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Palestinian Statehood

By Rev. Peter Eng

Recently, many evangelical ministers sent a letter to President George Bush supporting his two-state solution to the Palestinian problem. This is because some very vocal evangelicals strongly advocate that Christians need to give a blind and blanket support for all that Israel does.

The ignorant mass media in turn characterized all evangelical Christians as adopting that position. Again, the secular media is clueless about what constitutes an evangelical Christian. I believe the position of the evangelical ministers is correct. I don't know their rationale behind their support of the two-state solution, but in Oct 2001, I wrote about this matter, and I am recounting this to you at this appropriate juncture.

Should Christians support the Palestinian cause or the Israeli cause? Answers are not as easy as questions. This article discusses just one aspect of this dilemma. The Palestinian problem.

The Palestinian Problem

Let us trace the problem back to ad 70 when Jerusalem fell to the Romans. From that time, the Jews lost their independence. The Roman Empire was divided into the Western Empire under Rome (Latin) and the Eastern Empire (Greek) under Constantinople or Byzantium.

During the time of Christ, and before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in ad 70, the land of Israel was populated by Greeks, Romans, Jews, Samaritans, Babylonians, Bedouins, etc. There was no group of persons called Palestinians.

The land of Israel was under the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine), and as the Byzantine Empire became more Christian, the land of Israel was influenced by Christians.

Islam came on the scene as a conquering army. In ad 638, Omar ibn al-Khattaab conquered Jerusalem, ending Byzantine rule. The land was administered from Damascus under the Umayyad Caliphs. In the midst of rivalry for prominence, the Umayyad Caliphs built a large mosque from 685-715. To give the mosque significance, they named it "The Farther Mosque" (Al-Aqsa). This is because the farther mosque was mentioned by their prophet. The trouble was that this was built over the site of the Jewish temple.

The land of Israel remained under Muslim control from 638 to 1099. The administrative control of the land of Israel came from Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, as one would naturally expect over such a long period of time.

From 1099 to 1187, the Crusades brought Jerusalem under the control of the Western Roman Empire. This was a religious motivated war to regain the land of Israel

from the Muslims which the Byzantine Empire had lost.

This success was short-lived. In 1187, the Muslims regained control of Jerusalem. Genghis Khan's unstoppable attacks weakened Constantinople severely. In 1453, Osman, an obscure Muslim Turkish clan chieftain, stormed the walls of Constantinople (now Istanbul). He and his successors eventually conquered the whole region, creating the Ottoman Empire. In 1516, the land of Israel was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, and was administered from Istanbul. This continued until WW1.

One does not have to be clever to figure out that the Jewish people who have been scattered, and whose land was under perpetual foreign domination, mostly under the Muslims, should have disappeared. But they survived as a small remnant within Israel.

Throughout this time, the Muslims inhabitants grew and became the majority in the land of Israel, while Jewish communities exiled to different parts of the world retained measures of their Jewishness.

WW1 broke out in 1914. The war was fought by Britain, France and Russia against Germany and Austro-Hungary. The US was later drawn in on the British side and the Ottoman Empire allied with Germany.

As part of the WW1 effort, the British sought indigenous help to fight the Turks. Eager for sovereign national control, the Arabs and Jews all agreed to help the British, in exchange for the British liberating them from the Ottoman Empire.

This sounded simple enough. The problem was that the British promised the land of Israel to both the Jews and the Arabs! At the same time, the British and the French struck a separate agreement to colonize the Middle East between them!

The land of Israel came under British control after WW1. At the end of the 19th century, the Diaspora Jews began calling for a homeland and the return of Jews to their original homeland. Under British protection, and in keeping with the British Balfour Declaration of 1917, Jews were allowed to return. This could also have been done to protect British interests so that the Arab-Muslim population would have less influence. The British did not seem to have any intention of fulfilling their promise to the Jews that they would have an independent homeland, or to the Arabs that the land would be under their control. It is the twice-promised land!

