The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Context of the Arab World of the Middle East

A contribution to opinion formation in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands

General synod/April 2008

Contents

1. Preface

Developments in recent years have once again resulted in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands being faced with the question of what should be the church's stance with regard to the conflict in the Middle East. In September 2003, the joint board of the Uniting Churches (*Samen op Weg-kerken*, also *SoW-kerken*)[1] approved the policy memorandum 'The Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict. A contribution to opinion formation in the Uniting Churches' (*Het Israëlisch-Palestijns-Arabisch conflict. Bijdrage tot de meningsvorming in de SoW-kerken*). The title expresses the firm belief that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be extricated from the context of the Arab world of the Middle East. Peace between Israel and the Arab neighbouring countries is, after all, integral to any solution. In addition, tensions and conflicts in the non-Arab part of the region (Iran) have a direct impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Behind them lie the geopolitical interests of all the key players in world politics.
The memorandum was appended to the information memorandum to the joint synod and, among other, published on the website of Kerk in Actie. Its purpose was, on the one hand, as its subtitle indicated, to explain the position of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and so serve opinion-formation within the church(es). It was also about providing a resource for a well-considered stance of our church with regard to the conflict, and creating a policy framework within which the church can quickly and adequately react to the latest current developments, as the need arises.

The concern of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands about the intensification of the conflict since 2000 resulted, in November 2004 in the visit of a delegation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands to the Middle East. The delegation included some church board members and representatives of the church's services organisation. The experiences during this visit were recorded in a travel report. This resulted in the churchwide services organisation being given the task of producing a memorandum 'The Israeli-Palestinian conflict' *(Het Israëlisch-Palestijns conflict)*. that was more wide-ranging and based on stronger theological foundations, and which replaced the memorandum of 2003. In November 2007, the general synod discussed a first version of the new memorandum. The in-depth discussions in synod resulted in the text being amended. In addition, use was gratefully made of insights that were gained in conversations with a large number of persons, groupings and organisations that are closely involved with the subject matter.[2]

As of 1 May 2004, the Uniting Churches had united to form the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. This also entailed the confluence of three separate developments with regard to the issues that are relevant here. In the second half of the 20th century, the churches were at first, above all, each individually preoccupied with the problematical issues of the situation in the Middle East. This period of reflection took place against the background of the necessary consideration of the consequences for church and theology of the Shoah, and of the significance of the return to the Promised Land and of the foundation of the state of Israel. Increasingly, the lines of thinking in the three churches began to converge, and, from the middle of the 1980s, this was replaced with cooperation: the three churches increasingly presented themselves as the Uniting Churches, among other also with regard to issues that are relevant here.

The situation in the Middle East has dramatically changed since 2003. The question arises as to whether the chances of peace have thereby increased or decreased. But whatever the case may be, the current situation begs renewed reflection. However, it is not only the political developments that are forcing the issue. Rather, developments within the church make renewed reflection necessary and, with it, a new stimulus for broad-based opinion formation within the church. The church's services organisation seems to need a more considered coordination of activities related to the conflict. A younger generation of parishioners and theologians is less convinced by the theological and policy thinking about Church and Israel that came to the fore in the latter half of the previous century.

This memorandum, too, seeks primarily to promote opinion formation within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands about questions that are of intense concern to many, albeit in very different ways.

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[1] In 2004, the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC), the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (ELC) merged to form the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). During the process of merging that preceded the birth of the Protestant Church, they were collectively referred to as the 'Uniting Churches'.

[2] An overview of the conversations held in this regard are to be found in Appendix 1.

In essence, this concerns two sets of issues that need to be seen as interrelated.
On the one hand, there is an ecclesiastical and confessional aspect. The relationship of the church with the Jewish people is premised on the calling of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands 'to give form to its unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people [literally: "the people of Israel"]' (article I-7 of the church constitution).
On the other hand, there is the fact of our continually being confronted with reports and images from the Middle East that demand clear choices in favour of people who find themselves trapped.

