

Israel – Palestine

Guiding Thoughts and Explanatory Theses

**A Conversation Stimulus
from the Five Regional Churches of
Baden, Hesse and Nassau, Palatinate,
Rhineland, and Westphalia**



Evangelische Kirche
von Westfalen



FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

You have before you a paper with guiding thoughts and theses on "Israel-Palestine". It is the result of an intensive consultation process between five regional churches "on the Rhine and the Ruhr" (Protestant Church in Baden, Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau, Protestant Church of the Palatinate, Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Evangelical Church of Westphalia).

The first drafts emerged in Baden in the spring of 2019. They were triggered by a polarizing debate about growing anti-Semitism in Germany and the situation in Israel-Palestine, but also by the question of how the German host churches can engage with this area of conflict at the 2022 WCC assembly in Karlsruhe in a way that enables good, constructive conversations (and decisions). The responsible departments in the five regional churches have revised the texts many times in order to find, "beyond entrenched attributions and positioning in both social and ecclesiastical spheres, a language that is as consensual as possible in the discourse on one of the most difficult areas of conflict: the relationship between Israel and Palestine and our relationship to both." In addition, initial informal reactions from Jewish-Israeli, Palestinians, ecumenical, peace ethics perspectives, as well as from the field of conflict research, were solicited and included in the editing process. Beyond the theses and their rationales, comments in the footnotes identify some of the sensitive points in the debate.

Now that the church leaderships or councils of the five participating churches have adopted these Theses, they have been made available for free discourse. We hope that they can be more than just another example of posturing in this conflict; perhaps they can offer instead a helpful framework and useful language to aid in further debates, both within the EKD and in international ecumenical relations, through which something of the reconciling and unifying spirit of which the motto of the coming world assembly speaks becomes perceptible.

We greet you warmly from "Rhine and Ruhr"



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Israel - Palestine: Guiding thoughts and explanatory theses

Preliminary Remark:

For us as a church, reflecting on the possibilities of a peaceful coexistence of Israel and Palestine from a theological-ecclesial perspective is both an enduring task and an innermost concern. Beyond entrenched attributions and positioning in both social and ecclesiastical spheres, we are looking for a language that is as consensual as possible in the discourse on one of the most difficult fields of conflict: the relationship between Israel and Palestine and our relationship to both. The memory of the Shoah motivates our commitment to overcoming anti-Semitism and theological anti-Judaism, as well as our advocacy for universal human rights.

In view of the WCC World Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022, we can expect a renewed focus on the Israel-Palestine issue. The host churches would do well to formulate points of connection for the conversation with the churches of the ecumenical community on the basis of the convictions gained from long years of dialogue work.

A variety of motives suggest themselves:

- The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has not lost its intensity in recent years. On the one hand, the Israeli settlement policy and checkpoints, the course of the separation wall and the daily burdens of the occupation limit the lives of Palestinians. On the other hand, many in Israel live in fear for the continued existence of their state in the midst of a hostile environment; they see their lives threatened by rocket fire and terrorist attacks. Dialogue and exchange have virtually come to a standstill; instead, the political fronts are hardening - even within Israeli society - as the conflicts between Arab and Jewish Israelis in the early summer of 2021 have shown.
- In Germany, the conflict in the Middle East is reflected in a polarization of the discussion. Defamations, attributions and exclusions dominate the picture instead of listening to each other and exploring possible solutions and compromises through dialogue.
- "Apartheid", "ethnic cleansing", "racism", "colonialism", "genocide" easily become labels that replace differentiated analysis. Likewise, disqualifying legitimate criticism of government policies in Israel as anti-Semitic suggests conclusive judgments too quickly. There is an urgent need to clarify the language by means of an awareness of what is happening that is as differentiated as possible.
- The controversy surrounding the German Parliament Resolution of May 17, 2019, regarding the connection between the BDS movement and anti-Semitism further fuels the polarized debate.
- The Kairos Palestine document of December 2009, which was received with great attention and controversy in discussions at that time, calls for a revisiting of the issue after 10 years since its publication.
- The shadow of unrepressed and blatantly demonstrated hostility towards Jews in Germany and worldwide hangs over any concerned look at the Middle East. With utmost sensitivity, one must recognize times when old and new forms of burning anti-Semitism, on the one hand, intertwine with a critical view of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship, on the other hand. This is unacceptable.