In the run up to WW2, Nazi persecution accelerated Jewish immigration back to the land of Israel. The huge influx of Jews was opposed by the Arab-Muslim population in the land of Israel, which by this time, took on the designation Palestine, and the Arab-Muslim population called Palestinians. In 1936, a violent conflict flared up between the Palestinians and the Jews.

With their own problems of WW2, and in their attempt to preserve the peace, the British severely limited Jewish immigration in 1939. This in part resulted in the Jews not having a place of refuge from Nazi persecution, and added to the scope of the holocaust.

At the close of WW2, Nazi atrocities against the Jews became public knowledge and there was a now powerful argument that the Jews needed their own homeland, and it was wrong for Britain to have prevented Jewish immigration into Palestine.

In 1946 a joint British-American inquiry concluded that Jewish immigration must be allowed, but the mixed population in the land did not allow an independent state for either the Arab-Muslims or the Jews. The recommendation of this inquiry was followed by the UN Partition of Nov. 1947, which recognized a Jewish and Palestinian state with international jurisdiction over

Jerusalem. Both the Palestinians and the Jews felt betrayed by the British.

The Jewish cause for an independent homeland was support by the Holocaust, and the Palestinian cause for a homeland was backed by Arab oil. Before long, it became apparent that the Jews would declare an independent state based on the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

The Zionist Movement, dedicated to the creation of the State of Israel, launched terrorist attacks against the British. The plan was to make the land ungovernable for the British, who by this time were only looking for a way to extricate themselves from this mess. The British then began handing over the military installations to the Palestinians and help the Palestinians fight the Jews.

The Jews made overtures to the Palestinians to be part of the State of Israel and to overthrow the British. The Palestinians rejected this idea and instead opted to "push the Jews into the sea" with the help of their Muslim brothers. As the Provisional Government of Israel met to deliberate on the declaration of the State of Israel, the Arab-Muslim countries moved their armies towards the borders, in preparation to launch an attack if the Provisional Government made such a declaration.

On midnight, May 14, 1948, the Provisional Government of Israel declared the formation of the State of Israel. The very next day, the armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon invaded the land of Israel to exterminate the Jews. The Palestinians fought the Jews with British officers and advisors.

The impossible happened. The Israelis won! They signed armistice agreements with Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria on what constituted their national borders.

In 1956, another major conflict erupted. The tension started when Egypt closed the Suez Canal from Israeli (later, British and

French) use. Throughout the 1950s, the Palestinians also used Egypt as a base to launch attacks against Israel. These twin issues prompted Israel to attack Egyptian positions on 29 October 1956, and two days later, the British and French armed forces joined Israel against Egypt. The US was alarmed and pressured all sides to a ceasefire (5 Nov 1956) and Israeli forces to withdraw from all captured Egyptian territory.

The third conflict was carried over from the 1956 Sinai Conflict. Egyptian pride had been severely bruised and together with other Arab states began an enormous military buildup. The principal players were Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The war rhetoric was for the complete destruction of the Jews. The Palestinian need for a homeland was always a good reason for war.

Israeli shipping was denied access through the Gulf of Aqaba. This seems like a repeat of the Suez Canal issue with the exception that Israel was the only target this time.

US President, Lyndon Johnson, affirmed the gulf to be free for international shipping, but there was little comment from other nations. The anti-Israeli coalition was rolling out their hardware to attack Israel when Israel launched a preemptive strike on June 5, 1967. Jordan entered the fray and lost the West Bank area in the process. In six days, the combined Arab military might was broken while Israel gained more territory.

The fourth conflict was the 1973 Yom Kippur War. On the most holy of Jewish religious days, Egypt and Syria launched a co-ordinated attack against Israel for holding on to land gained in the 1967 war. The powerful and well-coordinated attack saw Israel losing for the first time. The annihilation of the Jews was again the motivation for the attacks.