Concerning the former, the first signs of a theological reconsideration of the significance of the Jewish people in the history of God and the world were already visible before the Second World War, in connection with the national socialism that was then on the rise. But, above all, the horrors of the Shoah, on the one hand, and the foundation of the state of Israel, on the other, caused the church to reflect on that solidarity. The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments were read afresh and in a different light as the testimony of God's abiding loyalty to his people. This led to a new form of confessional speaking about the church's relationship with Israel.
Recent political developments – and that is the second aspect – nevertheless continue to raise the question as to how this unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people, and the perception of the actual policy of the Israeli government, relate to one another. It therefore seems necessary to be more precise than in the previous policy memorandum as to what is and what is not meant by 'unrelinquishable solidarity'. The relationship with the Palestinian people was primarily, and in fact exclusively, premised on the diaconal task of the church, the ministry of mercy and justice. Here too, there are questions to be asked, based on a new consideration of the significance of the ecumenical relationship with the Christian Palestinians and, more broadly, with the churches in the Middle East.

This memorandum is not only intended to serve as a resource for opinion formation within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. It also aims to help create a policy framework for the church's participation in the public debate and for the work of the church's services organisation.

The contents of this memorandum are as follows:
1. In chapter 2, an attempt to describe, analyse and characterise the main features of the present situation in the Middle East, with particular attention to the political-historical developments, including the character of Israel as a Jewish state; furthermore, to the frameworks of international law and the role of religion in the conflict, focussing on Christians and churches, on the one hand, and Islam in the Middle East, on the other.
2. In chapter 3, an overview of some of the main features in the manner in which, during the past 60 years, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and its predecessors have spoken out about the situation in the Middle East in relation to the debate within the churches themselves. In particular, attention is given to the historical background of the expression 'unrelinquishable solidarity'.
3. In chapter 4, some theological issues are outlined. These start with an example of the way in which we can read the Scriptures mindful of the problematical issues. There then follows a theological reflection on the significance of international law, the relationship of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands to the Jewish people, its relationship to the churches in the Middle East, and its relationship to Islam. The chapter concludes with a general framework, a theology of diaconal ministry, for our engagement with victims of violence and oppression.
4. In chapter 5, the most important conclusions and dilemmas are again presented in summary form, followed by the formulation of policy parameters and substantive policy proposals.

Use of words
In this memorandum, frequent use is made of the words 'Israel', 'Jewish', 'Judaism', due to the nature of the subject matter involved. Where the context makes their meaning completely clear, no further explanation is necessary. Therefore, in the historical and political-juridical sections 2.1 and 2.2 of this memorandum, 'Israel' (and Israeli) consistently refers to 'the state of Israel'. And 'Jewish' in section 2.3 – about the role of religions – refers throughout to the religious aspects of the Jewish identity.
Matters are more complicated when '(the people of) Israel' are referred to in a theological and ecclesiastical legal context. The complexity of this concept is examined in more detail in section 4.3. Wherever this reality is referred to elsewhere in this memorandum, reference is generally made to 'the people of Israel' (as distinct from 'the population of Israel'). And wherever the intention is to refer to the state, this is explicitly referred to as 'the state of Israel'.
The term 'Israel' always refers to the reality referred to in more detail in section 4.3.

Depending on the context, ‘Jewish’ can be both a religious and an ethnic reference. Where necessary, to ensure a clear understanding, specific reference is made within the text as to whether one of these aspects is dominant in the use of the word.

2. Outline of the situation in the Middle East

2.1.The politico-historical development

The present-day situation in the Middle East has complex historical roots. It is not possible to give an extensive portrayal of this here, given the scope of this memorandum. However, a few of the main features should be mapped out. In this connection, two preliminary remarks need to be made.
First of all: objectively written accounts of history do not exist. Whoever tries to describe the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and discuss this with others, who are strongly engaged, discovers again and again that 'facts' do not exist independently of experience and interpretation. Already in the choice of vocabulary – such as 'occupied territories' or 'disputed territories' – this is a factor. Historiography always tries not only to describe, but also to explain. The step to 'explaining away' is but a small one.
And another thing: history is experienced history. People have had far-reaching experiences for more than a century. They understand what has happened from the perspective of the present age. The other side of the coin is that history is used to legitimise present-day interests.
It is for these two reasons that the decision was taken to give a very limited overview of the recent history, and then to follow this by listening to how people caught up in the conflict experience the present situation. In this way, we hope to take a small step towards a common perspective.

