



**Uniting Church in Australia**  
**ASSEMBLY**  
Assembly Standing Committee

15-17 March 2024

**DOCUMENT 13**

<b>Title</b>	<b>SEEKING PEACE FOR ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS</b>
Type of Paper	For decision.
Assembly or ASC Minute	ASC Minutes: March 2008 (08.29) July 2011 (11.33) November 2023 (23.69) 14 <sup>th</sup> Assembly Minute 15.35
Consultation	Assembly President, Assembly Policy and Advocacy Office, Senior Social Justice Advocate (VicTas Synod)
Purpose	Enable the ASC to make a response to the current situation in Israel-Gaza, which may provide a focus for advocacy by other Councils of the Church and which provides some direct invitations for action to members of the Uniting Church.
Rationale & Findings Summary	
Attachments	Correspondence from the VicTas Synod Standing Committee (24.8.1)
Proposal/s	See below.
Submitted by	Rev Lindsay Cullen, Assembly General Secretary (Interim)

## SEEKING PEACE FOR ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS

### PROPOSALS:

That the Assembly Standing Committee resolve:

- a) To note resolutions of the Assembly Standing Committee 08.29 and 11.33 and Assembly Resolution 15.35;
- b) To support the Middle East Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches in their advocacy concerning the Israel-Palestine conflict;
- c) To condemn acts of brutality and atrocities committed by those on both sides of the conflict, noting that such actions continue to form barriers to any efforts at peace;
- d) To welcome the efforts the Australian Government has made to see an end to the current escalation in the war between Israel and Hamas including by calling for a humanitarian ceasefire, the release of all hostages, and opposition to Israel's illegal settlements in Palestinian territories;
- e) To welcome the humanitarian assistance the Australian Government has provided to Palestinians and urge that the Australian Government continue to provide such funding to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza;
- f) To call on the Australian Government to:
  - i. Do all it can to prevent genocide as per the International Court of Justice's provisional measures in South Africa's case against Israel including calling for a sustained ceasefire, ending weapons exports to Israel and providing greater transparency over Australians weapon exports;
  - ii. Do all it can to facilitate a meaningful and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians and facilitate an end to atrocities and acts of brutality no matter who perpetrates them;
  - iii. To provide financial assistance and political support to organisations working for a meaningful and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians; and,
  - iv. Follow the lead of the US, UK and French Governments and impose targeted sanctions on Israeli settlers responsible for serious human rights abuses against Palestinians.
- g) To call on the Government of Israel to:
  - i. end its use of extrajudicial killings against suspected terrorists, and instead seek to bring suspects to trial in judicial processes that meet international standards;
  - ii. end impunity for members of the Israeli security forces and settlers that murder Palestinians and bring such people to justice in judicial processes that would meet international standards; and,
  - iii. abolish the practice of Administrative Detention that allows Palestinians to be imprisoned without knowing the charges against them or being able to contest the evidence used to imprison them;

- h) **To encourage congregations to offer support and comfort to those who are living with grief and fear in their communities as a result of the current escalation in the conflict and acts of racial and religious hatred happening in Australia including by:**
- ii. **praying for, listening to, and promoting the voices of those who are suffering;**
  - ii. **participating in events and actions in support of a just peace;**
  - iii. **donating to the *Act For Peace* Gaza Emergency Appeal and *Palestinian Christians in Australia* accommodation Drive; and**
- i) **To write to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the Leader of the Australian Greens, the General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches, the Israeli Ambassador to Australia and the Head of the General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, to inform them of the clauses above.**

### **Links**

The Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network offers resources and notices on upcoming events  
<https://pien.org.au/>

*Act For Peace* Gaza Emergency Appeal: [https://actforpeace.org.au/gaza-emergency/?utm\\_campaign=EM24-OCT-GAZA-WEB44&utm\\_source=afpweb&utm\\_medium=web](https://actforpeace.org.au/gaza-emergency/?utm_campaign=EM24-OCT-GAZA-WEB44&utm_source=afpweb&utm_medium=web)

*Palestinian Christians in Australia* accommodation Drive:  
<https://palestinianchristians.org.au/accommodation-drive/>

### **Rationale:**

In 1982, the National Assembly meeting committed the Uniting Church to be a peacemaking church with a resolution that stated:

*Acknowledge that God came in the crucified and risen Christ to make peace; that he calls all Christians to be peacemakers, to save life, to heal and to love their neighbours. The call of Christ to make peace is the norm, and the onus of proof rests on any who resort to military force as a means of solving international disputes.*

*Affirm that the Uniting Church is committed to be a peacemaking body, seeking to follow the Lord of the Church by encouraging political authorities to resolve political tensions by peaceful means.*

*Call on the members of the Uniting Church in Australia to support and engage in peacemaking programs and resist reliance on military solutions to political problems.*

The Assembly Standing Committee Resolution 08.29 included the following relevant positions:

- The state of Israel has a right to exist within secure international borders;
- The right of the people of Palestine to be free from military occupation within a state of their own;
- To support peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine; and
- To increase Australian Government aid to Palestinians.