PRELIMINARY REMARK:

This paper aims to provide impulses for further discourse. It is intended as a position paper, which was developed in departments of the five regional churches in Baden, Hesse-Nassau, the Palatinate, the Rhineland and Westphalia, and which was endorsed by the respective church leaderships as a basis for further discussions.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 1 - WHERE WE COME FROM

From their origins, the churches remain in the history of the promises of God's first-chosen people Israel as well as in the ecumenical fellowship of all Christendom.

THESIS 1/1

Connection with Judaism

The Church of Jesus Christ is inseparably connected with Judaism. Jesus himself was a Jew; the "early church" around Peter lived in a Jewish self-understanding and regarded Jesus as the Messiah promised in Judaism. Paul describes the relationship of the church to Judaism with the image of grafted branches on the trunk of the olive tree. In Jesus Christ, Christians are included in the history of God's promise to his people, which begins with Abraham and has its goal in the completion of the Kingdom of God.

THESIS 1/2

Interconnectedness of Worldwide Christianity

Christians are connected to the various Christian denominations worldwide as members of one body. From the one original church around the disciples of Jesus, various currents of Christianity have already been formed through the journeys of Paul, which in the course of the next centuries have manifested themselves in a multitude of different cultural expressions. Ecumenical Christianity in all its different members finds its unity in reference to the common ground in Jesus Christ. In our understanding, this implies the essential connection of the Church to Judaism.¹

¹ The churches, in their diversity, listen to Jesus' plea for unity in John 17:20f: "Now I do not pray for them (i.e., the followers of Jesus) alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." In the WCC study "The Church: Towards a Common Vision" (Faith and Order Commission No. 214, 2013), there is a fundamental formulation for the church's self-understanding: the churches declare that as a church they are "profoundly related" to Judaism: "There is a genuine newness in the covenant initiated by Christ and yet the Church remains, in God's design, profoundly related to the people of the first covenant, to whom God will always remain faithful (cf. Rom. 11:11-36)." (Chap. II, par. 17).

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 2 - WHAT WE HOLD TO

We recognize the inseparable relationship of the Jewish people to the land of promise with Jerusalem in its midst. For Christians, too, this land - and Jerusalem - is of special dignity as a place of divine self-disclosure and the motherland of the Christian faith. We also respect the deep connection of the Palestinian churches with the land of the Bible. ²

THESIS 2/1

Jewish Self-understanding

The Christian church recognizes Jewish self-understanding. According to this, there are four fundamental aspects in the term "Israel": Religion, people, land, and by extension, state. These four dimensions cannot be separated from each other, but they must also be carefully distinguished. "When Christians stand up for the right of the Jewish people to live in the land of the fathers, they respect that the connection between people and land is indispensable for Judaism. Insofar as the State of Israel has an essential safeguarding function for the land, Christians affirm this state. However, insofar as the State of Israel is a secular state in the community of nations, it is subject to the same criteria as all other states with regard to its borders and its policy towards non-Jewish parts of the population." (EKD-Studie „Christen und Juden II“, 1991, page 57 – translation by the authors) We struggle to find a way between a complete profanation and a religious-fundamentalist exaltation of Israel's history. ³

² In the discourse, one is reminded of the formulation of the regional church in the Palatinate (1995), which stands paradigmatically for many others in the Protestant Church in Germany: "Through its Lord Jesus Christ, it (i.e., the regional church) knows itself to be taken into the history of God's promise with his chosen people Israel - for the salvation of all people. ..." (translation by the authors) This sentence is brought into the discourse in its differentiation also in view of the core of the dispute, the dispute about the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan. In other words, any insistence on a particular claim to the land will fail if the universal horizon - that "salvation for all people" - is lost from view. This land, which is inscribed in the basic narrative of Jewish identity, is also the motherland of ecumenical Christianity; moreover, Jerusalem is also regarded in Islam as a place where heaven and earth touch. From the biblical beginnings, the particularity in the reference to the land has a further dimension with it, the universal opening of the land for the community of all peoples. The Palestinian churches, as it were, assert this universal horizon of the reference to the land on behalf of Christianity.