Under the repressive rule of Tsar Alexander III (1881-1894), hundreds of pogroms took place in Russia. This gave rise to the Jewish autonomy movement. In 1882, a manifesto was published in which the wish was expressed to found a 'home in our country' and so end the exile. As of 1891, the name Zionism came to be used. This came to public attention in 1897, when the first Zionist World Congress took place in Basel. In the period until 1914, three million Jews left eastern Europe. Of them, some 30,000 left for Palestine, which was then still a province of the Turkish Ottoman empire.

In Zionism, the Jewish people were initially regarded primarily as a political entity rather than a religious community. The Jewish people had to become a people among other peoples, with a state in the midst of other states.
In the political sense, the realisation of these endeavours came a step closer with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which virtually coincided with the collapse of the Ottoman empire at the end of the First World War. With this, the British government gave support to Zionist endeavours. In 1922, at the request of the League of Nations, Great Britain took on the mandate over Palestine. Gradually, increasing numbers of Arab inhabitants settled in the area to the west of the Jordan river. There was frequent talk of violence being used between Jewish and Arab inhabitants of this area.

After the Second World War – and the Shoah – the great powers supported the partition plan of the United Nations in 1947, or at least they did not put up any resistance to it. They thus approved the foundation of a Jewish as well as a Palestinian-Arab state in the mandate territory of Palestine to the west of the Jordan. The proposed borders were controversial even then. The Palestinians and the surrounding Arab states refused to give their agreement. On 14 May 1948, Israel declared independence; in the Declaration of Independence, the name was determined as being 'Israel' and this state was designated 'Jewish state'. The neighbouring Arab countries attacked and the War of Independence took place, and was to last until mid-1949. The attacks on Jewish kibbutzim claimed many victims. For the Arabs, this period came to be known as *al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe). The war caused an outflow of, in total, about 750,000 Arab refugees.[3] They were given shelter in camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan (especially on the west bank of the Jordan river) and in the Gaza strip (as of then under Egyptian administration). A comparable outflow of refugees was set in motion from the

[3] Figures dating from 2004 from the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) give the following estimate of the number of those affected. At first, this was put at 750,000 Palestinian refugees (according to Israeli sources, between 500,000 and 650,000; according to Palestinian sources, between 850,000 and 900,000), of which the majority came to be in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. As per the end of 2006, UNRWA speaks of almost 4.5 million Palestinian refugees, of which over 1.3 million are still in refugee camps, most of them in Jordan and the Gaza Strip.

surrounding Arab countries: Jews who saw themselves compelled to leave everything behind and flee for their lives to Israel or to the West.[4]