The Assembly Standing Committee Resolution 11.33 included the following relevant provisions:

- Encourage the governments of Israel and Palestine to reach a peaceful resolution to the conflict;
- Encourage the Australian Government to use its influence to see a resumption in the peace negotiations;
- Oppose anti-Semitism in all its expressions; and,
- To join the boycott of goods produced in illegal settlements.

Assembly Resolution 15.35 included the following relevant positions:

- To receive requests from the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, the Kairos Palestine movement and the World Council of Churches to act in response to the plight of the people of Palestine; and,
- Promotion across the Uniting Church of a boycott of goods from illegal settlements in the West Bank.

The ongoing conflict in Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem is a conflict between those on both sides who believe a future can be built through bloodshed and those who believe that meaningful peace can only be achieved through negotiation and the renouncing of violence.

There is no pathway to a meaningful and lasting peace through ongoing bloodshed. There are those on both sides that have reached that conclusion. For example, the former head of Israel's Shin Bet (described as a cross between the CIA and FBI), Ami Ayalon, concluded in his book *'Friendly Fire. How Israel became its own worst enemy'* (2020):

*I explained in as measured a tone as I could muster that when Palestinians felt that preventing terrorism would lead to the end of our occupation and the establishment of their own state, they cooperated with us. What most Palestinians sought, more than anything, wasn't our blood – they just wanted to trust that the Israeli government would end the occupation and allow them to be free. And we've given them little reason to trust us. What I was thinking but couldn't yet bring myself to say publicly was that our pursuit of peace was a sham. We were still caught in the Zionism of my parent's generation that saw the entire Land of Israel as our birthright. Since we refused to admit that Palestinians have rights and roots in Judea and Samaria, too, we were always looking for ways to renege on our promises. What we wanted was security, and if we could get it without handing over any more of the Land of Israel, we'd do it.*

The only pathway to meaningful peace and security is when the majority on both sides conclude that violence must be renounced, but that is not the only factor needed. As Iain King, who was involved in the Northern Ireland peace process, has argued, with clear implications for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict:

*First, it was clear by the 1990s that none of the protagonists would capitulate or be fully defeated; as a result, a compromise was the only way to end the violence. To make such an outcome sustainable in the long run, it was not just the elites who needed to be satisfied but also the communities they represented. The identity of rival groups, including their sense of dignity and their treasured symbols, had to be respected; historic grievances had to be acknowledged; and systematic imbalances in power and representation had to be addressed. Everybody had to be given an incentive to support the deal. The agreement had to be inclusive and offer far more than just an end to violence.*

There are groups of Israelis and Palestinians working together for peace, such as Standing Together, Parents Circle – Families Forum and Peace Now. However, they have yet to attract mass support. In

2003, Ami Ayalon and Palestinian leader Sari Nusseibeh launched a People's Voice peace initiative that collected the support of 251,000 Israelis and 160,000 Palestinians by 2008.

However, recently, there has been an increasing hardening of positions of many groups on both sides, suggesting that peace will be harder to achieve. On the Palestinian side, there is an increasing position that the state of Israel should not exist and all property taken from Palestinians by Jews in 1948 should be returned. Those advocating the position often do not explain what should happen to the Jewish population of Israel. On the Israeli side, there are open calls for ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from hardline Israelis and their supporters and labelling criticism of the current Israeli Government as anti-Semitism.

There is no justification for the horrific act of mass murder carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023 which resulted in the estimated deaths of 1,168 Israelis and foreigners and the abduction of over 200. However, the atrocity came in the context of ongoing smaller-scale atrocities and acts of brutality carried out by those on both sides of the conflict over many decades. These acts continue to provide fuel for the conflict and a sense of justification for those committed to extreme violence on both sides. For example, Defence of Children International Palestine documented 781 cases of Palestinian children killed by Israeli soldiers, police, settlers and security guards between 2011 and 2020.

In the current Israeli attack on Gaza, an estimated 70% of those killed by Israeli forces have been women and children. UNICEF has pointed out that the Palestinian women killed by Israeli forces have come from all walks of life, including journalists, medical staff, UN personnel and members of civil society organisations.

