

MIDDLE EAST POLICY STATEMENT

Adopted by the Governing Board National Council of Churches
of Christ in the U.S.A.

Nov. 6, 1980

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INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is a region of borders; borders of space and time, physical borders and borders of the spirit. Because Africa, Asia and Europe converge here, it has been from time immemorial a region where differing cultures touch and mingle, and where competing political and economic interests clash. History lives with a special intensity in the consciousness of Middle Eastern peoples. Much of that history is a record of conquest from without, betrayal from within. The very name we use for the region bespeaks a European and Western outlook. Many of the lines on its maps were placed there by builders of empires, makers of colonies, to advance the interests of distant capitals of commerce and in fulfillment of global strategies of domination. The situation today is not very different. Great powers, neighboring and remote, compete for political and economic advantage in the area, often with little regard for the needs and aspirations of indigenous cultures and peoples. The most recent development affecting the region — the deepening dependence of nations, large and small, outside the region upon its reserves of fossil fuels — works to exacerbate these tendencies toward intervention and exploitation. Economic rivalry is made more fierce, more destabilizing, by ideological contention and geopolitical maneuvering. The importance of the Middle East imposes a responsibility for continuing thoughtful reflection and for prudent and persevering action. What U.S.A. Christians say and do and think about the problems of the Middle East or what they fail to do may deeply affect their own future and the future of the world. It could make the difference between the achievement of justice and peace or continuing conflict and world-endangering war.

By the very nature of its vocation, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions are called to study and address the situation of the peoples of the Middle East and its implications for humankind. The issues inherent in the situation are not only ideological, economic, political and strategic; they are also issues of religious principle and profound moral consequence which demand a response from Christians — not least from the Christians of a nation that pursues its own interests in and has its own agenda for the region.

There is further reason for their special concern about the Middle East. Throughout the

centuries this region has been endowed with deep religious significance and spiritual value for Jews, Christians and Muslims. Further, Jesus Christ was born, walked and taught and suffered, died and rose from the dead there. Judaism, Christianity and Islam were born in the Middle East and coexist there still, often in an uneasy tension that is felt in the midst of U.S.A. religious communities as well. Recent events have made clear that differing religious loyalties and perspectives powerfully influence the course of events in the Middle East. Jews, Christians and Muslims form separate communities of faith in the one God, yet possess different understandings of how faith is to be expressed in life. Even within each religious community there are differences, particularly on issues of faith and nation. To some, for example, it seems natural and right that national structures provide a framework within which people of differing faiths may live, function and together shape national life and identity; to others, that the national life of a religious people should find concrete expression in law of people's fidelity to God.

This statement provides policy direction to the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and is submitted to its member communions for guidance in their relationships with the Middle East. It recognizes that while the people of the Middle East must, of necessity, play the primary role in determining their own courses of action, issues of war and peace are of such crucial significance to all the world's people, that they too may have a role to play. This statement deals with the relationship of U.S.A. Christians to the churches of the Middle East and to people of other faiths or ideologies in the area. It also affirms the responsibility of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions to witness to the government of the United States and to corporations and other agencies as their policies affect the people in the Middle East.

This policy statement is founded upon our conviction that for all people there is "one God who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6; RSV). God to whom Christians point in Jesus Christ is at work in every society; we do not fully grasp the ways, but God is not without witness in any human community. Here Christians acknowledge a profound mystery: God's redemptive action for the whole creation in Jesus Christ. Through Christ's coming, Christians have been drawn together into a community, the Church, which exists to

be the first fruits of God's Kingdom, to be a sign and symbol of all humanity and to care for the creation. The Church, the Body of Christ, witnesses to the unity of creation with the Creator, and to the unity of all peoples in the Creator. When the Church is truly Christ's church, through it the grace of God heals the brokenness of human relationships, breaks down separating walls, reconciles estranged persons with God and one another. The experience of this grace imposes a mission: Christians bear responsibility for a prophetic, pastoral and reconciling ministry in the world. It is out of this Christian self-understanding that this statement proceeds.

The first section of the statement, "Relations Among the Churches," affirms for the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions a special concern for relations with Middle Eastern Christians, with particular concern to foster a greater spirit of unity and mutual understanding among U.S.A. and Middle East churches.

The second section, "Relations With People of Other Faiths," explores the relations of U.S.A. Christians with people of other faiths either living in the Middle East or concerned with its destiny. Affirming the need for mutual respect and understanding, it acknowledges the reality of strife; it seeks to identify the sources of mistrust and prejudice and to lay the basis for reconciliation.

The third section, "The Witness of the Church in Society," rises out of the responsibility of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions to participate seriously in moral discourse, along with other agencies and communities in the U.S.A., in the effort to understand specific problems and issues of the Middle East and to form sound and workable policies. The statement calls upon U.S.A. Christians to recognize the moral dimensions of political action, to give witness to God's justice, love and mercy, to build peace upon the foundation of justice. This section looks at four specific concerns of comprehensive regional importance.

