**Reaffirmation of Our Commitments to Peace in the Middle East**
**In Light of the 1980 Middle East Policy Statement**

**Presented to the Governing Board of the**
**National Council of Churches USA**
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The 1980 Middle East Policy Statement was crafted in an era of hope for peace in the Middle East. It was adopted soon after the signing of the Camp David Accords, and indeed the track two diplomacy that informed the policy statement also helped to foster the environment that led to the Camp David Accords.

The policy statement specifically affirmed "a special concern for relations with Middle East Christians," "the need for mutual respect and understanding" in interfaith relations, and the responsibility "to participate seriously in moral discourse...and to form sound and workable policies." The policy statement understood these tasks "as an expression of our unity in Christ and our common ministry in the world."

## Historical Developments Since 1980

Since that era of hope, which also included the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, there have been many other positive developments toward peace in the region, as well as many negative developments, which have come forth against the backdrop of a changed global context with the demise of the Soviet Union and with the emergence of political Islam as a competing ideology in the region and beyond. There have been official diplomatic efforts, such as the Oslo Accords and the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, and unofficial initiatives, such as the Geneva Accords. The Arab Peace Initiative, opening up new opportunities for negotiation, was put forth by the Arab League, and the Road Map, offering a framework for peace, though languishing for lack of leadership by the United States, was put forth by the US and accepted by the Quartet (the US, along with Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations).

At the same time, political developments have mitigated against the establishment of Middle East peace. In Israel / Palestine, the way to peace has been obscured by the first and second intifadas, continued unwillingness of some countries and parties in the region to recognize Israel and its right to security, Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians and Israeli military assaults against Palestinians, political corruption, the erection of the Israeli Separation Barrier, the establishment of Israeli settlements and a system of checkpoints and Israeli-only roads on Palestinian land, the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, lack of US and international support for a democratically elected Palestinian government, and the division of the Palestinian community between Gaza and the West Bank. These developments have been accompanied and by a cycle of terrible acts of violence.

In Lebanon, a debilitating civil war, hostilities with Israel, Syrian domination of Lebanese politics and the military, the recent Hezbollah – Israeli War, and the current fracture in politics and society, have left the future of Lebanon uncertain. Syria has been implicated in terrorist activities and remains marginalized by the United States and Israel. Afghanistan remains unstable after the Russian occupation, subsequent Taliban rule, and the invasion of the US to root out a terrorist safe haven. The war between Iraq and Iran, the Gulf War, UN sanctions, and the ongoing US-led war in Iraq, have left Iraq in chaos. Iran continues to be ostracized by the United States and Israel, more so now with Iranian rhetoric against Israel and moves to establish nuclear programs, and with US talk of regime change and possible military

intervention. Egypt and Jordan have both been threatened with destabilization from circumstances within and without. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the region are not immune to similar tensions.

Beyond the Middle East, events related to the region have all impacted peace prospects there. The terrorist attacks in the United States on 9/11 by Islamic extremists have led to what the US Government calls a "war on terror." This offensive unfortunately frames all US foreign policy decisions, and the fear generated on both sides of this "war" leave little room for the discussion of alternative foreign policy choices.

**NCCCUSA Initiatives Since 1980**

Since its adoption, the NCCCUSA has based its work in the Middle East on the 1980 Middle East Policy Statement. Through the historical developments and others outlined above, this policy statement has served the US ecumenical family well in living out its commitments to peace in the region.

Based on the principles and affirmations in the document, the NCCCUSA has continued with vigilance to advocate for peace in Washington and globally, and to voice the concerns of its partner churches and ecumenical bodies in the region. The NCCCUSA has led many delegations to countries in the region, including most recently: a humanitarian delegation to Iraq before the current war to evaluate the effects of UN sanctions and to try to prevent the US-led invasion (2002); a church leaders' delegation to Israel / Palestine to understand the effects of the separation barrier and settlements on both Israelis and Palestinians (2005), and a women church leaders' delegation to Israel / Palestine to see the effects of the conflict directly on women and families (2007); and a fact-finding delegation immediately after the Hezbollah – Israeli War (2006).

