

Open letter from The National Coalition of Christian Organizations in Palestine (NCCOP) to the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical movement

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. (Isa. 1:17)

Background

As we meet this month in Bethlehem in occupied Palestine, we are still suffering from 100 years of injustice and oppression that were inflicted on the Palestinian people beginning with the unjust and unlawful Balfour declaration, intensified through the *Nakba* and the influx of refugees, followed by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank including East Jerusalem and Gaza and the fragmentation of our people and our land through policies of isolation and confiscation of land, and the building of Jewish-only settlements and the Apartheid Wall.

We are still suffering because of one political declaration from a Western Empire, based on a twisted theological premise. Even some churches and few Christian leaders supported the establishment of the colonial state in our land, and totally ignored – even dehumanized – the nation, our people that had already existed here for centuries and paid the price for atrocities committed in Europe.

Hundred years later with thousands of lives lost, towns and villages razed from the face of the earth – though not our memory –, millions of refugees, thousands of homes demolished and continued incarceration of prisoners, our *Nakba* goes on.

Hundred years later and there is still no justice in our land! Discrimination and inequality, military occupation and systematic oppression are the rule. Today, we stand in front of an impasse and we have reached a deadlock. Despite all the promises, endless summits, UN resolutions, religious and lay leader's callings – Palestinians are still yearning for their freedom and independence, and seeking justice and equality. Humanly speaking – we have reached the “moment of impossible”, as Emeritus Latin Patriarch Sabbah said recently.

Could it be that we have reached this “impossible moment” because things were built from the very beginning – a hundred years ago – on an unjust premise? Should we expect that such an unjust declaration will create anything but strife and destruction?

Today is also an opportunity to remember the *Amman Call* which was proclaimed ten years ago. We are thankful to those who stood with us back then in costly solidarity; those who stood for truth and justice. We are also concerned that ten years later the situation has been worsening on the ground and still deteriorating. Like other initiatives advocating end of occupation, the *Amman Call* did not achieve its goals in building and achieving just peace and we must ask ourselves today – why?

We are also concerned by Israel's systemic assault on Palestinian creative resistance, and on our partners worldwide who use this method to pressure Israel to end the occupation. Many new laws were issued in Israel and around the world to oppose this creative non-violent resistance unlawfully, and to stop all effort towards peace. Not only is this an attack on the freedom of conscience and speech but it is also an assault on our right and duty to resist evil with good. Israel is even now trying to prevent pilgrims from visiting Bethlehem – the city of Emmanuel!

While we are grateful for the ‘costly solidarity’ articulated in the *Amman Call* and exercised by many churches around the world, we are concerned that some churches have weakened their positions in the last ten years as a result of this manipulating pressure. Many still hide behind the cover of political neutrality, not wishing to offend their religious dialogue partners.

Finally, we meet in an environment of religious wars and persecution in our region. Religious extremism is on the rise, and religious minorities have paid a heavy and painful price. We thank you for your efforts towards the refugees and towards ending the conflicts in our region. We also thank you for your support of persecuted Christians in places like Iraq and Syria.

Our Call

“God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.” (Matthew 5:6)

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness (Justice), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me”. (Matthew 5:10-11)

As we stand in front of this “impossible moment”, it gives us no pleasure to say that “we told you so” eight years ago when we declared the moment as a *Kairos* moment! We stand facing the impossible, but we have not lost hope, since as followers of the Risen One, we are the people of hope. However, we need you and we need you now more than ever. We need your costly solidarity. We need brave women and men who are willing to stand in the forefront. This is no time for shallow diplomacy Christians. We urge you to hear our call and adopt the following:

1. That you call things as they are: recognize Israel as an apartheid state in terms of international law and in agreement of what a person like Desmond Tutu said and as the UN ESCWA report said: “Israel is guilty of imposing an apartheid regime on the Palestinian people”. We are disturbed by the fact that States and churches are dealing with Israel as if the situation were normal, ignoring the reality of occupation, discrimination and daily death in the land. Just as churches united to end apartheid in South Africa and whereby the WCC played a courageous and pivotal prophetic and leadership role, we expect you to do the same!
2. That you unequivocally condemn the Balfour declaration as unjust, and that you demand from the UK that it asks forgiveness from the Palestinian people and compensates for the losses. We ask that churches and Christians to support the Palestinians in their request for justice. It was his infamous declaration, after all that laid the ground for the concept of an ethno-religious state – the very same thing our region is suffering today.
3. That you take a clear and the strongest theological stand against any theology or Christian group that justifies the occupation and privileges one nation over the other based on ethnicity or a covenant. We ask that you adopt and live the theology suggested by Kairos Palestine and that you organize conferences to bring awareness towards this end.
4. That you take a stand against religious extremism and against any attempt to create a religious state in our land or region. We ask that you support us in combating the foundations of extremism and that you seek our council when acting against religious extremism so that you do not jeopardize and harm our standing here.

5. That you revisit and challenge your religious dialogue partners, and that you are willing to even withdraw from the partnership if needed – if the occupation and injustices in Palestine and Israel are not challenged.
6. That you lead campaigns for church leaders and pilgrims to visit Bethlehem and other Palestinian cities on this side of the wall in cooperation with Palestinian tourist and pilgrimage agencies, in response to recent attempts by Israel. We ask that you publicly challenge any attempt by Israel or other Christians that discourage pilgrims from visiting Palestinian places.
7. That you defend our right and duty to resist the occupation creatively and nonviolently. We ask that you speak in support of economic measures that pressure Israel to stop the occupation and go further to support sport, cultural and academic measures against Israel until it complies with international law and UN resolutions urging the ending of its occupation, Apartheid and discriminations, and accepts refugees to return to their home land and properties. This is our last peaceful resort. In response to Israel's war on BDS, we ask that you intensify that measures.
8. That you create lobby groups in defense of Palestinian Christians. We ask that you publicly and legally challenge Christian organizations that discredit our work and legitimacy.
9. We therefore propose as a matter of the greatest urgency that you create a strategic program within WCC similar to the Program "To Combat Racism" to lead efforts to lobby, advocate and develop active programs towards justice and peace in Palestine and Israel and work on maintaining the presence of the Palestinian Christians through supporting their organizations, church work and peaceful efforts.

As faithful witnesses, we acknowledge, affirm and continue the long standing prophetic tradition, especially the one started by the *Amman Call* and articulated in the Kairos Palestine document. We fully grasp the pressure church leaders are facing here and abroad not to speak the truth, and it is because of this that we are raising this call.

Things are beyond urgent. We are on the verge of a catastrophic collapse. The current status-quo is unsustainable. This could be our last chance to achieve a just peace. As a Palestinian Christian community, this could be our last opportunity to save the Christian presence in this land. Our only hope as Christians comes from the fact that in Jerusalem, the city of God, and our city, there is an empty tomb, and Jesus Christ who triumphed over death and sin, brought to us and to all humanity, new life.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor. 4:8-9)

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