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A Framework, Not a Roadmap: Christians Can Foster Peace, Justice, and Freedom in the Middle East

by Alan F. H. Wisdom

The Bible does not supply a roadmap for Mideast policy today. But there is a framework of principles that we can draw from the biblical story:

- We live in a world where the powerful build their empires by force, at the expense of the powerless. These regimes may be more or less oppressive, but the people of God cannot trust their future to any of them.
- The whole earth belongs to God. Humans, divided into various peoples and nations, are merely tenants. They enjoy the land at God's pleasure and by his grace.
- Continued enjoyment of the land depends upon a people's obedience to God's revealed will, its service to God's purposes in history. The people of God must take care not to be conformed to the evil ways of the world around. At the same time, they must act justly and compassionately toward outsiders.
- God chooses to reveal himself in a covenant with one individual, Abraham. He promises Abraham descendants, a nation, a land, and a blessing for all

humanity. The Jews, Abraham's descendants to this day, are the people of God in a special sense.

- The terms of this covenant are, however, somewhat ambiguous. Not all biological descendants of Abraham inherit the promises. Israel has been a "nation" in the usual sense for only a small portion of its history.
- When Israel violates God's commands, God raises up prophets to confront his people. The prophets denounce the rampant idolatry, deceit, violence, improper sexual relationships, and exploitation of the poor. Nobody—not even the anointed king in the line of David—is immune from this prophetic critique.
- The consequence of sin is exile. Israel, and all humanity in a different sense, is uprooted and displaced from the true home that God intends. Jews,

Table of Contents

A Framework, Not a Roadmap	p. 1
The Political Dilemmas of Arab Christianity .	p. 14

and later Christians, are called to live as foreigners and sojourners on the earth. They live by faith in promises that have not yet been fulfilled.

- After exile, there will be restoration. Despite all the ravages of human sin, God fulfills his promises. He vindicates his own character: that he is a faithful God determined to bless the people he has chosen to love.

- With the coming of Christ, God initiates a new covenant. He calls forth a new people into the Church. This new people is “grafted” onto Israel, the existing people of God, and inherits promises given to Abraham.

- Christians declare Jesus to be the fulfillment, not the nullification, of the old covenant. Jesus is the living water, the bread of life, the true vine. He is the new temple, the great high priest, the perfect sacrifice for the sins of humanity. He is the blessing to all humanity that God promised to Abraham.

- In Christ, God reaches out to people of every nation. Christians across ethnic and other lines are joined together as the Body of Christ on earth. The Church is not to be another ethnic or religious interest group; it is the new humanity being formed into the image of Christ.

- God has a particular concern for the poor and the oppressed of every nation. Jesus’ message is especially “good news” for such people. He proclaims deliverance—indeed, a striking reversal in which the poor will be lifted up and the arrogant oppressors brought low.

- But the promises of the new covenant are not primarily material rewards. Jesus instructs his disciples to seek “treasures in heaven” rather than on earth. The homeland to which they aspire is “the heavenly Jerusalem.” They look for everything to be set right in “a new heaven and a new earth,” after the second coming of Christ.

A Contested Crossroads

For several decades, the “Middle East conflict” has been shorthand for long-running disputes between 7.7 million Israelis and 4.4 million Palestinians. Debates between pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian activists have raged with little awareness of the hundreds of millions living in the surrounding countries. But the “Arab Spring” starting in 2010 changed the picture. Now people are starting to see the larger context of an entire region struggling to emerge from a history of violence and oppression. Understanding that context is crucial if American Christians are to play a constructive role in

helping Palestinians, Israelis, and other Middle Easterners pursue their hopes for justice, freedom, and peace.

Throughout its history the Middle East has been a contested crossroads over which great powers fought. Always subject to invasions and outside influences, the region has experienced jarring discontinuities of radical social change. One such change was the spread and eventual triumph of Christian faith all around the Mediterranean in the first centuries after Christ. These early conversions left a legacy of ancient, deeply rooted Christian communities that survive today in nations such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel.

Unfortunately, theological and political disputes divided the Middle Eastern Christians. Into this environment came a new upheaval in the seventh century: the Muslim movement hailing the Arabian merchant Muhammad as God’s final prophet. Uniting religious and political and military authority, Muhammad led his followers to rapid conquests. Within 80 years of the prophet’s death, Muslims controlled lands from Persia to Spain. Cultures in those lands underwent a process of Arabization and Islamization. Yet significant non-Arab and non-Muslim groups remain in many parts of the region to this day.

Islam appealed to many people with a straightforward message of submission to God’s will. Muslims in diverse societies were united by simple practices that they observed together: public profession of faith, daily prayers, almsgiving, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca. Accepting the Qur’an as a direct oracle of God delivered to Muhammad, Muslims believed they had a divine blueprint for every area of life, including politics. Religious scholars promulgated authoritative interpretations of *shari‘a* (Islamic Law). With time the interpretations crystallized and Islamic doctrine became resistant to change.

Divisions developed within the Muslim community over how to choose the caliph (successor) to Muhammad. Sunnis, Shi’ites, and subgroups vied for power and influence. When they attained power, they often oppressed other Muslim groups as well as non-Muslims. Islamic law had inequalities deeply engraved: between Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, free people and slaves.

Arab and Islamic civilization reached a peak under the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid caliphs of the seventh through thirteenth centuries. But gradually the religious authority of the caliphs was eclipsed by the might of military leaders such as emirs and sultans. Today there is no caliph or religious figure widely acknowledged

across the Muslim world. Political power still belongs mostly to men who command troops.

A great trauma came with the destruction of the ‘Abbasid caliphate at the hands of the pagan Mongols in 1258. From the fourteenth century through World War I, most of the Arab Middle East was under Ottoman Turkish rule. Ottoman armies came as far as the gates of Vienna in 1529 and 1683; however, by the eighteenth century the Ottomans showed unmistakable signs of weakness in the face of ascendant Europe. The relatively stagnant Middle East could not keep pace—militarily, technologically, economically, or intellectually—with the innovative, modernizing Christian states to the north and west.

Two Responses to Modernity: Nationalism and Islamism

For Middle Eastern people feeling vulnerable, there were two main responses to modernity. The first was a nationalist self-assertion that adopted western technology to build powerful independent states. Nationalist leaders, such as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, were often military men who set up authoritarian dictatorships. They leaned toward socialism, with large state enterprises dominating the economy. Zionism, the movement that led to the 1948 founding of Israel as a Jewish homeland, was an exceptional instance of nationalism in several ways.

For the most part, the nationalist dictators disappointed the hopes that had been placed in them. Their economic policies fostered inefficiency and corruption, and their human rights abuses victimized dissidents and minorities. They also brought disaster upon their countries through foolish wars, especially against Israel.

In their disillusionment with nationalism, many Middle Easterners have turned to a second response to modernity: the reassertion of Islam. Islamist movements—like the Wahhabi clerics who hold sway in Saudi Arabia, the Shi‘ite imams who rule Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood now dominant in Egypt—aim to make *shari‘a* the law of the land. They attract adherents through their reputation for piety, honesty, and charity. They turn popular hostility against the “near enemies”—westernized local elites—and the “far enemies” in Israel, the United States, and other western nations. Some Islamist groups proclaim violent *jihad* against their nemeses; others favor more gradual strategies for accumulating power.