These three sections each involve complexities of relationships and responsibility that require the people of the Church to have an awareness of historic opportunity, a willingness to engage in continuing, many-sided dialogue, and a patient firmness in the defense of human and transcendent values. This calling asks U.S.A. Christians to accept responsibility for action in the world. As Christians who have come together in the National Council of the

Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. as an expression of our unity in Christ and our common ministry in the world, we acknowledge that we are called to manifest more visibly our oneness in Christ, to seek unity in new ways with our Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East, to reach out to our brothers and sisters of other faiths and to work with them for peace and justice. It is in that spirit that this document is offered.

RELATIONS AMONG THE CHURCHES

In the Middle East the ministry and witness of the churches are carried on by four historic families of churches: Eastern Orthodox; Oriental Orthodox; Protestant and Anglican; Catholic, both Roman and Eastern Rite; and, in addition, the Church of the East (Assyrian). These churches vary greatly in size, resources and other characteristics. Most are reduced in numbers today as a result of emigration from the area; a few, however, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church (Oriental Orthodox) in Egypt claiming more than 7,000,000 members, are larger than most U.S.A. communions.

The majority of Christians of the Middle East, being of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox communions, trace a continuous witness of their churches to the time of the apostles; they carry on a tradition that has nurtured the fellowship of Christian believers through two millennia.

The Protestant and Anglican churches, a small minority of the Middle East churches, inheritors of European reformation traditions, came to the Middle East as a product of the 19th century western mission enterprise. Motivations and interpretations that shaped the western missionary endeavor were diverse. Protestant and Anglican churches and institutions came into being as a result of that movement. Membership for these new churches came largely from Orthodox and Catholic churches, creating divisions in the Christian community which have left bitterness and scars. Whatever motivations and strategies may have accounted for this history, clearly, gaps in cultural and historical understanding among western missionaries, in spite of good intentions, contributed to bitterly held divisions among Christians in the Middle East.

Even today some missionary groups employ mission strategies that tend toward fragmentation rather than unity among the churches of the Middle East. The majority of the area's

churches, however, now place a high priority on the furthering of Christian unity in their continued life and witness. This spirit of reconciliation and healing found expression in the creation of the Middle East Council of Churches in 1974. The Council brings together three of the families of Middle East churches: the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and a majority of the Protestant and Anglican. Its founding represents a major historical development with great significance for theology and mission.

Just as the Middle East Council of Churches is contributing to a deeper sense of unity among its members, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions are increasingly aware of the contribution they can make as partner churches toward enhancing the spirit of unity in the Middle East.

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions are called to recognize that the basic principle guiding relations between Middle East and U.S.A. churches is that the Middle East churches provide the essential witness to Christ in the Middle East. One role of the U.S.A. churches is to understand and be supportive of the significant witness of Middle East churches. Among the member churches of the Middle East Council of Churches and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., this is a relationship of partners who are called to express their unity in Christ. The relationship presumes the equality of the partners in every respect and evokes a spirit of mutuality among these various members of the Body of Christ.

Given this basic understanding, it is clear that a chief responsibility of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. is to nurture a variety of relationships, formal and informal, designed to foster unity and mutual understanding between U.S.A. and Middle East churches. The geographical considerations that informed past mission comity agreements of the western Protestant and Anglican churches, while a sign of western Christian cooperation in their time, are no longer appropriate since Middle East evangelical churches have developed their own autonomy and relationships. Future relationships should give evidence of unity and mutual respect among the churches.

Further, these new relationships must be marked by a degree of mutuality seldom seen in the past. Just as U.S.A. churches may play a supportive role to Middle East churches in their own region, the National Council of the Churches

of Christ in the U.S.A. along with the Middle East Council of Churches should encourage a supportive role of Middle East churches to U.S.A. churches within the United States of America. Beyond existing bilateral relations, church-to-church contacts should be developed and conciliar relations strengthened. Efforts should be made to create mutual relations across the historic ties of the several families of churches.

As these new relationships develop, the rich traditions of the Middle East churches may enlarge the experience of U.S.A. churches as they learn Middle East churches' life in prayer, in worship, in doctrine, in suffering and survival, in preservation of the sacraments and traditions, in witness to justice.

Within this context, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. notes with deep concern the diminution of the Christian community of the Middle East in recent years. Vital, living churches which trace their beginnings to the earliest Christian era are finding their members are being deported or emigrating in increased numbers because of turmoil of various types in the region. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions should support actions which contribute directly or indirectly to the strengthening of the Middle East Christian communities.

Toward such a new period of mutuality, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. recognizes the following guidelines and tasks and encourages its member communions to adopt them:

- a) In any witness or work that may have a direct bearing on the Middle East Christians, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions have a responsibility to consult with the churches of the Middle East;
- b) The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. must take initiative along with the Middle East Council of Churches and its member communions to encourage joint planning by its member communions and the creation of a holistic, integrated approach to issues of justice and peace and the various tasks of service, evangelism, interfaith relations, education and theological study in relation to the Middle East;

- c) The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions have a responsibility to share in the U.S.A. the information, interpretation and insights drawn out of its relationships with the churches of the Middle East and to make known the rich heritage of Christian communities of the region;
- d) The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions along with the Middle East Council of Churches and its member communions should continue to work together through the World Council of Churches as well as in region-to-region relationships.