The NCCCUSA has also participated in an interfaith delegation to Israel / Palestine to ensure a better understanding of each other's perspectives (2006), and an ecumenical delegation to Iran, the first delegation of Americans since 1979-81 hostage crisis. Over the years, there have been many NCCCUSA board resolutions, statements, and pastoral messages, all professing our commitment to peace and suggesting policy alternatives that might lead to such peace. Likewise, Church World Service, many of our mutual member churches, and Churches for Middle East Peace (of which the NCCCUSA is a member), have sent their own delegations to the region and have continued strong advocacy for peace.

Throughout this period, and even to today, the NCCCUSA has considered the Israeli Occupation of Palestinian land beyond the 1967 borders to be the single most significant obstacle to peace, and has therefore called for its end. This conviction has been informed by the witness of our partner churches in the region, whose membership has dwindled due to the ongoing violence fostered by the Occupation. Our continued call for the end of the Occupation is made in partnership with ecumenical colleagues around the world, who gathered recently in Amman, Jordan, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Occupation and to affirm their solidarity with the Christian communities throughout the Middle East.

**Theology**

The NCCCUSA has conducted its work with a clear understanding of justice that is rooted in the Gospel message. Our understanding is that the Word became incarnate in an act of love by God the Father, whose desire it is to reconcile all things unto God (John 3:16-17). This reconciliation of the world to God was made full through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (Romans 8:31-39).

Reconciliation, then, becomes a mark of Christian faith, and of the Christian's commitment to one another, and to all people at all times (2 Corinthians 5:14-21). It is therefore incumbent upon all believers

to seek justice in all situations, especially for the downtrodden and oppressed, and to seek peace (Psalm 106:3, Isaiah 61). While this imperative is not limited by time or geography, it is nevertheless fundamental to our Christian identity to carry out this imperative in the place where the incarnate Lord "lived among us" (John 1:14).

**Reaffirmation of Commitments**

Given this theological understanding of our calling as Christians to seek peace and justice, and to appropriately focus attention on the Holy Land, the NCCCUSA reaffirms the following commitments to peace in the Middle East, as gleaned from the 1980 Middle East Policy Statement and further worked out through subsequent ecumenical cooperation:

- Encouragement of a responsible public discourse on the Middle East with the aim of seeking peace, justice and reconciliation throughout the region. This includes the promotion of: multilateral engagement, which implies genuine US and international leadership in nurturing the peace process through intentional diplomatic efforts; security achieved through interdependence, which demands demilitarization of the region even as it calls for stepped up intelligence and police action to counter terrorism; and economic and social justice, which encourages the stewardship of the churches' financial resources in a way that builds economic security for all even as it promotes a just peace.

- Focus on issues of particular importance related to the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. This includes support for: a viable two-state solution, which takes into account the right to self-determination of, and security for, both Israelis and Palestinians; human rights for all people in the region, which leads to the monitoring of alleged rights violations and the condemnation of violence committed by Israelis and Palestinians against each other; an end to the Occupation, which involves resolution of issues such as refugees, the Separation Barrier, checkpoints, settlements, water sources, and the status of a shared Jerusalem.

- Concern for the alarming diminution of the Christian community of the Middle East over the last several decades, which should lead to significant actions that strengthen those communities. This requires ongoing consultation with churches in the Middle East; awareness-raising in the US of the heritage and experience of those churches; and continued collaboration among NCCCUSA member churches and CWS, and with the WCC and the MECC, on issues pertaining to the region.

- Appreciation for interfaith sensitivities among Christians, Jews and Muslims, as well as people of other faiths. This includes intentional interfaith relationship building based on friendship and trust; collaboration based on theological understanding and mutual respect, and devoid of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; and defense of civil and human rights for people of all religious communities in the US, the Middle East, and around the world.

The member communions of the National Council of Churches USA have a profound connection to the Holy Land. It is the place where God was revealed in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit, and thus where the Christian community finds its beginning. Therefore, we reaffirm these commitments, cognizant of the role our nation plays in the Middle East, to remind ourselves of the urgent need to influence our country to take right and moral actions in the region.