The Islamists have many frustrations into which they can tap. In global perspective, the Middle East today is a region of middle income but high repression. Its

peoples have achieved significant progress in areas such as education and health care. But the wealth is unevenly distributed, and the economies are narrowly based. Some lightly populated countries enjoy great oil wealth; other countries have large populations and few vibrant industries. Young people coming out of school have a hard time finding employment and are often impelled to emigrate.

Middle Eastern peoples also chafe under limits on their self-expression. Despite its moderate incomes and educational attainments, the Middle East is the least free region of the world. Its governments are overwhelmingly either dictatorships or monarchies. They systematically violate freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and religion. They discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities.

Christians are a shrinking and endangered community in much of the Middle East. Their church life is hemmed in by government restrictions. Laws against proselytism, blasphemy, and apostasy are used to intimidate Christians and others at variance with the predominant form of Islam. Christians suffer violence at the hands of militant groups, and governments do little to defend the persecuted. Middle Eastern Christians fear that their situation will grow worse as Islamist movements gain power.

Most Middle Easterners say they want democracy. But their history gives them little experience of that system of government. They lack many of the institutional and cultural foundations upon which liberal democracy has been built elsewhere. Strong majorities throughout the region also tell pollsters that they wish Islam to play a large role in political life.

Prudent Use of Limited Influence

How can U.S. Christians best help God’s people caught in this contested crossroads? How can they support Middle Eastern Christians who have stood fast for Christ through so many centuries? How can they be a blessing to Jews, who remain beloved for Abraham’s sake? How can they bring good news to the poor in Jesus’ name?

The first counsel of wisdom is to recognize the limits of our power. We cannot impose Christianity or democracy or peace upon the Middle East. These three are quite distinct; however, all three require an act of consent and trust. People must be drawn to follow Christ. They must agree to govern themselves in a free society. They must join together in peace accords.

These decisions will be made by actors in the region: the dictators, the monarchs, the Islamists, the people of

influence, the people who hitherto have lacked influence. They will not be induced to accept anything that they perceive to be contrary to their vital interests.

U.S. military force overthrew a dictator in Iraq in 2003. But it cannot guarantee the development of a lasting liberal democracy. Likewise, U.S. economic might goes only so far. Sanctions against Iran, for instance, have damaged that country's economy; however, they have not dissuaded the Islamist government from repressing its own people or threatening its neighbors.

Acknowledging these realities, however, is not a counsel of despair. U.S. Christians may not control the situation in the Middle East, but they do have means of influence. They have relations of partnership and solidarity with fellow Christians in the region. They have evangelistic, medical, educational, and charitable ministries in various nations.

As participants in the world's largest economy, U.S. Christians do business in the Middle East. They produce print and electronic media that reach audiences throughout the region. As citizens of the world's most powerful nation, U.S. Christians have political leverage on countries that depend on U.S. assistance or favor.

Four Policy Options

God in Scripture has not revealed a detailed plan for transforming the modern Middle East. How to use our limited but significant influence is mostly a matter of prudence. There are four main policy approaches to the Middle East that we see represented in U.S. churches. U.S. Christians will need to weigh the arguments for and against each approach.

Option A: Support Israel Unconditionally

This option would make support for Israel the centerpiece of Mideast policy. It backs the Israeli government in doing what it deems necessary to secure peace and prosperity for the Jewish people. It embraces governments and groups favorable toward Israel as friends of the United States and the churches. By contrast, it regards Israel's enemies as our enemies.

The theme verse for this position is the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse." The late evangelist Jerry Falwell expressed his belief "that God deals with all nations in relation to how these nations deal with Israel." Therefore, he said, "America should without hesitation give total financial and military support for the State of Israel." Falwell insisted, "If this nation [the United States] wants her fields to remain white with grain, her scientific achievements to remain

notable, and her freedom to remain intact, America must continue to stand with Israel."¹

Advocates for Option A often emphasize a debt of gratitude that they feel toward the Jewish people. It is through the Jews, they note, that Gentile Christians received the Word of God. Above all, Jesus our Savior was an observant Jew who saw his life, death, and resurrection as a fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

Many of these advocates also express a sense of guilt for the mistreatment of Jews under ostensibly Christian nations. They view the Holocaust as the culmination of that ugly history. Now, they hope, those long centuries of Christian anti-Semitism can give way to a new era of Christian philo-Semitism. The best way to show this new attitude, they believe, is to lend generous moral and material support to the modern State of Israel.

Many proponents of Option A are conservative evangelicals. They often hold to a "dispensationalist" theology that sees God's covenant with Israel as radically distinct from God's covenant with the Church. In the end times, many expect the age of the Church to draw to a close and the covenant with Israel to come again to the fore.

Televangelist Pat Robertson sees the 1948 establishment of Israel as the opening of that end-times scenario: "We believe that the emergence of a Jewish state in the land promised by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was ordained by God."² Adherents of Option A generally regard that land promise as irrevocable. They are prepared to support Israeli claims not only to the territory within the 1948 borders but also to the whole of Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Option A advocates look at the entire Middle East from the perspective of Israel. They mainly see striking contrasts. Israel is a stable democracy with wide civil liberties whereas its neighbors are largely repressive dictatorships and monarchies. Israel shares the Judeo-Christian values that undergird our U.S. democracy whereas its neighbors hold to a Muslim faith more typically associated with authoritarian rule.

Option A proponents view Israel as a natural ally of the United States. They support friendly relations with other nations, such as Egypt and Jordan, which have made peace with Israel. Such nations would benefit from U.S. aid and trade. Criticisms of their human rights violations, like Israel's, would be muted.

Israel and the United States also have common enemies, according to the Option A advocates. The same Islamists and aggressive nationalists who denounce the "Great Satan" in Washington likewise denounce the

“Little Satan” in Tel Aviv. Backing Israel against the likes of Iran and Syria makes sense, from this perspective, because those anti-Israel regimes are also hostile to America’s interests and its allies. Some Option A proponents even perceive in the fevered determination to destroy the “Zionist entity” a kind of demonic rebellion against God’s plan.

Pro: Option A takes seriously God’s promises to Israel. It follows the apostle Paul in faith that God still has his hand on the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Option A rightly calls U.S. Christians to exercise a special care for the fate of God’s people Israel.

Option A also focuses U.S. Christians on the conflict that garners the most widespread attention around the Middle East and the world. In that conflict, it would put us on the side of the nation that most closely shares our religious and political values. Attitudes toward Israel are indeed a fair test of a nation’s or a group’s commitment to democracy, pluralism, and human rights.

Con: Option A reads too much into Scripture. It assumes that modern Israel is the direct successor to the ancient Kingdom of David and inherits all the promises made to David’s line. But modern Israel was established as a secular state, and most of its leaders have been non-observant Jews.

Proponents of Option A are overly confident in their ability to discern how today’s Israel fits into Old and New Testament prophecies of the end times. They are much too certain that they know the divinely fixed boundaries for Israel. The fact that Judea and Samaria were the heartland of ancient Israel does not necessarily imply that modern Israel has the right to rule over the West Bank without the consent of the inhabitants.

