

ICCJ Message

PONDERING THE POSSIBLE INTERRELIGIOUS CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROPOSED ISRAELI ANNEXATION OF PARTS OF THE WEST BANK AND JORDAN VALLEY

Our world is living through exceptionally difficult times. Many countries are still in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, while others are slowly coming out of lockdown to face its social and economic implications. In addition, many Western nations are self-critically examining the repercussions of colonialism and racism in their societies. In a climate of multiple crises, intergroup relations become strained and incendiary conspiracy theories abound.

The Executive Board of the ICCJ is usually reluctant to comment on political controversies, except when they have the potential to obstruct understanding between Jews and Christians or freedom of religious practice. We have several times offered recommendations to our national member organizations and others devoted to interreligious amity about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our Berlin document from 2009, 'A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians' called for prayers 'for the peace of Jerusalem ... by critiquing the policies of Israeli and Palestinian governmental and social institutions when such criticism is morally warranted, at the same time acknowledging both communities' deep attachment to the land.'¹ Often guided by scriptural texts shared by Jews and Christians, including Deuteronomy 14:20: 'Justice, justice shall you pursue...', we have on many occasions affirmed both the right of the State of Israel to security and safety as the homeland of the Jewish people and the right of the Palestinians to self-determination in their homeland.² The thirteenth-century Rabbi Yehuda HeHasid suggested that this biblical verse repeats the word 'justice' because for any conflict to be resolved there must be justice for all parties.

Recent declarations on the part of some Israeli leaders of their intention to begin the unilateral annexation of parts of the West Bank and the Jordan Valley raise disturbing questions about which we encourage reflection. These include the need for justice for all those who would be affected by such an action. It would surely have 'grave consequences for the Palestinian people' and greatly injure Israel's international standing, as recently stated in an open letter from over forty Jewish leaders in the United Kingdom to Israel's ambassador to the Court of Saint James.³

As an international organisation dedicated for over seventy years to interreligious understanding and cooperation, we are particularly alarmed at the likely adverse impact of any such annexation on relations among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, both in the region and around the world. We can foresee great rancour among Christians with diverse opinions about the conflict and among Jews with equally diverse opinions in Israel and the diaspora (and between Israeli and diaspora Jews). Important trust-building

¹ *A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians* (2009): http://iccj.org/fileadmin/ICCJ/pdf-Dateien/A_Time_for_Recommitment_engl.pdf.

² *'Let Have Mercy Upon Words': A Plea from the International Council of Christians and Jews to All Who Seek Interreligious Understanding* (2010): <http://iccj.org/Let-Us-Have-Mercy-upon-Words.152.0.html?&L=7>;
'As Long As You Believe in a Living God, You Must Have Hope': Reflections on the Role of Religious and Interreligious Groups in Promoting Reconciliation about and in the Troubled Middle East (2013): http://iccj.org/redaktion/upload_pdf/201305102052530.ICCJ-Pentecost-2013.pdf.

³ *Haaretz*, 6 April 2020: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/we-cannot-justify-israel-s-west-bank-annexation-1.8898139>.

steps recently taken between Israel and neighbouring states could be thrown into disarray⁴ and the growing dialogue between Jews and Muslims could be jeopardized. What is to be gained by such divisiveness? As the British Jewish leaders stated, it would be ‘a pyrrhic victory intensifying Israel's political, diplomatic and economic challenges without yielding any tangible benefit.’

Moreover, the prospective annexation, whatever its precise geographic details might be, raises other disturbing questions that deserve consideration. Would such annexation represent the end of the two-state solution? What would be the implications of annexation for Israel's self-understanding as a democratic Jewish state? How would Israel convincingly defend itself against the charge of simply conquering the land? Asserting that Palestinians have not been cooperative partners in the peace process could too easily be characterized by many as ‘blaming the victim’.

Finally, in the present social turmoil, the potential for increased global antisemitic outbursts to erupt in the wake of annexation initiatives is very real.

All these concerns make very timely the publication expected this fall of the ICCJ sponsored book, *Enabling Dialogue about the Land: A Resource Book for Jews and Christians*. Intended for use among local Christian and Jewish dialogue groups, it will offer a structured process for constructive conversation and informative topical articles written from a variety of perspectives. More information about this volume will be available in the coming months. However, even with such resources, we fear that Christian-Jewish and Christian-Jewish-Muslim dialogues around the world could be thrown into chaos and recrimination if annexation plans were to be enacted.

In sum, we believe that the implementation of a policy of annexation could well result in many destructive consequences that cannot be entirely foreseen. We therefore call upon those in positions of political leadership to act on principles of justice and only after prolonged reflection on all the potential outcomes. We urge the worldwide interreligious community to consider how it will intensify the work of dialogue and mutuality if the divisive consequences we anticipate should ensue if the proposed plans for annexation actually occur. In accord with its mission, the ICCJ pledges its assistance in deepening the already vibrant Christian-Jewish dialogue and the growing Christian-Jewish-Muslim dialogue in the years ahead.

ISSUED BY

THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS (ICCJ)

MARTIN-BUBER-HOUSE HEPPENHEIM, JUNE 18, 2020

⁴ *Jerusalem Post*, 12 May 2020:
<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/israels-annexation-plan-the-gulf-and-the-status-quo-627644>.