After initial setbacks, Israel recaptured lost territory and advanced farther into Egyptian

and Syrian. In the Sinai Desert, Israel trapped the Egyptian Third Army and cut them off from Egypt.

The US and the Soviet Union were almost dragged into this war, but eventually a ceasefire was called. After a failed Soviet attempt to resolve the conflict, US Secretary of State, Kissinger, began his shuttle diplomacy which aimed at bi-lateral disengagements rather than a comprehensive peace. Israel withdrew from the Sinai, and parts of Syrian territory occupied in both 1967 and 1973. During the war, Saudi Arabia joined in by imposing an oil embargo on the US and other nations friendly to Israel. This led to the global recession of 1973.

Peace between Egypt and Israel has arrived as Israel has withdrawn from all Egyptian land. This is where moral right comes into full play. Israel has no moral or historical right to occupy Egyptian land. This was not part of the Promised Land and the Israelis knew this. Nor was there any international agreement or recognition of the land as belonging to anyone other than Egypt.

A truce, but not peace, has come between Syria and Israel. This is because Israel refused to withdraw from the Golan Heights which was under Syrian control. There is no international recognition of Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, but Israel justifies it by pointing out the repeated Syrian aggression and the strategic military value of the Golan Heights. For now, there is peace, but this will have to be resolved if there is to be lasting peace.

Palestinians Today

As Christians, we tend to support the view that Israel has the right to the land that God assigned to Abraham. Yahweh's land grant to Israel was *not* unconditional.

Judging by all reports, the Israeli governments, since their independence, have treated the Palestinians in a very shabby and discriminatory way.

I will not pretend I fully understand the plight of the Palestinians. But to help me understand how the state of Israel discriminates against the Palestinians, we can look at how they persecute Christians. The Israeli instruments of state have supported the orthodox Jews in persecuting Christians whenever they can. Some of these actions are subtle, and some not so subtle. Christians must not have any delusion that orthodox Jews allow freedom of religion. If Christians who support Jews and Israel was persecuted, try to guess the lot of the Palestinians.

Visitors to Israel and see the ill treatment of Palestinians on a daily basis. There is global unanimity that Israel is very harsh towards the Palestinians.

When the children of Abraham failed to meet the OT ruling that they are to be kind to the aliens in their land (Exodus 23:9), they can act in such a way as to annul God's conditional gift to them. The Jews are not only people who have a right to life and freedom. Palestinians also have a right to life. Towards this end, they have long concluded that they cannot live within the State of Israel, but need a homeland of their own.

The Israelis have a right to life. The earlier Palestinian attempts to deny them this basic right was the cause of much of the conflict. In short, the Israelis could not trust a Palestinian state functioning virtually within the Israeli state.

The ideal solution for the Palestinians is to get rid of all the Jews and claim the land for their exclusive use (which was never the case historically). The ideal solution for the Jews is for the Palestinians to melt into the Arab nations and so there are no more claimants to the land.

US Policy then and now

The pro-Israel US policy stems from several factors. The Palestinian-Arab cause was backed by the Soviet Union. They wanted

to destroy Israel. The US policy to back Israel in her hour of dire military need was the right policy. The problem was the Palestinian-Arab policy of genocide for the Jews and not US policy of helping Israel.

Egypt decided to break away from the main Palestinian-Arab cause of killing all Jews, and there is now peace between the two nations. Jordan is also at peace with Israel because they have abandoned their claim to the West Bank. Other Muslim nations in support of the Palestinian cause argue that these bilateral peace agreements leave the Palestinians with nothing. This is only partially true. The natural division of the land has left the West Bank and Gaza as the default possession of the Palestinians since Jordan and Egypt no longer claim them.

I think we can safely say that the current problem began in AD70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and when the subsequent action of other Roman emperors undermined Jewish presence in the land of Israel.

The Muslim immigration into the land was the next piece that contributed to the problem. Muslim hegemony of building their mosque over the Jewish Temple was highly triumphalistic and provocative. Poor British administration added to the crisis. The Muslim-Arab hatred for the Jews and their determination to wage war against the Jews exacerbated the problem.