Option A advocates often overlook the fact that, in the Old Testament, enjoyment of the land was contingent upon obedience to God’s law. Modern Israel, too, has a duty to deal justly with all its own citizens and its neighbors. Certainly the Palestinians are owed the opportunity to govern themselves, as well as the full panoply of human rights. When modern Israel denies those rights, we must be willing to hold the Israeli government accountable—just as the biblical prophets condemned the injustices perpetrated by the ancient kings of Israel, just as modern Israelis criticize their own government.

Option A, in stressing political support for Israel, tends to neglect the primary calling of Christians to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. The apostle Paul’s main hope for his fellow Jews was not political but spiritual: “that they may be saved” in Christ (Romans 10:1).

Option A has the potential to damage Christian evangelism elsewhere in the Middle East. Because most Arabs and other Muslims sympathize with the Palestinian cause, they may turn a deaf ear to a church that has identified itself exclusively with Israel. Unconditional support for the Jewish state would also alienate most Arab Christians.

More broadly, Option A would send a negative message to the 450 million Middle Easterners outside Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. It tells them that they matter to us only insofar as they support or oppose the Jewish state. Option A does not value their own struggles in their own context.

Option B: Oppose Israel Systematically

This option, the inverse of Option A, would make opposition to Israel the centerpiece of Middle East policy. It singles out the Israeli presence in the West Bank as the gravest injustice in the region. Option B proponents typically demand that “the occupation” end immediately and unconditionally.

To achieve this result, Option B advocates ask the U.S. government, other governments, churches, and other private groups to use all available means of pressure against Israel. They make no explicit demands on the Palestinians or others of Israel’s neighbors, nor do they seek any pressure against those parties. Option B adherents are convinced that if the Israeli presence can be removed, the Palestinians will be free to determine their own future under a government of their own choosing. They also seem to believe that this kind of positive resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would have a greatly beneficial effect throughout the region.

Most Option B advocates are left-leaning activists in the oldline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. They do not usually offer a theological framework undergirding their position, other than generalized calls for justice. Option B proponents reject the idea that contemporary Israel has any special or divinely authorized claim upon the land of Palestine. To them Israel is, like any other nation, subject to criticism for its human rights violations.

Indeed, Option B advocates seem to hold the Jewish state to a stricter standard. They liken it to apartheid South Africa: a western colonial implant foisted upon the victimized indigenous people. Israel’s receipt of large volumes of U.S. economic and military assistance likewise makes it a bigger target for criticism, in the eyes of these activists.

Option B proponents point out that Israel's presence in the West Bank is the grievance most frequently expressed by Middle Easterners. Other Arabs and Muslims sympathize with the plight of the Palestinians: denied the right to have their own sovereign state, humiliated by Israeli soldiers at checkpoints on every road, facing high unemployment as their economy is choked by Israeli restrictions on movement and commerce, their land taken for Jewish settlements in their midst. They find intolerable these indignities at the hands of a non-Arab, non-Muslim state inserted into the region. Israel's neighbors also see its presence on the West Bank as a violation of international law, and therefore an affront to the world community.

All these accumulated grievances against Israel do tremendous damage to the reputations of the United States and the Christian faith, according to Option B adherents. The U.S. government, they believe, has the leverage to change the situation. If the United States were to withhold its economic and military aid, Israel would be forced to withdraw from the Palestinian territories. Option B advocates see that kind of Israeli capitulation as the key to redeeming America's reputation around the Middle East.

Option B proponents also believe that U.S. churches need to restore their own good name throughout the region. Christianity, they fear, has been greatly harmed by its association with Israel and pro-Israel policies. Option B activists push churches to break dramatically with that image by taking concrete actions to distance themselves from Israel. They often align themselves with the "BDS movement"—for boycotts of Israeli products, divestment from companies doing business with Israel, and economic sanctions limiting trade with the Jewish state. None of these measures is urged against any other government in the region.

Pro: Option B addresses the top stated grievance of people across the Middle East. The Palestinians are among the poorest people of the region, with unusually high unemployment rates. Their poverty is in large part due to negative effects of the conflict with Israel.

Clearly, Palestinians deserve our sympathy for what they have suffered. The Christians among them have a particular claim upon our attention. For Palestinians to obtain the self-determination that is their right, Israel will have to make some concessions. The United States and its Christian community have means of influence to encourage Israel toward making such concessions for the sake of peace.

A peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could have ripple events throughout the region. It would lend encouragement to all Middle Easterners struggling

for their self-determination and human rights. It would strengthen America's hand in advancing a "freedom agenda."

Con: Like its inverse Option A, Option B is too narrow in its fixation on Israel. Option B fails to recognize that there are other Middle Eastern peoples besides the Palestinians that are denied self-determination. There are others who live under the intimidation of military force. There are others who lack jobs in a constricted economy. There are other Middle Eastern Christian communities that are threatened and dwindling. Israel cannot be blamed for all these problems.

Option B errs by taking the Israeli-Palestinian dispute out of its regional context. Israel is far from the worst abuser of human rights in the Middle East. In fact, the human rights group Freedom House rates it as the freest nation in the region. Israel is in some ways a model democracy that its neighbors would do well to imitate.

The one-sided criticism and pressure that Option B directs against Israel is not the wisest strategy to bring peace. Pressure needs to be applied also to Palestinian and other Arab leaders. They must assume their share of responsibility for the plight of the Palestinian people. For decades many of these leaders refused to accept Israel's existence—some still refuse—and devoted their energies to trying to destroy the Jewish state. Rather than finding workable solutions for Palestinians in the West Bank, in Gaza, and in refugee camps elsewhere, they left them in their misery and fanned the flames of resentment against Israel. They resorted to tactics, such as terrorism, that discredited their cause and brought further repression down upon their people. They turned down opportunities for peace.

If the United States turned against Israel, as Option B advocates urge, it would not balance the scales in Middle East negotiations. On the contrary, it would leave the Jewish state isolated. Even so, Israel could not be expected to make concessions that would jeopardize its security or its survival.

Finally, Option B lacks adequate biblical grounding. It does not seem to take seriously God's Old Testament covenant with Israel. Nor does it emphasize the New Testament call to "make disciples of all nations." The peace that it seeks is a temporal peace for one people, the Palestinians.

Option C:

Support Democracy and Human Rights, Especially Religious Freedom, Across the Region

This option, unlike the two previous, addresses the whole Middle East. Its guiding principle is not support

or opposition to any particular government, but rather consistent devotion to the cause of freedom. No government would be exempt from criticism.

Option C does not rest on a detailed theological framework. Its adherents come from a variety of Christian traditions. There is no religious body that consistently lines up with Option C, although the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic bishops may come closest.

Option C is based on the conviction that God opposes tyranny. It refuses to accept regimes, secular nationalist or Islamist, that arrogate to themselves powers that belong only to God. It resists rule that it imposed by force rather than by covenants freely entered. Option C challenges regimes that deny the dignity of persons created in the image of God. It stands against social and political systems that consign large groups to second-class status.