It is estimated that 1.9 million Palestinians in Gaza have been driven from their homes. That is 85% of the population of Gaza.

It is further estimated that 60% of the homes in Gaza have been destroyed or damaged since the Israeli attack.

The health system in Gaza has collapsed. Diseases such as diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections will take the lives of thousands more Palestinians even if the fighting stops.

Palestinian Christians are not spared from human rights abuses carried out by Israeli security forces. On 16 December 2023, Israeli troops gunned down a mother and daughter, Nahida and Samar, inside the Holy Family Parish in Gaza. One was shot dead while trying to carry the other to safety. The parish is a sanctuary for many Christian families. Seven other people were injured in the attack.

The actions of the Israeli Government are vital to finding a just and lasting peace. Jewish dialogue facilitator Adam Kahane was involved in bringing Israeli leaders together to try and reach a shared vision of their future. In his 2010 book "Power and Love. A Theory and Practice of Social Change", he points out the difficulty of reaching a peaceful and just settlement to a conflict when there is a strong asymmetry of power. He states:

*The stronger party – which in the Israel-Palestine case is Israel – always has the option of enforcing its own solution rather than accepting a mutually agreed solution.*

In "Friendly Fire", Ami Ayalon, outlines how successive Israeli Governments undermined the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords. While the Palestinian Liberation Organisation worked with Shin Bet to suppress and curb terrorist attacks by Palestinian Islamic extremists, Israeli Governments continued to expand settlements in the Occupied Territories. He wrote (page 151):

*I had begun to see that more bypass roads, military outposts, and settlements would eventually destroy any hope of a two-state solution. If we kept up the building, before too long, the Palestinians would conclude we had no intention of ending the occupation and allowing a Palestinian state alongside Israel. This would inevitably lead to the loss of hope and the triumph of terror.*

He also pointed out that Palestinian terrorist attacks favour the election of right-wing Israeli parties committed to ongoing war. In response to Palestinian terrorism, Israeli “voters turned to the right. When fear took over because of terror, we voted in leaders who promised to kill the enemy, not those who promised a better, more just world.”

Successive Israeli Governments have often resorted to extrajudicial executions of suspected terrorists. Such assassinations are even carried out in other countries, violating the laws of those countries. Ami Ayalon casually talks about the decades in which extrajudicial executions have often been used as an Israeli Government response terrorism.

In addition, when members of the Israeli army or police kill unarmed Palestinians, they are rarely sanctioned. Even when brought to trial and found guilty, the sentences from Israeli courts are often very light. Palestinians can be subject to indefinite imprisonment without charge or trial. Human rights organisations also report that some Palestinian detainees continue to be subjected to severe beatings. Thus, many Palestinians understandably believe there is one law for Jews in Israel and another for Palestinians.

It is impossible to see how peace would be possible until Israeli Governments provide equality before the law for Palestinians and end the use of human rights violations in response to the threat of terrorism.

Whilst the Australian Government has made several moves to advocate for lasting peace and security, there are several reasons to urge it to go further.

The Australian Government’s decision to temporarily end its funding to the UNRWA, alongside other major nation donors, threatens the lives of the 2 million Palestinians facing starvation, imminent famine, and disease outbreak. UNRWA, one of the biggest employers in the Gaza strip with 13,000 staff, has terminated the contracts of several employees who were allegedly engaged in misconduct regarding involvement in the Oct 7 attacks. Acknowledging that the Uniting Church has not seen the evidence of the allegations, Australia must be judicious and discriminate between allegations against a small number of individuals and the foreseeable impact of defunding UNRWA on millions of Palestinians reliant on their services, including children.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the Australian Government recently suspended consular services for non-immediate family members, leaving many Gazans worried for loved ones who are unable to join them in Australia. Although Palestinians should be able to live in peace in the long-term, there is an immediate need to support as many people find safety during the current conflict.

Australian also has a history of exporting defence goods to Israel. The Foreign Minister has said Australia has not supplied weapons to Israel since the start of the Hamas-Israeli conflict, but a more robust set of transparency measures would greatly benefit the Australian public’s knowledge in ensuring weapons involved in the killing of Palestinians are not part of those exports.

The Uniting Church in Australia is connected to the Middle East Council of Churches through our World Council of Churches membership.

The proposal above focuses on the limited role the Uniting Church can constructively play in supporting Israelis and Palestinians committed to meaningful, just and lasting peace. It seeks to be aligned with the Uniting Church's position of seeking to be a peacemaking church.

<sup>1</sup> <https://acfid.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Open-Letter-to-PM-Minister-Wong-ICJ-UNRWA.pdf>