³ In the debate about the concept of *Israel*, there are decidedly religious connotations and equally strict secular interpretations. In the series of theses of the working group "Church and Judaism" of the Protestant Church of the Palatinate it says: "Between both extremes there is a path that - often contrary to appearances - sees God at work in Israel even today, without simply identifying God's will with the state of Israel, its government or certain political actions. This position takes up the biblical promise of land, but at the same time states a 'surplus' of this promise compared to the historical events of immigration and founding of the state." (Israel: Staat - Land - Volk, Thesis 14 – translation by the authors). According to the biblical promise of God, one cannot speak of the fate of the Jewish people in its multidimensionality without taking into account the presence of this very God in history. Nevertheless: With such promise statements "no state is to be made" - but the reference to the fact is to be affirmed that the God of history did not leave into a somewhere or even nowhere.

THESIS 2/2

Palestinian-Christian Self-understanding

We recognize the call of Palestinian Christians together with the entire Palestinian people for undiminished right to life and political self-determination. Out of a centuries-old bond with this land, they demand their right to live in state autonomy. United in the one body of Christ, we share in the continuing affliction of our Christian brothers and sisters and suffer with them, for "where one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).⁴

THESIS 2/3

State Sovereignty

As Christians, we know ourselves to be closely connected with the State of Israel, which is the refuge and home of most Jews all over the world. At the same time, we support and strengthen the Palestinians' striving for state sovereignty: spiritually, morally, materially and politically. The prospect of coexistence under the formula of the two-state solution in mutual respect and recognition seems to have receded into the distant future. Whatever political models may be developed by the parties to the conflict, there can be no sustainable solution to the conflict without following a path toward the "recognition of Palestinian statehood" - a path that is largely consensual in the international community of states (EKiR Synod resolution 2016). "There can only be peace in Israel and Palestine if Israel's right to exist is recognized in the same way as the Palestinian people's right to their own state." (EKvW Synod resolution 2017 „Israel - Palästina" – translation by the authors) In all of this, we hear the admonition from the Biblical Word that the gift of the land to all who dwell in it is linked to the demand for justice and mutual respect.

⁴ In the struggle for a specifically Christian understanding of the land, Palestinian theology and church see themselves as particularly addressed. Not that the question of the relationship to the Promised Land is an internal Christian-Palestinian matter! For all of Christianity, the land of the Bible is the motherland and the scene of divine self-disclosure. Insofar as the coming of God to the world has concretely taken place, the Christian faith is also, in a concrete sense, place-bound. Palestinian theology stands as a clear example of the "geographical concreteness" of the Christian faith. From a Jewish perspective, this idea is rather difficult and can be perceived as a diminution of the Jewish relationship to the land. In both respects the great task remains to consider the particular together with the universal.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 3 - WHAT WE SEE CRITICALLY

In view of the dwindling readiness for political compromise, the fronts are hardening in Germany as well, the lines of communication are breaking down, the possibilities for understanding are dwindling, and positions are diverging to the point of becoming irreconcilable. The discourse on Israel-Palestine is increasingly becoming a verbal battleground in which contextualization and differentiation no longer have any place.