Historical experience, not biblical command, persuades Option C proponents that liberal democracy is the best available alternative to the dictatorships and monarchies that now prevail in the Middle East. Liberal democracy gives individuals the fullest opportunity to develop the gifts that God has given them and pursue the callings that God has laid upon them. It gives peoples the fullest opportunity to decide their future together, reasoning with one another about what justice requires. Liberal democracy also opens more social space for women, ethnic and religious minorities, and other traditionally oppressed groups. It offers a peaceful alternative to rule by force and coercion.

Liberal democracy is also the alternative that affords the greatest liberty for the Church to carry out its mission. A freer society would allow Middle Eastern Christians wider opportunities to proclaim Christ in word and demonstrate him in deed.

Option C advocates speak up for the rights of all minorities, not just Christians. They ally themselves with proponents of women's rights, freedoms of speech and press, free trade unions, and the full range of internationally recognized human rights. They see liberal democracy as the package that best delivers all these rights.

Insofar as democracy is an option, Option C adherents support it and those striving towards it. Where democracy is not currently an option, they still aim to broaden the social space available to Middle Eastern people. A partly free country such as Kuwait or Lebanon is preferable to a rigidly repressive regime such as Iran or Saudi Arabia.

Convinced that religious freedom is “the first freedom,” Option C proponents will particularly speak out against limitations on the practice of one's faith. They know that persons who are able to follow their consciences in religious matters will feel freer to follow their consciences in other matters as well. Likewise, Option C adherents are conscious that economic pluralism—free trade, freedom to establish and grow enterprises without excessive burdens imposed by government—often leads in the long run to political pluralism.

Option C advocates employ various means of influence to advance democracy and freedom. They raise their voices in defense of oppressed Middle Eastern peoples. Churches and other groups also lend direct assistance to their civil society cohorts in the region, thus strengthening alternative centers of power. The very existence of the Church is an indirect challenge to the presumptions of despotic rulers. Moreover, to the extent that Christian or other schools, hospitals, or development projects embody an alternative, more pluralistic ethic, they point the larger society in the direction of freedom.

Option C exponents also encourage the U.S. government to use its influence along the same lines. U.S. aid and trade can bolster the forces of freedom in a society, and reinforce governments that move in that direction. U.S. military power in the Middle East can deter foes of freedom, and perhaps in some circumstances buttress its friends.

Option C proponents, in standing for freedom, must focus on the greatest threats to freedom. Currently, the most organized threat is Islamism. As represented by governments like Iran and Saudi Arabia and movements like Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist project of a state under *shari'a* has ideological appeal across the region.

Option C adherents prioritize democratic, pluralist alternatives to the Islamist vision. They will naturally be most supportive of the few existing democracies in the region: Israel, Turkey, and the fledgling government in Iraq. Even so, Option C advocates will be ready to acknowledge deficiencies in those democracies.

From the perspective of Option C, Israel—the freest, most democratic nation in the entire Middle East—is especially deserving of support from U.S. Christians. But not even Israel is exempt from criticism. When the Israeli government fails to live up to its democratic ideals, its U.S. friends and its own citizens must challenge its policies. The Israeli military presence in the West Bank is a standing contradiction to those ideals. Israel must find ways to satisfy Palestinian desires for self-government and civil liberties.

Pro: Option C approaches the Middle East as a whole. It treats each country in its own right, rather than merely as a player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It addresses the sufferings and aspirations of all Middle Eastern peoples.

Option C places all the problems of the Middle East in a larger context: the patterns of authoritarian rule that deny human rights. Against this oppression, it asserts Christian values of freedom, justice, and human dignity. Option C offers a solution, liberal democracy, which has brought blessings to the church and society in America. Democracy is also a solution that many Middle Easterners have said they would like to try.

Option C would have U.S. Christians express the love of Christ in their concern for material wellbeing and social justice among Middle Eastern peoples. Indirectly, this approach could aid the spread of Christ's message. In a more democratic setting, as state and social coercion decreases and freedom of conscience expands, Middle Eastern Christians will be able more fully to enter the marketplace of ideas. There are reasons for confidence that, in that free marketplace, the Gospel can compete effectively against Islam and other ideologies that have traditionally relied on coercion.

Con: Option C is unrealistic in the hopes that it invests in liberal democracy. The vast majority of Middle Eastern nations have little experience of democracy and few democracy-nurturing institutions. People tell pollsters that they want democracy, but they do not understand what democracy entails. At the same time they affirm democracy, they also affirm systems of Islamic law that run contrary to basic democratic principles of limited government, individual liberty, equality under the law, and majority rule.

Democracy, by itself, will not solve all the deep social problems that afflict the Middle East. Sometimes, tragically, limited doses of democracy may exacerbate the situation. As in Iraq after 2003 or Egypt after 2011, they may increase the level of conflict and violence in the society. Forces kept under the lid of an authoritarian regime burst forth to make life more difficult for the poor, Christians, and other minorities. A partial democratic opening may also clear the way for more extreme forces to take power.

It may be that what the Middle East needs most is not democracy but the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Option C, by making the diffusion of the Gospel dependent upon a putative democratic opening, may have its priorities reversed.

Option D: Stay Out of Middle East Political Struggles and Concentrate on Christian Evangelism and Charity

Option D is politically isolationist but ecclesiastically activist. It is pessimistic about the prospects for democracy but optimistic about the possibilities for Christian mission. There are few prominent public advocates for this approach; however, it is the unofficial policy of many Christian mission agencies involved in the Middle East.

Option D adherents focus on what churches can do under current circumstances in the region. Discreet evangelism is possible in many countries, and some Middle Eastern Muslims do come to faith in Christ. Works of charity—addressing needs in education, health care, and economic development—are needed and appreciated in many cases.

Option D rests on a confidence in the Gospel's power to offer answers not found elsewhere. Nationalist ideologies have failed to satisfy either the material desires or the spiritual longings of Middle Eastern peoples. Islamism has likewise proven unsatisfying in places like Iran where it has been tried. It relies on coerced obedience to *shari'a*, which will never match the joy, freedom, and human flourishing that flow from God's grace in Jesus Christ. As Middle Easterners find themselves disillusioned with the false choice between Islamism and western materialism, they may become more open to the Gospel.

Option D sees little to be gained by intervening in the region's political struggles. On the one hand, U.S. Christians do not wish to be aligned too closely with the authoritarians who usually win those struggles. On the other hand, they can do little to help the losers with whom they might sympathize. Even when one dictator or monarch is ousted, democracy advocates often lack the social base or economic or military power to prevent the installation of a new regime of equal or greater brutality.

Option D is also skeptical about prospects for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The fear and distrust that the two sides hold for one another may be so great, and the gulf between their incompatible demands so wide, that any kind of comprehensive peace agreement is beyond immediate reach. It may take a new generation of Israelis and Palestinians, not so steeped in animosity, to be able to find a way toward peace.

In the meantime, Option D adherents are leery of becoming too compromised with either side or investing too much moral and political capital in trying to bring them together. U.S. Christians are not inclined to

sympathize with the movements that dominate the Palestinian territories, and the political price of being pegged as Israel's closest ally is too high.

From the perspective of Option D, it would be useless and even counter-productive to beat our heads against the status quo of a non-democratic, conflict-ridden region. Pragmatically, U.S. Christians will have to cultivate relationships with the rulers using quiet diplomacy. Under Option D we would seek the maximum feasible freedom for our Middle Eastern Christian brethren, as well as for others in their societies. But we would not challenge directly the social and political systems under which they live.