Peace was not made. Israel did reach a series of ceasefire agreements in 1949 with, successively, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. These resulted in the borders of the de facto state of Israel, which varied from those of the partition plan and were recognised by the international community, but not by the neighbouring countries. West Jerusalem became the capital of the young state. East Jerusalem, including the Old City with the various Jewish, Christian and Islamic holy sites, was occupied by Jordan. In the UN Partition Plan of 1947, Jerusalem was foreseen as *corpus separatum* under international administration. Its citizens were to decide five years later under which authority the city should come. These plans were overtaken by the tragic reality of the war. The many Arab families which lived in the part occupied by Israel, had to leave. The same applied to the Jewish citizens of the Old City.
The Suez crisis developed into the war of 1956. This did not result in any far-reaching changes in the situation. In the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula (which was later returned to Egypt), the Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, the West Bank of the Jordan river and East Jerusalem. The administration of the holy sites was left unchanged. Israel began with the construction of settlements in the occupied territories.
The Yom Kippur War (1973) hardly changed the situation. In 1977, the president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, came to Jerusalem. This was followed, in 1978, by a summit meeting at Camp David, the mountain retreat of the president of the US, between presidents Jimmy Carter, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin. They agreed that Israel and its neighbours would agree on a peace treaty on the basis of UN resolution 242 (which dealt with the return of the territories occupied by Israel in 1967). Israel and Egypt agreed to peace.
In the years that followed, however, no further significant steps were taken along this path.
In 1987, the frustrations of the Palestinians in the occupied territories were vented in the first Intifada.
The Oslo accords of 1993 seemed to form a turning-point, and the path to peace seemed to lie open. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was recognised by Israel as the legal representative of the Palestinian people. The PLO recognised the state of Israel and a period of Palestinian self-rule began. The West Bank and the Gaza Strip were to be returned in stages to a yet-to-be-formed Palestinian Authority, which in many respects started to work on developing a future democratic Palestinian state.
In 1994, a peace treaty was signed between Israel and a second neighbouring Arab country, Jordan.
In Israel, there was a growing gulf between opponents and proponents of 'Oslo'. In 1995, the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was shot dead during a peace rally.
In 2000, negotiations between Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and US president Bill Clinton ('Camp David II') proved unsuccessful. The most important sticking-points were still the partition (or not) of Jerusalem and the issue of the Palestinian refugees. After a visit by opposition leader Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount, intended to underline Israel's sovereignty, the second Intifada broke out in October 2000, accompanied by much violence in the form of Palestinian suicide attacks in Israel. Hamas began to make itself better-known in the occupied territories. The repression of the Palestinian population served as collective punishment by the Israeli army.
In March 2002, the Arab League came up with a peace plan, in which Israel was offered normalisation of relations in exchange for Israel's withdrawal to the borders of 4 June 1967, while the Palestinian refugees of 1948-49 and their descendants were to be given the opportunity to return to their former homes. Israel rejected the last condition, because that would have undermined the Jewish character of Israel. Instead, Israel offered to pay the refugees compensation.
In 2002, when the government was headed by Sharon, a suicide attack during the Jewish Passover led to the reoccupation by Israel of the autonomous Palestinian territories.
The infrastructure, in particular the road network connecting the various Palestinian settlements, was completely destroyed.

From 2002, the will to achieve territorial concessions and new peace talks declined on both sides to an absolute minimum. The Israeli and the Palestinian populations were completely demoralised by events. The peace camp found itself in an impasse. Even Jews and Palestinians who until then had devoted themselves to bringing about rapprochement between the two population groups, had hardly any contact with each other in that period. Israel began with the construction of a partition wall

[4] The UNRWA confirms that around 1948 perhaps some 800,000 Jews left Arab countries, among other because of increasing hostility and violence from the Arab side.

between the Palestinian territories and Israel. This had to ensure that potential suicide attackers could no longer infiltrate Israel. This heavily guarded barrier – which, in part, consists of a fence with barbed wire and, for a shorter part, of a high wall – arouses much disgust among Palestinians and Jews, but also abroad, primarily because, for the most part, it is built on Palestinian territory and not within the borders of 1949. In June 2003, Hamas offered a ceasefire. Israel viewed Hamas exclusively as a terrorist organisation and not as the representative of a part of the Palestinian population, and rejected the offer out of hand. For a short while, there was relative calm.
In 2004, the protests against the partition wall resulted in an 'advisory opinion' being handed down by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which stated that this partition wall is illegal insofar as it is built on Palestinian territory and accordingly had to be dismantled. Israel ignored this 'advisory opinion', because it took the view that the security interests of Israel were not taken sufficiently into account.

The death of PLO leader Arafat unleashed a political battle for his succession, and the prospect of a political solution became even more remote. Consequently, the Israeli prime minister Sharon openly favoured a one-sided solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because, in his view, there was no partner for peace. To that end, in 2005, Israel evacuated the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip. From then on, only Palestinians, above all refugees, lived there.
In January 2006, Hamas won the freely-held elections in the Palestinian territories. This party refused to recognise the state of Israel and therefore the international community refused to give financial support and recognition to this government. The nascent Palestinian state found itself isolated from the West, but was compensated in part by support from (radical or otherwise) Islamic countries such as Iran, Syria, Saudi-Arabia and the rich Gulf states.
After the kidnapping of some Israeli soldiers in the Gaza Strip and, shortly afterwards, at the border with Lebanon, an armed conflict again broke out in the summer of 2006 in southern Lebanon between Hezbollah (a militia supported by Syria) and the Israeli armed forces. A great deal of infrastructure was destroyed, including many houses. What was striking was that the militias of Hezbollah were well armed and were able to hold out for a surprisingly long time against the Israeli counter-attacks, in the end making an assault with ground troops necessary. The Israeli army seemed completely unprepared for this task and, by the time the war ended, both the army command and the government led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had lost a great deal of their authority.
From the beginning of 2007, Saudi Arabia exerted pressure on Hamas to form a government of national unity together with Fatah. This did happen at first, but then fighting broke out between supporters of both parties in the Gaza Strip. Hamas gained the upper hand. Hamas, led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, ruled the Gaza Strip, while Fatah, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, ruled the West Bank.
In November 2007, a peace conference was held in Annapolis. The Arab League repeated its proposal of March 2002. Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas committed themselves to further negotiations about a peace accord before the end of 2008. At the beginning of 2008, the American president Bush visited the region. He said that he would devote himself to achieving a definitive peace settlement, and considered this still to be feasible before the end of the year.