Of themselves, these guidelines, however helpful, will not create the community we seek unless they are observed in a spirit of love, trust and sincerity and with constant attention to the goal of witness to the churches' oneness in Christ.

RELATIONS WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

The Middle East is the spiritual homeland of three major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the past few decades the attention of the whole world has been drawn in an unprecedented way to the vitality of all three faiths. At the same time these religions have encountered one another in new ways, both in context of peace and in the midst of violence.

For U.S.A. Christians, recognition of these new religious dynamics underscores the urgency of gaining fuller understanding of the three religious communities as they are present not only in the Middle East but also in other parts of the world. This awareness also presses Christians to gain a deeper grasp of their own faith and of its resources for dealing with Middle East issues. Recent events make clear that people of faith may have new roles to play in deciding issues of global consequence. These new understandings will require close attention to western Christian religious and cultural assumptions about the role of religion in the world and the relation of these assumptions to the Christian faith.

There are important similarities as well as differences among these three faiths. As for similarities, all three affirm God, who created the world and the people in it. Each acknowledges God is sovereign and sent prophets to

warn humanity against idolatry and to call for repentance. All find God's will revealed in holy scriptures and all see promise in history. These similarities offer some common theological ground for interfaith relationships.

Nevertheless, deep tensions have arisen out of Christian and Muslim convictions that the revelation granted them is a corrective fulfillment of that which was given to those before them, and out of the use of theological expression by all three faiths in their struggle for power. Further, in the first century, tensions developed between Jews and Christians as they tended to define themselves over against each other, and these have influenced their understandings of each other for nearly 2,000 years, often with tragic results, especially for Jews. Theological differences which produce tensions among Jews, Christians and Muslims today are concepts of land; mission, and the relation between religion and state.

In the name of truth and in attempts to defend God, theological commonalities have been subordinated to the particular interests of each faith community. A history of relationships where the emphasis has been on differences and where political actions have been defined theologically has led to people of differing faiths living in physical proximity yet for the most part isolated from one another. As a result Christians, Muslims and Jews often hold distorted images of one another and treat one another with contempt or hatred to the point of violence and oppression. Further, the people of the West have for centuries viewed the people of the Middle East through the prisms of prejudice, misunderstanding, stereotypes, and insensitivity. In part, these biases have arisen out of ignorance and xenophobia. Nevertheless, they not only have served to provide rationalizations for the imperialist and colonialist ventures of some countries, but also have fostered hatred of Islam as in the Crusades and anti-semitism as in the Holocaust.

The relations of Christians with Jews and Muslims are also complicated by the variety of theological positions held by differing Christians about people of other faiths. These positions vary all the way from the claims of some Christians that all other faiths are false to those who claim that all are true. Depending on the particular theological position, a variety of missionary efforts have been carried out with respect to Muslims and Jews, some of which have alienated both. The theological diversity found among Christians is paralleled by the diversity found

among Jews and Muslims. Taken in sum, historical relationships between these three communities and the variety of theological positions expressed by Christians, Jews and Muslims toward each other often adversely affect programs intended to contribute to the building of justice and peace.

Today, there is evidence of the necessity of responding to opportunities for new openness to each other by Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is urgent that the moment not be lost, but that people of different faiths seek new contacts, relationships, and ways of working together.

Moving in this direction makes many demands upon all people of faith. For Christians the call to repentance, implicit in God's gift of grace, must be a vital dynamic in their lives before it will be seen and received by others as message or reconciliation. Awareness of continuing need for God's grace should move Christians to be self-critical, an attitude that is wholly in keeping with the best of Christian self-understanding, with the command of Christ that His followers love their neighbors as they love themselves (Luke 10:27, e.f. Leviticus 19:18), and with the observation that one must first remove the log from one's own eye before one will be able to see clearly the speck in the eye of another (Matthew 7:1-5).

Christians also understand themselves as pilgrims in search of a deeper understanding of God and the truths given in Christ, a truth which they do not possess but which possesses them and opens them to theological insight and enrichment of experience that others can provide (Romans 1:20). In order to be open to this larger wisdom, the Christian community must be prepared to seek with greater clarity, candor, patience and sensitivity the theological similarities and differences which both unite and divide people of different faiths. An important first step would be for persons of the different faiths to join in explorations involving scholarly exchanges, existential encounters and to abjure the use of religious claims for dehumanizing and ulterior purposes.

People of all faiths must be aware of how theological and religious understandings and differences are affected by political, economic, cultural, ethnic, and social concepts. The search of peoples in the Middle East for national identities and boundaries, for economic viability and autonomy, and for cultural distinctiveness as opposed to the impact of western culture on that region is supported by religious affirmations. The national pride of the U.S.A., its readi-

ness to use the nations of the region to further its own national security, and its need for oil shape the attitudes of everyone involved including Christians, Muslims and Jews, both in the U.S.A. and in the Middle East. An awareness of the implications of all these factors will help Christians, Muslims and Jews to deal justly with such important issues as the sacredness of land, the nature of religious liberty, the rights of religious minorities, the relationships between religion and state, and the purpose and structure of mission.