Option D does not despair of change in the Middle East. But it expects that change to come slowly, as Middle Easterners work out their internal and external difficulties. If the United States continues and expands its commerce with the region, and if U.S. Christians take advantage of the openings provided through this commerce, free trade will have a gradual effect in undermining ideological and political monopolies. Ideas unfamiliar to the population, including Christianity and democracy, will become more familiar. The groundwork will be laid for changes that are not possible today.

Pro: Option D is realistic in acknowledging the obstacles facing Christians and democracy advocates in the Middle East. Authoritarian patterns of rule are deeply rooted in the region's history, religion, and culture. They will not easily or soon be changed.

The United States and its Christian community have limited leverage over Middle Eastern regimes. It would be irresponsible to raise false hopes that we could force the authoritarians to yield their power. Indeed, if we press the regimes too hard, the tragic result could be to provoke reprisals against the Christians and other oppressed groups that we had meant to defend. And if there is regime change, it will not necessarily be for the better. A relatively mild dictator or monarch might be replaced by a more oppressive Islamist government.

In view of all the unpredictable effects of U.S. attempts to exert influence, it might be wiser to exercise caution about throwing our weight on any side in the region's political conflicts. It might be better to make the most favorable accommodation possible with the status quo.

Option D also shows prudence in looking to the long term. Any deep change in the region is likely to take time. In the meantime, this option would direct the church's efforts toward missions that are attainable today.

Con: Option D proposes to neglect politically a region that we cannot afford to neglect. The 450 million people in the Middle East have demonstrated their desire to govern themselves. As their neighbors who share that same human hunger for freedom, U.S. Christians have an obligation to help them as we are able. If we do not deploy our influence on behalf of democracy and religious freedom, others will surely be pushing contrary agendas.

As the uprisings since 2010 have indicated, the apparent stability of Middle Eastern regimes may often be an illusion. Relatively small disturbances may suddenly dispel the illusion and give people hope that change is possible. Amidst such an unstable equilibrium, inaction is not a viable policy. Middle Eastern conflicts have the potential to upset the entire world: by the creation of massive refugee flows that would burden many other nations, by disruptions in energy supplies that would deal a blow to the global economy, and by the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons. We cannot afford to ignore these dangers.

Despotic and dangerous regimes must be challenged with ideas that undermine their claims to power. The United States and its Christian community have leverage to promote such ideas. We should use that leverage to favor positive outcomes. Even when we lack the means to ensure that Middle Eastern peoples get the democracy that they desire, we can at least help them toward greater measures of freedom, justice, and peace.

Points of Ready Consensus

As we consider church statements on the Middle East, we find some points of ready consensus among U.S. Christians. These are matters rooted in Scriptures recognized by all major branches of the Christian faith. They express a biblically informed sense of the peace, justice, and freedom that God wills for humans all over the globe. There are also at least a few widely shared perceptions of the situation in the Middle East. Here are some of those points on which most Christians might concur:

1. The Middle East is an important concern for U.S. Christians. It was the home of Jesus and his earliest disciples, who first emerged as a movement among the Jewish people. It remains the home of the world's most ancient Christian churches. Those fellow believers, and hundreds of millions of their compatriots, live today under great suffering and oppression. As Christians we are called to effective solidarity with them in their suffering. Jesus will judge us on how we have responded to "the least of these my brothers" (Matthew 25:40).

2. God's people in the Middle East includes everyone, at least potentially in some sense. Primarily, it is fellow Christians—the sheep of Christ's own fold whom he calls and who "follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:4). These are our brothers and sisters who, together with us, have "received adoption as [God's] children through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5). In a different sense God's people includes the Jews, to whom collectively "belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Romans 9:4). And God's people includes others yet unknown—a great multitude, we hope. Jesus speaks of these as "other sheep that do not belong to this fold." He declares, "I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice" (John 10:16). He offers himself particularly to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). There are many of these, in all the nations of the Middle East, whom Christ would claim as his own.

3. Effective solidarity requires specific acts of service. The Church must strive to meet the expressed needs of Middle Eastern peoples: for health care, education, information, economic development, environmental stewardship, opportunities for women and other disadvantaged groups, and so forth. We will have to find ways to show God's love especially to the poor and the oppressed. This effort may involve challenging, subtly or openly, the systems that perpetuate the poverty and oppression of so many across the region. Some acts of service may be carried out through direct ministries of the Church. In many cases, however, the most effective solidarity may come from church members in positions of influence—business leaders, journalists, educators, government officials—acting on their Christian convictions.

4. These acts of service flow out of the love of Christ. This is the Church's top priority in the Middle East and everywhere: to manifest in word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Repressive regimes may limit what it is prudent to say and do publicly; however, Christians should be clear that our ultimate mission is to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I [Jesus] have commanded you" (Matthew 26:19-20). The greatest need of Middle Eastern peoples is not material progress; it is restored relationships with their Creator and their fellow creatures.

5. Our political objectives in the Middle East should be peace, justice, and freedom. These are qualities of God's gracious rule, which is present in the lives of believers and is being extended throughout the world. We desire these blessings for all people.

6. U.S. Christians have special fraternal ties with the Christian churches of the Middle East. We have a duty in Christ to attend to their cries. We recognize that their very existence—a precious witness to Christ in the region of his birth, maintained through century upon century of hardships—is in danger. Middle Eastern Christians face restrictions upon their religious freedom, social discrimination, economic deprivation, and frequently personal insecurity. Increasing numbers have chosen to emigrate. It would be catastrophic if these Christian communities were to disappear. American Christians should use their influence on behalf of their Middle Eastern brethren: to open space for them in their societies, and to assist their resettlement if they are forced out. The leaven of a continuing Christian presence would benefit those societies and further the spread of the Gospel.

7. Nevertheless, we do not seek any special privileges for fellow Christians. We seek only the human rights with which God has endowed all persons. These are rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent United Nations conventions ratified by almost all nations in the region. As we advocate these rights for Middle Eastern Christians, we also advocate them for other religious and ethnic minorities that suffer similar abuses. And we advocate them for Muslim majorities that also experience curtailed liberties, economic deprivation, and personal insecurity under oppressive governments.

8. The Church has a special commitment to religious liberty, the "first freedom." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 18: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."³ Laws forbidding proselytism and blasphemy violate the freedom to manifest one's religion in public teaching. Punishing apostasy denies a person's freedom to change religion. These kinds of restrictions, common in Middle Eastern countries, must be opposed vigorously.

9. At the same time, Christians should defend the full panoply of rights due to every person. Respect for God our Creator demands that we respect the dignity of human beings made in God's image (1 John 4:20). Human rights, like the persons to whom they pertain, are a package deal. Alongside the freedom of religion come the rights to life, liberty, property, expression, association, assembly, equal protection and due process of law, and asylum from persecution. Despotism governments that do not allow freedom of conscience to their citizens typically do not trust those citizens with

other freedoms. The Middle East is the region of the world where all these rights are most frequently trampled down. The Church should be in the forefront of lifting up those who have been brought low by these abuses. It should stand with all the defenders of human rights. Especially in the region where women's rights are most severely restricted, the Church should support full and equal opportunities for women.