What does the current situation mean for the people there?
The population of Israel somehow has to manage to live with the ongoing threat of suicide attacks. In geographical terms, Israel consists of merely a small area of land and, demographically, it is surrounded by superior numbers of Arab peoples. The peace agreed with Egypt and Jordan has not reduced awareness of the hostility of the Arab world. Radical-Islamic forces take shape in the form of Hamas in the South and Hezbollah in the North. Rocket attacks are a continual dangerous reality in the areas bordering the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, which can, of course, also cause psychological problems.
Young soldiers are regularly confronted with Palestinian protests and resistance, without it being clear as to who should be viewed as innocent citizen and who as militant. In that situation, everyone is suspect, and every suspicion of provocation is severely punished.
The threat is also real for the population of Israel in the appearances of the new, radical president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who tries to unite the Islamic countries by discrediting Israel in the most populist manner possible, inciting hatred against Jews and denying the Shoah. The stories about increasing knowledge of nuclear physics, and the ongoing rumours that nuclear weapons are being made, feed the state of fear. Forms of anti-Jewish hatred also lie dormant in the Middle East.

Furthermore, there is still considerable disunity among Jewish Israelis as to which political course to follow, as is expressed in the varying but always narrow victories in the democratic elections. Various corruption scandals have had a negative effect on voters' trust in politics.

The Arab citizens of Israel form a minority in the Jewish state, have fewer political rights and are trapped between the interests of the state of Israel and those of the Arab peoples surrounding them. They experience legal and practical discrimination[5] when it comes to security (police and justice) or opportunities for health care, education, a job or a house. Many Israelis view them as potential traitors and treat them accordingly.

The Palestinians and their allies experience Israel as a regional military superpower, mainly thanks to the support of the United States. This causes the Palestinians to feel they are powerless 'victims of the victims'; Western shame about the Shoah helped to bring about the disastrous – from the point of view of the Palestinians – UN partition plan of 1947. The Palestinians were not to blame for the Shoah, but the partitioning of the land is forced upon them by the West, and the consequences of this can be felt daily. Where they do not accept this, their experience is that the West is quick to blame *them* for something that is a mark on the West's own history: anti-Semitism.
To this day, the *Nakba* marks the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who live in refugee camps, both in the occupied territories and elsewhere, especially in Jordan and Lebanon. The vast majority of them are born into this situation. The hope of a peace settlement that may result in their going back – or possibly internationally guaranteed financial compensation – collides against the hopelessness of their situation. Sixty years of, at times, bitter fighting and countless failed negotiations take their toll on morale.
The situation of the Palestinians in the occupied territories is deplorable, albeit at present with significant differences between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which are split apart by the political differences between Hamas and Fatah. Their lives are marked by fear – fear of actions by the Israeli military and of violent settlers. They have to try to survive in a world dominated by restrictive measures, checkpoints and the like.
In the meantime, the ordinary population of Gaza finds itself in an untenable situation and is held hostage by the stalemate. The Israeli army has withdrawn, the Jewish settlements have been evacuated. Israel controls the borders, as a result of which not a single economic activity can be developed and shortages have emerged in many sectors. This makes the population completely dependent on support from Europe. Because Europe does not want to talk directly with Hamas, this only happens in fits and starts. On the other hand, there is a Hamas administration that does not effectively intervene against the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel, partly to keep up the pressure on Israel. The sanctions and reprisals waged by Israel against Gaza and its population are thereby merely aggravated. In addition, the Hamas organisation is beginning to exercise far-reaching control over public life, which ensures that a certain stability is indeed achieved, but which, at the same time, leaves less scope for people to develop themselves or express their opinions.
The deployment of the vastly superior military and administrative might of the state of Israel against Palestinian citizens contributes to the continuation of an explosive situation, also in the West Bank. This dominates daily life. Palestinian territories are repeatedly cut off from the outside world. Identity papers are confiscated from many thousands of Palestinians. The houses of many Palestinians, suspected of activism, are razed to the ground on a simple military order. In occupied territories, construction continues in settlements that, according to international law, are illegal. Some settlements are even being expanded. Where it is not completely forbidden, the transportation of persons and goods is greatly impeded, by long waiting times at the many checkpoints and by the need to make long detours in order to reach one's destination. East Jerusalem, including the holy sites, is inaccessible for most Palestinians. It is made well-nigh impossible for Palestinian organisations in East Jerusalem to carry out their work. On the Palestinian side, there is a lack of authoritative leadership in the West Bank. One cannot speak of democratic decision-making while a good legal system is not in place. Corruption has still not been eradicated.
The situation of the Christian minority among the Palestinians is even more difficult, not least because their loyalty to the Palestinian cause is viewed by their Muslim compatriots as not necessarily being reliable. Suspicion of being too involved with the West is easily aroused.