THESIS 3/1

Yes to an Open, Differentiated Discourse

We expressly stand for a discourse without prohibitions on thought and speech in accordance with the standards of a free, democratic society. In the heated current debate, even in our political decision-making bodies, we must insist on a differentiation between anti-Semitism on the one hand and a critical view of the respective government policy of the State of Israel on the other. Where such criticism uses anti-Semitic forms of expression, it meets with our energetic resistance. Open discourse also includes a critical view of the policies of the Palestinian ruling elites. We are aware of the longing of the people in Palestine for freedom, fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy. We recall sentences from the Baden and Hesse-Nassau response letters to the Kairos document: "Wherever international law is clearly disregarded by actions of Israeli or Palestinian authorities, this must be fully named." (EKiBa – translation by the authors) "Unjust structures that seriously limit human rights [...] are unacceptable. They contradict God's forgiving love towards all humans." (EKHN)

THESIS 3/2

No to a Comprehensive Boycott of Israel

We hear the call of the Palestinians who ask us for means to oppose the illegally built settlements on the territory occupied by Israel. We recognize in principle boycott measures as a legitimate, non-violent form of political resistance against actions that violate international law worldwide. The current EU legislation, according to which goods from the occupied territories are in principle subject to a labeling obligation, enables corresponding purchasing decisions. At the same time, we reject a total boycott of Israel, as demanded by the BDS movement (cf. statements of the EKD of 29 February and the EKiR of 6 March 2020), because it affects an entire collective without any distinction and excludes any cooperation with Israelis, which weakens precisely those forces that are working for justice and peace in Israel itself. For us as German churches, this rejection is also motivated by the disastrous history of boycotts against Jews in Germany.

THESIS 3/3

No to the Instrumentalization of Religion for Political Power Claims

Neither quotations from holy scriptures nor religious traditions can legitimize disenfranchisement and discrimination or justify geopolitical claims to power at the expense of law and justice. This applies both to a biblically-based claim to ownership of the land, as can be found among "Christian Zionists" or Israeli settlers, as well as to the claim of an exclusively Islamic land, e.g. by Hamas. We reject such positions as hostile to dialogue and as aggravating the conflict.⁵

⁵ The conflict over the land is inextricably interwoven with religious motives. From the perspective of conflict and peace research, it will be crucial to differentiate between a meta-physically legitimized exclusive claim to a specific territory and a religiously motivated attachment or affiliation to a specific country, which can allow other attachments to apply. Religious narratives can be regarded as legitimate and peace-affirming when they formulate a bond; on the other hand, the allocation of territories, including the course of borders, must not be attributed to a kind of divine grace, but must be the result of state-political agreement.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 4 - WHAT WE STAND FOR

We rally around the vision of an unchallenged and recognized State of Israel living side by side with a free and sovereign State of Palestine in the midst of a peaceful Middle East. Those who strive nonviolently to achieve this goal have our undivided support.

THESIS 4/1

Shalom over Israel

The well-being of Israel is close to our hearts. We reaffirm our attachment to Israel and fully affirm the right of the State of Israel to exist. We express our hope and pray for a reconciled coexistence of Jewish and Palestinian people in the Holy Land in a just and fair peace for all. Believing in the changeability of deadlocked conditions, we rely on the support and promotion of all forces and initiatives that enable encounters and serve peace. This applies especially to groups, institutions, and schools that are committed to promoting humanity, solidarity, and social acceptance.

THESIS 4/2

Cooperation with the Palestinian Churches

The welfare of the Palestinians is equally close to our hearts. In consensus with the member churches of the Protestant Church in Germany, the Protestant regional churches at the Rhine and the Ruhr reaffirm their solidarity with their Palestinian brothers and sisters, and hold with all intensity to the cooperation in the civil-social-diaconal sphere that has grown over many years and decades. We appreciate the impulses from Palestinian theology and seek a fraternal exchange with the Palestinian churches about the contextuality of theology, here in Germany as well as there. We pay particular attention to where our respective theologies run the risk of perpetuating old patterns of replacement and substitution of God's people under new auspices. As churches of the Word, we seek guidance primarily from the biblical Word in each specific context.