Matters on Which There Should Be Agreement

There are other matters on which there should be consensus among U.S. Christians. Some may dispute these points; however, the witness of most major branches of the faith is overwhelming. A clear view of current realities in the region, set in the context of a straightforward reading of the Bible and Middle East history, forms strong convictions in us.

1. In addressing Islam, the majority religion of the Middle East, Christians need to acknowledge both similarities and differences between their own faith and that held by Muslims. The two religions do not teach the same things, and it would violate the integrity of both to collapse them into a least-common-denominator doctrine of "ethical monotheism." Central affirmations of Christian faith—that God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, that Christ died for our sins, that he was raised bodily from the dead—are explicitly rejected in the Qur'an. Conversely, Christians cannot accept Muhammad's prophecies because they contradict earlier revelations in the Old and New Testaments. Yet this is not to say that Christians and Muslims have nothing in common. Both are human and share perceptions in the light of nature: that God is the all-powerful Creator, that he has designed human beings to live in certain ways, and that all will reap the consequences of their actions. Many, but not all, of the moral precepts of the Bible are echoed in Islam: humility before God, respect for parents, charity to the poor, control of one's appetites, and so forth. Christians can appeal to Muslims based on these principles, as well as common human aspirations for freedom, justice, and peace.

2. As we pursue peace, justice, and freedom in a volatile region of a fallen world, Christians must be both idealistic and realistic. We should pray for and aim toward comprehensive and lasting arrangements that would deal justly with all persons, groups, and nations; however, we should not show contempt for more limited measures of justice, peace, and freedom. We should not make the greater good that may not be achievable today into the enemy of the lesser good that is actually possible.

3. As Middle Eastern peoples rise up and demand greater freedoms, U.S. Christians must be on the side of freedom. We cannot fail to sympathize with their desire for participation in a government that respects their human rights. We must pray and hope that current dictators and monarchs will yield to those entreaties, or that the authoritarian rulers will step aside. We take this position with the awareness that not every movement demanding "freedom" will in fact deliver freedom. Sometimes the self-styled liberator becomes a new dictator. We must seek to avoid the kind of tragic twist that occurred in Iran in 1979, when the repressive shah was replaced by an even more thoroughly repressive Islamic republic.

4. In standing for freedom, U.S. Christians must oppose Islamist movements that seek to institute *shari'a*. Islamic law, as traditionally interpreted, is not compatible with human rights as they are internationally recognized and understood by Christians. *Shari'a* does not treat all citizens equally. It enshrines discrimination against women and non-Muslims, reducing them to a second-class status. Islamic-inspired prohibitions of proselytism, blasphemy, and apostasy violate the freedoms of conscience and expression. Countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia that declare *shari'a* to be their law are among the least free in the world.

5. U.S. Christians must condemn terrorism as a tactic. Terrorist attacks on civilians violate almost every standard of the Christian just war tradition. Terrorist groups have no authority to wage war. The targets they choose bear scant relationship to any grievances the terrorists might have. The terrorists do not discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Their attacks have little probability of accomplishing the terrorists' stated objectives. No matter how oppressed and frustrated the terrorists may claim to be, there can be no excuse for the murders they commit.

6. Governments have a God-ordained duty to protect their citizens against terrorism. They can take prudent measures to prevent terrorists from reaching their targets, and they can pursue terrorists after they have struck. They can use force to capture or kill terrorists. At the same time, governments must seek to change conditions that foster an inclination toward terrorism.

7. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a significant problem that needs to be addressed diplomatically. A peaceful resolution of the conflict would relieve the suffering of both peoples and free them to work together for mutual prosperity. Nevertheless, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the central issue in the Middle East today. It directly involves only 12 million of the 450 million people in the region. The problems that afflict the rest merit attention too.

8. God still has a covenant with the Jewish people. God's "gifts and calling" to them are "irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). He still has purposes for them in his providential plan of history. Those who seek to destroy the Jews are defying the God who formed them as a people. U.S. Christians, by contrast, should be among those who aim to be a blessing to the Jews—and to all peoples.

9. The state of Israel has a right to exist as a homeland for the Jewish people. This claim would be valid even if there were not a special covenant between God and the Jews. Every people has a right to self-determination and security. Palestinians, too, have a right to live under a government of their own choosing. The same is true of other peoples throughout the Middle East. U.S. Christians should show an equal concern for all those across the region who are being denied their rights.

10. Insofar as modern Israel may be a fulfillment of biblical promises, it is also subject to biblical commands. It is not permissible to try to attain God's promises by unrighteous means. On the contrary, the Jews' possession of the land was always conditioned upon their obedience to God's righteous will. Israel is called, like every nation, to act justly: to treat its own citizens fairly and equally, to deal compassionately with foreigners, to seek peace with its neighbors. Israel's actions should be judged under the same standard as any other nation's actions.

11. Christians pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20) We look for the signs of his promised return. Yet we remember that he told us, "[A]bout that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). We do not know where we stand on the timeline of the last days. For this reason, it would be unwise to base either the church's position or U.S. policy upon any conjectures about the end times. Our calling as Christians is both simpler and more difficult: to be the faithful servant ready to give an account to his Master at any time. We must exhibit the justice, love, and mercy of Christ, trusting God to bring about the results that he intends.

12. The United States, as a leading nation in the world, has vital interests in the Middle East. The global economy is dependent upon oil and gas produced in the region. With Mideast countries possessing, or seeking to possess, nuclear weapons, a Mideast war could turn into a conflagration spreading out of control. A number of the terrorist groups that most threaten America and its allies have their origins in the Middle East. Disengagement from the region is not a viable option. We need instead to cultivate contacts of all sorts: freer trade, freer movement of people, freer exchanges of information and ideas. If the United States could

contribute in some way to making the Mideast more peaceful and prosperous, the region would be less likely to host rogue regimes and terrorist organizations that endanger our security. And its nations would make more reliable and attractive trading partners for our country and others. U.S. Christians should understand these vital national interests and appeal prudently to them as they interact with U.S. policymakers.

Unresolved Questions

There are other questions on which consensus is lacking in the Christian community. Good-faith interpretations of the Bible and the tradition may differ. Christians also reach different practical assessments of the situation in the Middle East and how it might best be addressed.

1. What are the prospects for Christian evangelism in the Middle East? To this point, it has been the region of the world most resistant to the mission movement that burst forth in the nineteenth century. Relatively few Muslims come to Christian faith. Middle Eastern societies and governments are intolerant of open evangelism and conversion to Christianity. Is this a fairly permanent cultural stone wall that will not be breached in our lifetimes? Should Christians give up on butting their heads against that stone wall? Should we go elsewhere to evangelize, and confine our Mideast mission work to easier and more fruitful ministries? Should we, with most of the region's historic churches, accept that the best we can hope is that Middle Eastern Christians enjoy a ghettoized minority status? Or do we hope for some kind of breakthrough? Is it possible that as nationalist and Islamist movements fail to deliver the promised salvation, Middle Eastern people might begin to consider Christ in a new way?

2. How should Middle Eastern Christians respond to religious restriction and persecution? Should they follow historical precedent, becoming defensive, turning in on themselves, and accommodating themselves to a second-class *dhimmi* position? Should they engage in covert Christian witness? Or should they challenge the restrictions openly?