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[5] Discrimination against Palestinian citizens is an issue in Israel and also an official concern for the Israeli government. The 2003 report of the Or Commission – a panel of inquiry appointed by the Israeli government to investigate the background to the anti-government riots in 2000 – confirms the picture of discrimination against and neglect of the Arab section of the population by the government and by society.

There are few, if any, signs of practical solidarity from the more prosperous Arab countries toward the economically very weak occupied territories.

How do we view the people there? We are increasingly concerned about the consequences that the more than 40-year occupation is having on the psychological constitution both of those who live under the occupation as well as those – often young Israeli soldiers – who have to enforce the occupation as part of everyday life. Among those who live under the occupation, it increases the sense of bitterness and leads to acts of exceptional violence – often carried out by youths – with the aim of hitting the occupier in any way possible. Among those who enforce the occupation, this results in brutalisation and easily also in feelings of contempt and superiority, and likewise in acts of exceptional violence.

Lastly, a consequence of the recent developments that concerns us very much is the fact that talk of fostering contacts between Jews and Palestinians is becoming ever rarer, both within the state of Israel and even more so in the occupied territories. Political measures, such as the partition wall and the far-reaching restrictions on the Palestinians' freedom of movement, consolidate the tendency no longer really to meet one another. Meeting on equal terms is a precondition for taking the next step forward. Besides the physical partition, the big differences in power and legal position make real meetings between Jews and Palestinians especially difficult.

2.2. Israel as Jewish state

The state of Israel was established from the outset as a Jewish state. Resolution 181 of the General Assembly of the UN (29 November 1947) refers consistently to the existence alongside each other of an independent Arab state, an independent Jewish state, and a special international regime for the city of Jerusalem. Jews account for some 80 percent of Israeli society.
Over time, legislation has been used to work out in more detail what it means that Israel is a Jewish state. Only citizens who are considered as belonging to the Jewish people have Jewish-Israeli nationality. By virtue of the Law of Return, Jews have the automatic right to immigrate to Israel, no matter from where and when. A person is Jewish when there is recognition of matrilineal descent.
Twenty percent of the population of Israel has an Arab background. They are citizens, but without the Jewish-Israeli nationality. They may have 'Arab' stated as nationality in their Israeli passports. Arabic is officially a second language in Israel, and Arab citizens can elect their own representatives in their parliament.
Besides citizens, there are, as in any country, residents. This category includes the Palestinians in East Jerusalem, annexed by Israel. Residents lose their residence permit if they remain abroad, in the West Bank or Gaza for longer than five years.
Besides playing a certain role in the allocation of land and housing, the concept of 'Jewish-Israeli nationality' is important with regard to access to basic facilities. The authorities spend much more in this area on Zionist semi-public institutions. Non-Jews are denied this and so fall between two stools.
Arab inhabitants of Israel – except for the Druze and Bedouins – are not subject to compulsory military service. They do have the option of enlisting voluntarily, but it is understandable that, given the current situation, they do not make use of this. However, it does have a big impact, because those who do choose to serve in the army enjoy all sorts of privileges, such as subsidised access to insurance cover. There is no alternative to military service that offers the same advantages. However, the policy is to help Arab citizens better integrate with the government apparatus and improve their opportunities in the job market.