These issues are important precisely because human lives and freedom are at stake in the Middle East in the clash over ethical and political norms and religious absolutes. Finally, Christians in the U.S.A. need to expand their associations with Muslims and Jews who are their neighbors. Here is an opportunity not only to gain directly a greater understanding of Judaism and Islam, but also to work toward cooperative relationships based on friendship and trust. Muslims and Jews are among those in the U.S.A. who suffer from acts of discrimination, prejudice, violence and deprivation of civil rights. Christians must work to eliminate these injustices. What happens among Christians, Jews and Muslims in the U.S.A. greatly affects the relations among people of those faiths in the Middle East, just as the conflict there affects relations here.

In practical terms, the considerations set forth above call upon the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. to take these steps:

- a) Encourage its member communions and related conciliar bodies to develop with the Council a more comprehensive, integrated and cohesive approach to relationships among people of different faiths at all levels of church life in the U.S.A.;
- b) Initiate studies which will examine the theological bases of Christian relationships with people of other faiths, articulating the similarities and clarifying so far as possible the differences of understanding;
- c) Advocate civil rights for people of all religious groups in the U.S.A.;
- d) Foster in consultation with the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches those relationships with religious leaders and communities of

the Middle East which will enhance understanding and goodwill and will work toward the achievement of social justice and peace.

The creation of new programs, the allocation of resources and the assignment of personnel will not of themselves bring about a new era of interfaith understanding. Deepening interfaith understanding will depend in part upon whether, as they launch this effort, U.S.A. Christians fear encounter with other believers as risking dilution or disturbance of their own faith, or welcome it as assuring enrichment. It will also depend in part upon how fully they accept the relevance of their religion and other religions to the great questions of war and peace, justice and freedom that are posed for all humankind by the situation in the Middle East. If persons of different faiths out of their respective faith commitments seek relationships with each other, accepting the risks and welcoming the opportunities involved, a new sense of peace and unity may be given the world by the one God, Who is Lord of all. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. out of a clear commitment to Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, trusting in the Holy Spirit, wishes to begin that journey with brothers and sisters of other faiths.

THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH IN SOCIETY

The first and second sections of this policy statement have dealt with relationships within the religious communities. This third section approaches Middle East issues in the society at large from the angle of vision of the Christian and focuses on four major areas of discourse suggesting policy direction that should guide the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. The first two areas, self-determination and rights of minorities, are related to issues present in almost all existing Middle East states. Indeed, these issues have in large part resulted from the nation-state system in the form introduced into the Middle East by European colonial powers. The third area, the arms race, security and justice, deals not only with relations between states and peoples of the Middle East, but more importantly with the impact of great power interests in the Middle East. The

fourth area deals with a specific conflict with grave and immediate international consequences, that of Israel and the Palestinians and Arab states.

Historically, religious bodies in the U.S.A. society have accepted (even asserted) responsibility for initiating and sustaining moral discourse on public issues of justice and political responsibility. It would be arrogant to pretend they have always acted in unity, or that religious people and their institutions in interaction with the rest of society have shown themselves exempt from the various blindnesses that affect all people. Yet the religious community as such possesses an angle of vision which is different from that of the political party, the university or the research institute.

Specifically, the Christian community understands itself to be a community of conscience. Belief in a just and loving God is expected to have consequences in human relationships. The complexity of events, the sinful nature of persons and society, and human fears make it difficult to bring an informed conscience to bear on issues of policy; the more difficult, the more necessary. Christians, like other peoples, can sow the seeds of justice or of injustice. Nevertheless, the Christian community, responding to the God of love and justice, is called to identify and lift up ethical issues and to go beyond technical and material considerations in an effort to focus the public debate on human concerns.

This is not to say that "religion" supplies ready-made answers to policy questions. Religious people must struggle like all others for breadth and depth of comprehension and for a hearing. The Christian community, while not always united in its understanding of what faith requires in particular situations, is increasingly at one in accepting the relevance of faith to policy. The fact of division does not impose a duty of silence. It does impose a duty to reflect carefully, to listen sensitively to one another, to debate according to high standards and to be as clear as possible in ambiguous situations, recognizing that ultimately truth rests solely with God.

The response of the Christian community ought to be more than moralizing, more than the insertion of ethical principles into formulation of policy. At its best, the response of Christians is faith in, witness to, and praise of God's

sovereign and redemptive involvement in world history.

Fundamental definitions of world order, human rights and national integrity are being tested by the particular dynamics of the contemporary Middle East. These dynamics are marked by a confluence of oil wealth, a greatly strengthened emphasis on the religious roots of society, a desire to finally end foreign domination and to develop indigenous Middle Eastern models for government, economics and international relations. Continuing tensions and the frequent eruption of minor and major crises reflect the rivalries of both intraregional and great power blocs, of competing ideologies, of religions and of nationalities.