3. How should U.S. Christians respond to Christian emigration out of the Middle East? Should we make efforts to persuade Middle Eastern Christians to remain in their native countries? Or should we facilitate their resettlement in the West?

4. What are the prospects for liberal democracy in the Middle East? The region has little experience of democratic government or civil liberties. Its current governments are at a great distance from those ideals. Is the Middle East ready for democracy? Does it have the cultural resources to build and maintain a democratic

way of life? Is there hope that Middle Eastern revolutionaries can attain the freedom for which they have risked their lives? Or will they and we have to settle for something far less—milder forms of dictatorship at best?

5. What is the likelihood that the region's more extreme, oppressive governments will soften their rule? Will dictators, monarchs, and Islamist regimes share power? Will they allow their people greater liberties? Will they yield only to force?

6. What is the relationship between Islam and liberal democracy? Are the two compatible or incompatible? Is there some interpretation of *shar'ia* that will point Muslims toward democracy? Can Islam maintain itself in a free society where there is no coercion or pressure in matters of religion?

7. To what extent will economic development in the Middle East lead to greater civil and political liberties? As the region becomes more integrated into the global economy, can we expect it to experience the same liberalizing tendencies that have affected other parts of the world? It is generally true that a more open economy, with a growing middle class, will produce a more open society and a more participatory political system. But counter-examples such as the People's Republic of China suggest that the process is not automatic. Many autocratic Middle Eastern regimes such as the Saudi monarchy have used new wealth and global connections to consolidate their power.

8. Should regime change be a stated objective of U.S. Christians or the U.S. government? In many cases, a change in the political system may be the only realistic path to greater freedom. Naming regime change as an objective could help to embolden dissident Middle Easterners who might set out to achieve it. But there is a risk that an unsuccessful challenge to the regime would simply cut off conversations with it that might have yielded some moderating moves. A total estrangement might also snuff out the private international contacts—businessmen, students, information, goods and services moving back and forth—that might do more to undermine the repressive system in the long run.

9. On the other hand, to what extent can U.S. Christians justify cooperating with Middle Eastern authorities that they know to be oppressive to their peoples? Does not such cooperation make them complicit in the oppression? If Middle Eastern peoples eventually succeed in throwing off their dictators and monarchs, will they not hold Americans accountable for backing those unjust rulers? Yet sometimes there is no credible democratic alternative to a dictator or monarch. In such straits today's more moderate authoritarian might be

preferable to a more extreme challenger bidding to replace him.

10. To what extent is Israel a nation unlike all others? What is the relationship between modern Israel and the ancient biblical kingdom of Israel? Do today's Jews inherit the Old Testament promise of the land?

11. What should be the borders of Israel? Should they extend from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates River, as God once promised (Genesis 15:18) but ancient Israel never achieved? Should they match the maximum extension of the ancient kingdom under David and Solomon? Are the pre-1967 borders of Israel sacrosanct? Or are the final borders of contemporary Israel open to any negotiation that satisfies the parties involved? Should we simply try to draw the lines in a way that situates the greatest number of people in states of their own choosing that will be economically viable, militarily defensible, and at peace internally and externally?

12. Are we seeking a "two-state solution" in Israel/Palestine, with one state for the Jews and one for the Arab Palestinians? Or are we aiming for a "one-state solution" in which both peoples would attempt to live together under a single government?

13. What should be the disposition of Jerusalem under an Arab-Israeli peace agreement? Should Israel rule the entire city? Should it fall wholly under a Palestinian or other Arab state? Should Jerusalem somehow be shared? Should it be ruled by the United Nations or some other international authority?

14. What is the best posture for the United States to adopt regarding Israel and its Arab neighbors? Should our nation act as a neutral party to mediate negotiations? But given the rest of the world's severe pro-Palestinian tilt, would U.S. neutrality produce a truly balanced situation conducive to peace? Or would it leave Israel friendless and isolated? Might it be better for America to take Israel's side as a fellow democracy threatened by Islamist terrorists?

15. If the United States is not the best mediator for the Arab-Israeli conflict, what would be a more appropriate candidate for that role? The United Nations? Given the UN's long history of anti-Israel pronouncements, can it be a truly "honest broker"? Is there some other international body or group of governments that might best play the part?

We U.S. Christians are among those who watch to see how these questions might be answered. We recognize that the outcome is beyond our control. It will be up to Middle Eastern actors to decide which way they will go.

Only Muslims can decide what Islam means and how it relates to democracy. Only those who hold power can decide whether they will share it, or whether it must be wrested away from them. Only the peoples of the region can decide which governments they will support. Only they can decide to make peace among themselves.

Ultimately, the future of the Middle East lies in God's hands. God has revealed himself in this region in unique ways: in his promises to Abraham, in making a people out of the slaves escaped from Egypt, in the incarnation and death and resurrection of Christ, in forming a new people out of Christ's scattered disciples. God has preserved his Church through 2,000 years of upheavals, violence, and persecution in these lands. We believe that God will continue to have a witness, and that it will bear good fruit in God's timing.

We do not know God's timing for the Middle East or our own nation. But we do know what God has given us to say and do for as much time as we have. God has given us the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a gospel of justice—of wrongs made right in Christ's fulfillment of the law, even to the point of death. It is a gospel of freedom—of deliverance from all the sins and evils that have cursed humankind down the ages. It is a gospel of peace—a “peace that passes understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

Christ is our peace, and he commissions his followers to be peacemakers in this world. We can give people a taste of God's peace and freedom and justice. He offers these blessings to all humans, including the long-suffering peoples of the Middle East. We, Christ's disciples, are bearers of that offer. And we have God's promise given to the Hebrew prophet Isaiah in that land where precipitation is so uncertain:

For as the rain and the snow come down
from heaven,
and do not return there until they
have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
(Isaiah 55:10-11)

¹ Cited in David Brog, *Standing with Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine, 2006), 70, 137-138.

² Pat Robertson, “Why Evangelical Christians Support Israel,” speech to the Herzliya Conference on Security, Herzliya, Israel, December 17, 2003, cited in Brog, 69.

³ United Nations, “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

The Political Dilemmas of Arab Christianity

The Middle East's Christian minorities have a painful political history. Not only have they suffered persecution and restrictions at the hands of Muslim majorities, but they have also sometimes made poor choices themselves.

One can find Arab Christian leaders who have championed democratic freedoms. For example, the Lebanese statesman Charles Malik (1906-1987) was a major force behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He also strove valiantly to keep interreligious peace in his own troubled nation.

Yet many other Middle Eastern Christians aligned themselves with non-democratic Arab nationalist movements. These movements brought neither peace nor freedom nor prosperity to their countries. And in the end they failed to protect the Christian minorities that had placed so much hope in them.

Scholar Kenneth Cragg remarks, “We find Christians in fact in the vanguard of Arab ideology” in the early twentieth century.¹ The attraction was understandable. The main ideological alternatives to nationalism were Islamic movements. If the new states emerging after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire chose *shari'a* as their basis of social order and cohesion, then Christians had a dim future. At best they would remain in second-class *dhimmi* status, tolerated but marginalized from all power. At worst they would be treated as a foreign presence to be expelled from the body politic. Arab Christians have learned from long historical experience, going back to the Crusades, that they cannot rely on western Christian allies to protect them against the Muslim majority.