THESIS 4/3

Demand for Justice and Peace for Israel and Palestine

We want to contribute to the growth of justice and peace in Israel and Palestine: We affirm our commitment to promote and strengthen actors and initiatives in the region that are willing to engage in dialogue and reconciliation. We believe that God's instruction at its core aims at justice and peace for all people. We expect the responsible politicians on both sides to be willing to negotiate and open to compromise solutions.⁶ We demand

⁶ Palestinian voices claim that the Israel-Palestine dispute is not a conflict between equals, but between two sides with a blatantly unequal distribution of power - it would therefore be necessary to speak clearly of "asymmetries". These asymmetries do not only concern the military balance of power, but are also clearly evident, for example, in the economic sphere and in the education and health systems. Israeli voices point out that the disputes are part of a geopolitically much broader threatening conflict, which

an end to the continued construction of settlements and concrete efforts to end the occupation. We reaffirm the statement of the Evangelical Middle East Commission of 28.5.2020: Any unilateral annexation cements injustice and fuels violence. We call for clear steps towards political autonomy for Palestine as well as a renunciation of terror and violence of any kind. We urge all parties in the region to respect human rights and the international law of the international community.

clearly puts the asymmetry into perspective. The asymmetry in the relationship between Israel and Palestine is the result of multiple historical and political causes that are intertwined.

As Christian churches, we recall the special responsibility of the stronger and the special right of the weaker - founded in the biblical ethos: "Open your mouth for the dumb and for the cause of all who are abandoned ... And establish justice for the wretched and the poor." (Proverbs 31:8-9)

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 5 - WHAT WE EXPECT

... "that justice and peace kiss each other" (Psalm 85:11). Biblically based hope is directed toward justice and peace. In this hope we support political steps that come closer to conflict resolution.

THESIS 5/1

High Time for Justice and Peace

The response letter from Baden to the authors of the Kairos document from 2010 concludes with words that, from the perspective of our churches, have lost none of their relevance. However, we relate them even more self-critically to us as Western churches with all our entanglements in the global power structures - these words are for us both a greeting to our brothers and sisters and a plea to God: "It is time for peace in Israel and Palestine. It is time for a no without any yes to all acts of violence and bending of rights on all sides of the conflict." (translation by the authors)

THESIS 5/2

Steps of Reconciliation

Christians understand from the biblical scriptures that "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity." This motto of the 2022 World Assembly is biblically nourished hope. "Reconciliation" means change, exchange; reconciliation will only be possible through mutual giving and receiving of each other's perspectives and narratives. In this way, "unity" will also be attainable. Reconciliation begins with the willingness to engage with each other's feelings: with their stories of loss and suffering, but also with their stories of hope. For this, we as a church can and should create forums of conversation and exchange. We want to strengthen such initiatives and movements in the conflict between Israel and Palestine: between Israel and Palestine, and among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This is what we pray for, what we campaign for and what we work for.

Bielefeld / Düsseldorf / Frankfurt / Karlsruhe / Speyer, Nov. 3rd, 2021

FURTHER INFORMATION AND CONTACTS

Additional materials, texts and explanations on the topic are available on the homepages of the regional churches:

- **Protestant Church in Baden**
https://www.ekiba.de/html/israel_palaestina.html
(Reader on the Israel - Palestine discourse).
Contact: Klaus.Mueller@ekiba.de
- **Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau**
<https://www.zentrum-oekumene.de/de/themen-materialien/religionen-interreligioeser-dialog/naher-osten>
Contact: Knoche@zentrum-oekumene.de
- **Protestant Church of the Palatinate**
https://www.evkirchepfalz.de/fileadmin/public/internet/03_dokumente/AKJ_Stellungnahme_Israel.pdf
Contact: Stefanmeissner@gmx.net
- **Evangelical Church in the Rhineland**
<https://www2.ekir.de/inhalt/christen-und-juden/>
Contact: Wolfgang.Huellstrung@ekir.de
- **Evangelical Church of Westphalia**
<https://www.evangelisch-in-westfalen.de/themen/interreligioeser-dialog/israel-palaestina/>
Contact: Ralf.Lange-Sonntag@ekvw.de
- Cf. in particular: "Israel - Palestine. A definition of stance on Israel and Palestine by the Evangelical Middle East Commission (EMOK)", 2009, as well as the more recent publications of the Evangelical Middle East Commission (EMOK) in:
<https://www.ekd.de/en/documents-and-statements-of-the-emok-1227.htm>