Examples of current, unresolved Middle East conflicts reflecting the turbulent changes of the area include the Israel-Palestinian-Arab states conflict, the multi-faceted struggle in Lebanon, the struggle of the Kurds and other ethnic groups for national existence, a divided Cyprus, sporadic warfare and reconciliation between the two Yemens, continuing ideological struggles between Syria and Iraq, open warfare between Iran and Iraq, and the revolutionary movement in Iran and the creation there of an Islamic republic. These conflicts must all be seen against the rich mosaic of the history of the Middle East, its geographic placement, its resources, and its religious significance for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The government of the U.S.A. has declared the Middle East region vital to U.S.A. interests — economic, political and military. The continuing U.S.A. involvement in the region has been intensified by the dependence of the U.S.A. and its allies on the abundant oil resources of the region. The Soviet Union, with borders contiguous to several Middle East states, has historically held the region to be vital to its interests as well. The projected need of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for external energy resources within the next decade adds a further dimension to the great power conflict in the area. This highlights the urgency of the peaceful adjustment of great power interests with full respect for the people of the Middle East.

The challenge to the U.S.A. Christian churches to create a responsible public discourse related to the complexities of the Middle East carries a sense of urgency. This urgency is

caused by challenges to fundamental definitions of world order and international institutions including the United Nations. The role of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. is to seek with others peace, justice and reconciliation throughout the Middle East. This requires that the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. find new ways to help its member communions and, to the extent possible, all of U.S.A. society, to be more sensitive to the long range issues of the Middle East as well as the short range issues, to be informed about these concerns, and to consider seriously the needs and rights of the peoples of the Middle East as well as those of the U.S.A.

1. Self Determination

The Middle East is made up of states that came into being in a variety of ways: as portions of ancient empires, as tribal kingdoms, as the creation of western colonial powers, and as part of a process of peoples asserting their independence. In some cases the national boundaries of these states bear little resemblance to ethnic, religious or historical considerations. When some states were created, communities of natural affinity were put asunder. In some instances states lacking a sense of national identity were formed, thereby all but guaranteeing internal conflict and instability. Additional problems were created in some cases by the imposition of forms of government which did not reflect the consent of the governed.

In the wake of the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire and the intrusion of western colonialism, it was inevitable that these precariously constituted states would suffer crises of identity and conflicts over sovereignty. Established states are continually being challenged by groups sharing historic, ethnic, cultural or religious bonds and therefore harboring national aspirations. Though the inherent legitimacy of such aspirations is recognized in international law — "All peoples have the right to self-determination"¹ — the international community lacks both adequate criteria to define this right in particular instances and adequate procedures to achieve peaceful and just implementation. In these circumstances, self-determination has too

¹ United Nations, "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights," Part I, Article 1. Also in United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," Part I, Article 1, number 1.

often been a concept without real substance either in law or equity. This is particularly the case when aspirations to self-determination involve conflicting claims to territory. Therefore, a peaceful resolution of these conflicting aspirations lies in each party recognizing the right of the other to the self-determination it claims for itself. Recognizing this sense of "justice" is a first step in negotiations. Establishing criteria for determining the justice of competing claims continues to be a responsibility of the international community. Further legal mechanisms are needed to adjudicate and implement agreements involving conflicting claims. A willingness to negotiate and compromise is essential to finding peaceful solutions that are recognized as just and provide a basis for reconciliation.

Those claiming the right to self-determination usually perceive themselves as the oppressed. Giving voice to the voiceless and providing support for the powerless when their claims are believed to be just are practical ways the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. can express its commitment to justice. Therefore it is appropriate for the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions to assist those seeking recognition and protection of their rights to self-determination and those international bodies acting to affirm such rights. This assistance may include: providing forums wherein conflicting claims may be aired in an atmosphere of concern for justice and peace, monitoring developments, fact-finding, theological reflection, and advocacy for human rights.

Above all, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. seeks to provide a ministry of the reconciling love of Jesus Christ — not another combatant in conflicts in which the victims are the peoples of the Middle East.

2. The Rights of Minorities in Middle Eastern Cultures

The international community has developed a consensus recognizing certain basic human rights and obligations that all governments owe to their citizens. This body of international law is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and other international and regional human rights agreements.

These rights fall into three broad categories. First are those concerning the inviolability and

integrity of the person, including such matters as freedom from torture or cruel and inhuman treatment or punishment, arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, denial of fair public trial and invasion of the home. Second are the rights to fulfillment of basic human needs such as food, shelter, health care and education. Third are civil and political rights including freedom of speech, press, assembly and religion, the right to leave one's own country and to return, and the right of freedom from discrimination based upon race or sex.