Therefore, those Christians naturally searched for the best accommodation that they could make with the majority. By comparison to Islamic systems, the

nationalist alternative looked more promising. If the new states based their identities on Arab culture and language, then there could be a place for Christians who shared that culture and language. They, like their Muslim neighbors, had experienced the indignities of Ottoman rule and then western colonialism. Now the Christians hoped that they could be full citizens contributing equally to rebuilding the glory and honor of the Arab people. Christian institutions like the American University of Beirut, founded by Protestant missionaries in 1866, became seedbeds of Arab nationalism. Cragg describes that university as “the intellectual nursery through more than a century of much of the political and professional leadership of the Arab world from Aleppo [Syria] to Khartoum [Sudan].”²

Christians at the Fore of Nationalist Movements

The Greek Orthodox Michel ‘Aflaq was the co-founder of the Ba’ath Party that dominated Syria and Iraq for many decades. The Ba’ath constitution declared, “The national tie is the only tie that may exist in the Arab state.” ‘Aflaq advised fellow believers to subordinate their Christian faith to their identity as Arabs. Then they would be able to accept Islam—not as an authority structure but as an element of cultural heritage. “Christian Arabs will become aware, when nationalism fully awakes in them, that Islam is a national culture which they must assimilate until they love it,” ‘Aflaq wrote. The Ba’ath held forth the prospect of Christians and Muslims working together for “Unity, Liberty, Socialism.”

Christians remained attached to the Ba’ath even as it devolved into brutal military dictatorships in Syria and Iraq. The Chaldean Catholic Tariq Aziz was the international voice of the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein during the 1980s and 1990s. Even as the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad was embroiled in a civil war in 2011-2012, Syrian Christians remained largely loyal. They feared that if Assad’s Alawite minority government fell, they would become victims of Sunni Islamist mobs shouting, “Christians to Beirut [Lebanon], Alawites to the coffin!”³ They were conscious of the unfortunate example of neighboring Iraq, where the Christian population shrank by half as Shi’ite militants came to the fore in the years after Saddam’s ouster.

Similarly, Egyptian Christians tended to cooperate with the nationalist dictatorships of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar El Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak. The Coptic Boutros Boutros Ghali rose through positions under Sadat and Mubarak to become Secretary General of the United Nations from 1992 to 1996. After Mubarak fell

in 2011, the Christians experienced increased insecurity as Islamist groups prevailed in elections and on the street.

Arab Christians have played significant roles in movements to establish a Palestinian state on all or part of the territory now occupied by Israel. Overwhelmingly, they have identified with the more secular nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—which now controls the West Bank—as opposed to the Islamist Hamas movement, which rules Gaza. One of the most violent of the PLO’s components, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was the brainchild of the Greek Orthodox George Habash.

The Anglican Hanan Ashrawi has been a prominent spokesperson for PLO peace negotiating teams and a member of the Palestinian legislature. As a Christian with extensive education and contacts in the West, Ashrawi is especially effective at communicating with western audiences. She presents a more attractive face of Palestinian nationalism than that of her late boss, the wily PLO leader Yasser Arafat.

Palestinian church leaders have also come forward as advocates for their people’s cause. Figures such as the Melkite Catholic Archbishop Elias Chacour, the Anglican canon Naim Ateek, and the Lutheran pastor Mitri Raheb are regulars at western church meetings and on the international lecture circuit, moving audiences with vivid stories of Israeli oppression. U.S. oldline churches adopting a pro-Palestinian stance often cite such figures as their inspiration.

A Radical Manifesto

There are some Palestinian Christians who are less vocal politically and who have a respectful relationship with the Israeli government. But the most recognized voices are those of a PLO-aligned Palestinian nationalism. A widely circulated expression of that view is the 2009 manifesto entitled “Kairos Palestine,” signed by a number of leading Palestinian churchmen.⁴

“The injustice against the Palestinian people which is the Israeli occupation is an evil that must be resisted,” the manifesto declares. It rages against how “Israeli settlements ravage our land in the name of God” and the Israeli separation barrier “has turned our towns and villages into prisons.” Israel is charged with “contempt” and “disregard of international law and international resolutions.” The manifesto offers no criticisms of the Palestinian Authority or any other Arab state or movement.

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“Kairos Palestine” rejects Israel as a Jewish state, as it also opposes Hamas’s project of an Islamic state. “Trying to make the state a religious state, Jewish or Islamic, suffocates the state, confines it within narrow limits, and transforms it into a state that practices discrimination, preferring one citizen over another,” it warns. The author seems to prefer a single state encompassing both Jews and Arabs.

The means of anti-Israel “resistance” favored by “Kairos Palestine” are nonviolent. It calls for an international “system of economic sanctions and boycott to be applied against Israel.” But the manifesto also seems to justify violent “resistance” by blaming it on Israel: “Yes, there is Palestinian resistance to the occupation. However, if there were no occupation, there would be no resistance, no fear and no insecurity.”

“Kairos Palestine” encloses the word “terrorism” in sneer quotes, as if to doubt the existence of the phenomenon. “The roots of ‘terrorism’ are in the human injustice committed and in the evil of the [Israeli] occupation,” it claims. “These must be removed if there be a sincere intention to remove ‘terrorism.’” Regarding violent Islamist movements like Hamas and Hezbollah, the manifesto maintains that “Muslims are neither to be stereotyped as the enemy nor caricatured as terrorists but rather to be lived with in peace and engaged with in dialogue.”

Yet this approach—blaming Israel alone, escalating nonviolent and violent confrontation with the Jewish state, giving uncritical support to a non-democratic nationalist movement (the PLO) that has repeatedly backed out of possible peace accords, minimizing the Islamist threat—has not brought good results for Palestinian Christians.

A Separate Moral Accountability

U.S. Christians have a duty to listen to the voices of Arab Christians. They are brothers and sisters in Christ who have kept the faith through many trials. Middle Eastern Christians are under much pressure today, and

their existence as a community is endangered in many places. They have legitimate grievances, which they share with many of their Muslim Arab neighbors.

American Christians should be slow to condemn their Arab brethren for the political choices the latter have made. We should understand why, in difficult situations, non-democratic nationalist movements often seemed the best available option. But our retrospective understanding does not change our current awareness that nationalist dictators failed to deliver what they promised their peoples. There must be a better option.

In seeking that better option, U.S. Christians are not obligated to replicate the political choices made by their Arab brethren. We have our own separate moral accountability. We need to examine the larger Middle East picture, consider the various policy options, and pursue that which seems wisest. One important measure of a policy’s success will be the degree to which it protects and benefits the Christians and other minorities in the region.

¹Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 143.

²Ibid, 220.

³Stephen Starr and S. Akminas, “Christians in Syria live in uneasy alliance with Assad, Alawites,” *USA Today*, May 9, 2012, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-05-09/syria-christians-crisis/54888144/1?fb_ref=.T6yEjW67h-F.like&fb_source=other_multiline.

⁴“Kairos Palestine 2009: A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering,” <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/English.pdf>.

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