The US response to help the Jews and thwart the aims of the Muslim-Arab nations was morally right. The Jews have a right to life. They have a claim to their ancestral land which cannot be denied.

Many Arab nations have adopted a more enlightened approach towards Israel, and many Palestinians no longer claim the whole of the land for themselves but acknowledged the right of Israel to exist, progress is being made.

The key to peace of Israel and the Palestinians is for both sides to recognize

the other's right to life. And in this case, the right to love involves the need for a homeland.

US policy under Bush has announced the Palestinians have a right to a homeland. This is probably a step in the right direction. The Palestinian vote for Hamas is part of the Palestinian learning process. Hamas policy is not moderate. They want to annihilate the Jews. This has been a set-back in the search for peace.

The Palestinian cause is an arguable cause. Their methods of terrorism are not new. It was a method created by the Zionists. It would be wise for the Palestinians to realize as did Egypt and Jordan and Israel, that compromise is inevitable.

The Palestinian cause is different from Usama Bin Laden's (UBL). UBL wants to create an Islamic world through violence. The terms violent jihadists or Islamofascism are probably accurate descriptions of what they are trying to do through violence.

Muslims have the right to think they are correct even if they are wrong. In short, they have the right to be mistaken. Muslims need to accept that they may think other religions are wrong, but that does not give them the right to kill, maim or coerce in the name of what they consider truth.

The Palestinian cause is for their self-preservation, which is a valid cause, whatever mistakes they made in the past and whatever we think of their methods to achieve this. UBL's cause is different. It is for the destruction of those who do not accept his version of Islam.

Osama has skillfully manipulated the situation such that the Palestinian cause and his cause for the Islamisation of the world are blended into one. While in the past, this confusion has served the Palestinian cause, two things that happened in recent history will, hopefully, move Palestinians in a different direction. (1) The US recognition

of the need for a Palestinian state, and (2) the aggression of Al Qaeda from which the Palestinians need to distance themselves.

Christians can support the Palestinian need for a homeland. They need a place where they can live securely and without harassment. If Christians were more vocal about Palestinian rights, perhaps the current conflict will not be seen as a Muslim-Christian divide.

Christian support for Israel's right to life is right. Palestinians also have a right to life and livelihood.

On the matter of Jerusalem, the right to the Temple Mount belongs to the Jews. Jerusalem as a city has expanded over time. Who owns Jerusalem can be an argument over terms. The original Jerusalem has expanded over time. It is conceivable that old Jerusalem be the exclusive right of Israel while the other parts are negotiated.

In the past, the Palestinians acted poorly towards Israel. But Israeli action today seems to be dictated only by the need to protect their security. This created a deep animosity among the Palestinians. Now that Israel is willing to accept a Palestinian state, the Palestinians have voted for Hamas, which is a vote rejecting the state of Israel.

Conclusion

Is there any link between US foreign policy and the terrorist attack? Yes. US foreign policy stands in the way of that branch of radical Muslims who make it their goal to set the world aflame and forcibly convert all to their form of Islam. They also make it their agenda to declare that the Jews have no right to life.

Those who call the US to change their foreign policy may not know what they are saying! They are actually saying that the US and the rest of the non-Muslim world should allow these extremists to impose their brand of Islam on the world. They are saying that the world should simply lie down

and die while the likes of UBL should rule the world.

It is easy for us as Christians to lump the Palestinians with the violent Jihadists. In reality, their goals are different. It is easy for Palestinians to become befuddled, but I am optimistic that over time the position that both the Jews and the Palestinians have the right to life and livelihood would gain traction.

Christians, let's be wise and not join in the foolish chorus for the US to have a foreign policy acceptable to the likes of UBL.

We can advocate the Palestinian cause as Christians. But no right-minded Christian should ever advocate the change of US policy to accommodate UBL's bloody objective.

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