Virtually all governments acknowledge the validity of these rights. But, in no country is there full compliance with all the rights recognized in international law. Human rights, however, do not exist in a vacuum, sometimes may appear to be conflicting, and are understood differently in differing cultures. Situations of war and military occupation may particularly strain adherence to human rights principles. However, even when the context suggests explanations for the violations of human rights, their sanctity must be upheld.

A particular human rights problem in the Middle East concerns the rights of minorities. Where the distinction between organized religion and the state is not affirmed, and where peoples define themselves and their political and social structures in specifically religious terms, issues pertaining to religious minorities become urgent.

While it is neither right nor wise nor possible for the peoples of the West to attempt to define for others a single mode of dealing with the rights of minorities, these rights must nevertheless be protected. A secular pluralist society would imply to many Middle Easterners religious indifference or atheism. Historically, Middle Eastern states and societies whether specifically theocratic or simply dominated by one particular confession, have acknowledged the fact of religious pluralism by exercising tolerance for the communal and/or personal status of minorities. Religious minorities in Middle Eastern states have not usually enjoyed all the legal rights of citizens who are members of the religious majority. At issue today is whether a minority should exist by "toleration" or whether by right of birth into national citizenship they should enjoy the same rights as adherents of the majority religion. This debate is growing increasingly crucial as more states in the Middle East define themselves from a religious perspective.

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. recognizes that its under-

standings of human rights and majority-minority relations grow out of the tradition that envisions an ideal of pluralism that is not fully realized in the U.S.A. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. does not deny the right of a majority to define itself as it wishes, whether this be in terms of the separation of church and state guaranteed in the Constitution of the U.S.A., or in religious terms. Nevertheless, whatever form may be chosen by the majority, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. believes that the burden is on that majority to provide full rights for citizens who may therefore be placed in a minority status. Included within these rights is that of a minority group to practice its religion with the same freedom as that enjoyed by the adherents of the dominant religion or ideology.

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. recognizes that particularly in the Middle East questions of rights of minorities and other human rights issues often touch on serious questions of interfaith relationships. Concepts such as "human rights" may not convey precisely the same meaning to all who claim sincerely to uphold them. Therefore, these questions should be approached in a spirit of open dialogue. An appropriate task of the religious community alone or in cooperation with others committed to justice is to monitor alleged violations of rights of minority groups and to call to task those governments and groups whose record demonstrates a disregard for minority rights. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. recognizes the need to apply similar standards of judgment to all countries of the Middle East in questions of human or minority rights, and to resist singling out only one country for particular focus without due recognition of other continuing human rights problems throughout the region. The best proof of the integrity of concern of the U.S.A. Christian community will be given when it attends to violations of rights by its own governments (national, state and local) and its own institutions. What people in the U.S.A. do with respect to human rights can well affect and influence the attitudes and actions of the people of the Middle East. It is the responsibility of individual Christians, churches and ecumenical bodies to persevere in raising these issues of violations of human rights both in the U.S.A. and throughout the world. Where the perceived interests or actions of the government or corporations of the U.S.A. may be contributing to the denial of full achievement of human rights in the Middle East,

Christians in the U.S.A. have a special responsibility.

3. The Arms Race, Security and Justice

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. has consistently emphasized that lasting peace with security depends on just international relationships. While security is a legitimate concern of individuals, of peoples and of states, the concept of security is often used to justify the escalation of armament technology and production at enormous expense in order to achieve military superiority.

Weapons in themselves can never produce genuine and lasting security. Concentration on the technical demands of the military without sufficient concern for political, diplomatic and economic context in which the nations relate is dangerous and can be counterproductive.

The achievement of peace with justice and security must rest ultimately on a recognition of the mutuality of interests, rather than on the domination of one nation or group by another, on the mutual enhancement of the quality of life of the peoples of these nations rather than on the exploitation of one by another. In this context, genuine security can only be founded on cooperative relationships of mutual trust. A U.S.A. Middle East policy guided by those principles would seek not so much to preserve the status quo, as to support processes of change in the direction of justice. It would reflect a broad conception of the U.S.A. national interest with a genuine concern for the well-being of the peoples of the Middle East. It would support and strengthen international agencies in efforts to overcome economic injustice, safeguard human rights and promote orderly and timely juridical and political processes.

The strategic location of the Middle East and its tremendous energy resources result in competition among the great powers for influence and a deepening dependence on these resources by large and small nations outside the region. The recent acquisition of great national wealth through increased oil income has created a lucrative market for arms sales. In this context, the temptation to offset balance of payments deficits by means of arms sales is strong.

The Middle East has become the most heavily armed region, apart from the major powers, far exceeding the rest of the world in almost every measure. Since the early 1960's the average annual increase in military expenditures in the

Middle East has been nearly 20 percent, or about seven times the world average.

The United States is not alone at fault. Other arms producing states, both East and West, compete for influence in the region by supplying arms and military training. Superpower rivalries, ideological conflict and maneuvering to assure oil supplies or strategic advantage lead to outside interference in the internal affairs of Middle Eastern states. Transnational corporations seek to influence government policies in their own interest and these tendencies are exacerbated by unprecedented wealth through petrodollars. All these factors, many of them in conflict, create destabilization and slow efforts to improve the quality of life of its people.

