economic power—especially where oil was involved. “Where the constraints of post-colonial socialism were lifted, capitalism of the crony, rent-seeking kind took hold, as it

³⁵ See e.g., http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/israeli-priest-defends-israel_819715.html

³⁶ <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21606284-civilisation-used-lead-world-ruinsand-only-locals-can-rebuild-it>

did in the later years of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Privatization was for pals of the government. Virtually no markets were free, barely any world-class companies developed, and clever Arabs who wanted to excel in business or scholarship had to go to America or Europe to do so. Economic stagnation bred dissatisfaction. Monarchs and presidents-for-life defended themselves with secret police and goons.³⁷

Sadly, in our day, whatever hope the Arab Spring began to give birth to, has, at least for the present moment for the majority of Arabs, been suppressed by the resurgence of dictatorial leaders and fundamentalist Islamic militants. On the other hand, Israeli Arabs, including their Christian minority, live in a democracy—albeit an imperfect one—and thus enjoy the rule of law and educational and social services alongside their Jewish counterparts. My presentation has not even touched upon the question of God's providence, as witnessed by history and scripture regarding the return of the Jewish people to the historical land of Israel. Tomorrow morning we will begin to hear presentations on this topic and how we as a movement need to engage with this conflict within and without our own circles.

Although my presentation has perhaps painted a grim picture of the situation; I nonetheless fully believe that we as the body of Messiah in the Land, Jew and Arab, cousins in the flesh, and brothers in the spirit, truly have a Kairos moment in our generation. We need to find ways to build the Kingdom of God together, to see the power of the Gospel transform individuals, who collectively can transform our respective cultures so that they bring hope to our people and glory to God.

³⁷ Ibid.