2.3. The frameworks of international law

An important element in the discussion about the situation in the Middle East concerns international law.

In point of fact, two questions are at issue here:
- juridical/analytical: how does the present situation in the Middle East appear in the light of international law?
- evaluative: what value does this analysis have for determining the standpoint of a church?

The second question is addressed in chapter 4. Here, first the current situation is described as best possible.

As regards international law, further distinction can be made between two aspects, namely that of the relations between states (the 'state-related' aspect) and that of how states treat people (the 'human rights' aspect).

With regard to the state-related aspect, Israel came into being as a state on the declaration of the General Assembly of the United Nations. According to the standards of international law, this is a state like any other, the existence of which is not up for discussion. Israel was immediately accepted, in 1948, into membership of the United Nations and is therefore recognised internationally as a state. In that same year, 1948, and just as readily explicable against the background of the experiences in the Second World War, the General Assembly of the United Nations also approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This Declaration, in the development of which representatives of the churches played a large role, was the first major milestone in the development of an internationally recognised standard for the indivisible and inalienable rights that people could call on in relation to governments. This concerns, for example, protection against any form of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race or political conviction, and the maintenance of fundamental freedoms, such as the freedom of expression and assembly. Governments have the duty to guarantee these rights. But the Universal Declaration also mentions, among other, the right to security, development, work, health and education, which governments have to champion according to their capacities. This provided the point of reference par excellence for discussions about the moral aspects of politics.

The political situation can be clearly described in light of the state-related aspect. Egypt and Jordan have, in the meantime, also recognised the state of Israel in peace accords. Neighbouring countries Syria and Lebanon have not yet gone this far, nor have other countries – not named here – of the Arab League.
The actual borders of the land controlled by Israel differ from the borders of the state as they were at the ceasefire in 1949 and remained unchanged until the Six-Day War of 1967. Then Israel occupied Egypt's Sinai Peninsula (which was returned with the signing of the peace treaty) and the Egyptian-ruled Gaza Strip (where the Israeli settlements have meanwhile again been evacuated). In Jordan, it occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem and, in Syria, the Golan Heights. At a later stage, Israel annexed East Jerusalem and thereby separated it from the West Bank. As far as Israel is concerned, the definitive status of the Golan Heights should be settled in a peace treaty with Syria.

The Oslo Accords, which were signed in 1993 by the Palestine Liberation Front (PLO) and by Israel, determine the formal legal position of the occupied territories. One result of the accords was the founding of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994. According to 'Oslo', between 10 and 15 percent of the territory comes under direct control of the PA, 70 percent comes under Israeli control and the rest is under combined Israeli-Palestinian control. The Palestinian Authority is, therefore, a semi-autonomous state organisation, with a government that regulates the daily existence of the Palestinian population in parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The Jordan Valley, the settlements and the major roads are not accessible to the Palestinian population and the PA has no jurisdiction over these. Furthermore, a number of financial matters are administered by Israel. Israel also administers the borders and border-crossings, as well as traffic between the territories that are under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Israeli soldiers have unrestricted access to any area when they want to arrest people for security reasons or go on patrol there.
The PA is internationally recognised as the organisation that represents the Palestinian people and has observer status and the right to speak at the United Nations. In the context of a hopefully permanent treaty, the PA will form the basis for an independent Palestinian state. International law binds Israel to what was agreed in the Oslo Accords.

All the states that are involved in the tensions in the Middle East have committed themselves to the Charter of the UN, to the Geneva Conventions and to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, the Palestinian Authority is not yet a signatory to these international treaties. Based on the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority is, however, party to the negotiations and thereby bound by these accords.