Ultimately, the people of the Middle East suffer severely from the economic and social consequences of military buildups. For example, Saudi Arabia ranks fourth in the world in per capita military expenditures and ranks 117th in literacy; Jordan ranks 48th in per capita military expenditures and 75th in literacy; Israel ranks third in per capita military expenditures and 38th in literacy.² So it is that the arms race imposes a massive injustice on the peoples of the Middle East.

The U.S.A., the Soviet Union and other arms producing nations justify arms supply and re-supply as a stabilizing factor in the Middle East. However, serious attention must be devoted to defusing the explosive mixture of oil, arms and power politics. Basic to development of a new context for security would be a firm agreement by outside nations that no one or any group of them will seek to impose itself as dominant in the region. Efforts to protect what the major powers understand as their vital interests, when carried on at the expense of the welfare – or even worse, the lives – of the people of the region, are unjust and immoral.

The potential for economic and social development of the Middle East is greater than ever before due to the same increased oil revenues now financing increased arms purchases. The entrance of the Middle East oil producing nations into world development organizations, as well as the creation of lending agencies by Arab countries offer new opportunities for cooperation in development of the resources of the region to benefit its peoples.

² Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures 1979*, Leesburg, Va.: World Priorities, 1979, p. 30. (World Priorities, Box 1003, Leesburg, VA 22075).

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions should therefore support efforts related to the Middle East which

- a) seek to reduce the perceived need for military preparedness and to subordinate it to the demands of justice and the work of reconciliation among peoples and nations;
- b) strengthen the peacekeeping and peace-making role of the United Nations;
- c) move rapidly toward substantial reduction and control of arms;
- d) encourage the establishment of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the region.

In addition, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions, in cooperation with the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches, should support programs and projects aimed at economic and social justice in the Middle East.

4. Israel and the Palestinians

A major destabilizing element in the Middle East continues to be the conflict between two nationalisms, that of the Israeli Jews and that of the Palestinian Arabs, as well as related conflicts involving surrounding Arab states, all of which affect the relations of the entire region and the world. This conflict, while regionally focused, poses sufficient threat to world peace to deserve special attention in any overall consideration of the Middle East. The resolution of this Israel-Palestinian conflict would not eliminate all tension nor potential conflict in the region, but would remove a major source of instability and a major threat to world peace.

At the heart of any solution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict is a recognition that the struggle is between two peoples over the same territory. Conflicting promises made to both Jews and Arabs at the time of World War I by the great powers set the stage for the struggle of these two peoples. Palestinians feel they have been deprived of their homeland and denied the right of self-determination. Israelis feel they have legitimately acquired their homeland for rebuilding a Jewish national life. Attempts at solution are complicated because within each society there are differing concepts of the nature of religious identification with the state

and the degree to which pluralism should prevail.

Numerous proposals have been put forth and forums suggested in which a solution to the conflict could be achieved. In 1967 the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 242 which includes "respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force," as well as "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent (June 1967) conflict." This resolution has been generally regarded as providing an acceptable basis for a resolution of the conflict between Israel and the Arab states. However, various parties to the conflict have found this resolution insufficient in itself, in part because it deals with the Palestinian people only as refugees.

In November 1974, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 3236 on Palestinian rights. This resolution affirmed the right of the Palestinian Arabs to self-determination, national independence and sovereignty, as well as their right to return to their homes and properties in what is now Israel. As a General Assembly resolution, this document does not have the same force as a Security Council resolution.

In October 1977, the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union, which together chair the Geneva Peace Conference on the Middle East, issued a Joint Communique calling for a comprehensive negotiated settlement of the conflict. Specific reference was made to insuring the borders between Israel and neighboring Arab states and for "insuring the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people." For various reasons several parties to the conflict found these proposals inadequate as well.

The 1978 Camp David Framework for Peace provided new hope and evidence that negotiation can bring an end to hostilities of long standing. The Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty of March 1979, resulting from the Camp David Framework, at least temporarily reduced the likelihood of war in the Middle East in that the two strongest military powers in the area resolved to settle differences through peaceful means. This significant achievement provided the impetus for an important step of building trust and therefore security between two adversaries, Egypt and Israel, in the Middle East conflict.

While the Camp David Framework has pro-

vided a new climate of trust between Egypt and Israel, this has not been the case throughout the entire Middle East. This agreement has isolated Egypt from other Arab states and has not brought Israel closer to peace agreements with other Arab states or with the Palestinian people.

Further, the Palestinian people themselves have not been a party in negotiations, nor is there an agreed-upon mechanism to accomplish this. At this time, the Palestine Liberation Organization functions as the only organized voice of the Palestinian people and appears to be the only body able to negotiate a settlement on their behalf. Steps toward peace which would make possible direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians must include official action by the Palestine National Council, the deliberative body of the Palestine Liberation Organization, including either an amendment of the Palestine National Covenant of 1968 or an unambiguous statement recognizing Israel as a sovereign state and its right to continue as a Jewish state. At the same time, Israel must officially declare its recognition of the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, including the option of a sovereign state apart from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and of its acceptance of the Palestine Liberation Organization as a participant in the peace negotiations. Further, each party should refrain from all hostile acts against the other. As long as each party demands that the other takes the initiative, successful negotiation seems unlikely. These reciprocal initiatives will remove doubt about the acceptance by the two parties of each other's right to a national existence.

Ceasefire and recognition do not come easily for either party. The Israeli government cites evidence that the Palestine Liberation Organization seeks the destruction of Israel, and, in some formulations, denies the existence of Jews as a people. The Palestine Liberation Organization cites evidence that Israel seeks the destruction of the Palestine Liberation Organization and, in some formulations, denies the existence of Palestinians as a people. Whether or not the critical steps in resolving these historic enmities can be achieved depends in large part on the ability of the international community to communicate its commitment to the survival of both peoples and to a broad vision that encompasses the aspirations of both peoples as compatible rather than mutually exclusive.

Whatever formula for the peace process develops, there should be reciprocal recognition of the right of self-determination. The

Jewish people have claimed and exercised their right to self-determination in the state of Israel. The Palestinian people claim and seek to exercise their right of self-determination by creating a Palestinian entity, including the option of a sovereign state.

In order to build upon the existing, but partial, beginnings of a resolution of the conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians and the related Arab-Israel conflicts, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. considers the following affirmations essential, recognizing that their sequence and timing will be matters of negotiation:

- a) Cessation of acts of violence in all its forms by all parties;
- b) Recognition by the Arab states and by the Palestinian Arabs of the state of Israel with secure, defined and recognized borders; and recognition by Israel of the right of national self-determination for the Palestinian Arabs and of their right to select their own representatives and to establish a Palestinian entity, including a sovereign state. In the meantime, unilateral actions in respect to such issues as settlement policy and land and water use in the occupied areas can only inflame attitudes, and reduce the prospect of achieving peace;
- c) Agreement on and creation of a mode of enforcement of international guarantees for the sovereign and secure borders of Israel and of any Palestinian entity established as part of the peace process. This would mean the implementation of the principles enunciated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (1967);
- d) Provision for solutions to problems of refugees and displaced persons, Palestinian Arab, Jewish and other, affected by the Israel-Palestinian and related conflicts dating from 1948, including questions of compensation and return;
- e) Agreement on the future status of Jerusalem, a focus of the deepest religious inspiration and attachment of three faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Existing international treaties (Paris, 1856 and Berlin, 1878) and League of Nations actions regulating the rights and claims of the three monotheistic religions to Holy Places should remain unaltered. At the

same time, the destiny of Jerusalem should be viewed in terms of people and not only in terms of shrines. Therefore, the future status of Jerusalem should be included in the agenda of the official negotiations including Israel and the Palestinian people for a comprehensive solution of the Middle East conflict. Unilateral actions by any one group in relation to Jerusalem will only perpetuate antagonisms that will threaten the peace of the city and possibly of the region.

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. has a particular responsibility in the U.S.A. which plays a key role in the resolution of the conflict. In helping create a responsible public discourse in the U.S.A. on the conflict of Israel and the Palestinians and other Arabs, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. should seek to uphold a perspective that is holistic rather than partial. It is essential that U.S.A. Christians recognize that peace and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians require peace and justice for each. This will depend upon bold initiatives by all parties seeking new options, risking courses of action which, while at one time appearing impossible, may provide a basis for a common vision of peace and justice. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions should remain open to such initiatives and seek to develop understanding and support for them within the U.S.A. Christian community and society at large.

Further, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. should use every available means to make possible constructive communication among the parties involved. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. has an important responsibility to promote understanding and discussion because of its associations with Christian institutions, with the churches of the Middle East through the Middle East Council of Churches, and with the Muslim and Jewish communities both in the Middle East and in the U.S.A. These relationships are a precious gift that must be nurtured, preserved and used to enhance a future of peace and justice for the peoples of the Middle East and to ensure that opportunities for peace not be lost.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East is the place where the Church began its life. Current complexities in

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the Middle East help U.S.A. Christians to face their own questioning of what it means to be a community witnessing to the world, and that their salvation must not be perceived only in individualist terms but in terms of the whole creation. U.S.A. Christians must not only proclaim the unity of creation and of humankind, they must also imagine and pursue ways of solidifying and celebrating that unity. U.S.A. Christians have much to learn from the churches and other peoples of faith in the Middle East in this task.

The people of God are called to be caretakers of creation. This is an active, not a pas-

sive or reactive, role. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and its member communions, if faithful to this role, may facilitate a new era of human encounter in their relations to the Middle East. To be the Body of Christ requires an openness to the Spirit, an awareness of historic opportunity, a radical understanding of life within the Kingdom of God both present and becoming. It is a vision of unity expressed first and most powerfully in the sacrament of communion through which the incarnate Christ is revealed to the community and the community becomes that Body of Christ in service to the world.