Both the General Assembly and also the Security Council of the UN has pronounced on the developments in the Middle East in numerous resolutions. In this, both the state-related aspect and the human rights issue play a role. For this reason, the following is, among other, laid down:
- Palestinian refugees have the right to return, on the basis of the Geneva Conventions;

- Israel should withdraw from the occupied territories, that is to say the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. As regards the border between Israeli and Palestinian territory, the starting-point is the actual border as it came into existence as a result of the ceasefire of 1949;
- The Israeli settlements in the so-called occupied territories are illegal;
- Unilateral actions of Israel with regard to the status of Jerusalem are illegal and invalid;
- The PA should honour its promise that those responsible for terrorist activities should be brought before a judge;
- Abuses of human rights in the occupied territory are contrary to international law;
- The 'partition wall' is – at least where it is or will be built within the occupied territories – unjust and illegal, and should be demolished.

Article 25 of the Charter of the UN states: 'The Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter.' The Charter then distinguishes between different sorts of decisions, which have a different 'specific power'. Resolutions of the Security Council are therefore not always legally binding in the same way. The enforceability of these resolutions is extremely limited. In certain cases, the Security Council itself attaches sanctions to its decisions, but that requires agreement among the permanent members. The International Court of Justice is not in a position to enforce adherence when one of the parties complains. What is crystal-clear is that the UN resolutions must be recognised as having important political status and great moral authority, and that they[6] contain the keys to any peace agreement.

2.4. The conflict and the role of religion

Judaism, Christianity and Islam in many ways play a role in the conflict in the Middle East. Their mutual relations are characterised by the fact that they are three monotheistic revelation-based religions that share a common (early) history. Whoever 'has the oldest credentials' will, of course, not be interested in what is said on the basis of a later revelation. Whoever is from a later period in time, will be inclined to say that what is older is to be viewed as outdated – and in that sense practises 'replacement theology'. It is, therefore, not strange that the New Testament and the *Qur'an* are of no interest to most Jews. Equally, it is not strange that most Muslims view Judaism and Christianity as superseded by Islam. Christians are in-between: traditionally they have mostly viewed Judaism as outdated,[7] and they see Islam as irrelevant in religious terms. In this way, the common history of each of the three religions determines both the self-image as well as how they view the other, but self-image and the other's view differ greatly.

Later in this report we will discuss in more detail the relations of the Christian tradition with the Jewish tradition. We have, until now, devoted less attention to Islam. This religion sees itself as a renewal of the faith of the People of the Scripture (namely Judaism and Christianity); in the eyes of Muslims, the *Tawrat* (Torah) and the *Injil* (Gospel) are indeed God's revelation to Moses and Jesus, but the original version thereof that has reached us is flawed, as too the interpretation thereof by Jews and Christians is flawed. Muslims view God's revelation through the words put in the mouth of the Prophet Muhammad as final, complete and therefore definitive. They see themselves as standing in the long lineage of a religious tradition dating back to Adam – whereby the original faith was repeatedly lost and was recovered – beginning with God's creation of the world, via Abraham, Moses and Jesus, ultimately to Muhammad. Depending on the historical context, the Islamic 'replacement theology' leaves hardly any scope for reading Jewish and Christian sources, never mind a relevant exegesis thereof.

The overwhelming majority of Jews, Christians and Muslims – and certainly not only in the Middle East – can hardly imagine that an interreligious dialogue can be of significance for their interpretation of their own faith. Social and political motives for a dialogue are again being recognised by more people. In such cases, it is a matter of promoting mutual understanding, social cohesion, justice, peace and reconciliation. In all this, the actual circumstances determine the willingness to engage in dialogue. Historical developments in Europe have also been determinant for the way in which, after the Shoah, Christian theologians in the West have gradually learned to become more open to a real dialogue with

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[6] This especially concerns the Security Council resolutions 181 (1947), 303 (1949), 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1515 (2003).

[7] See section 4.3 below. It is true that the Old Testament has gained greater recognition, for example, in Protestantism, but this alone did not exclude any form of replacement theology.

living Judaism, and to the willingness on the Jewish side really to engage in that dialogue. Such a willingness is, however, more the exception than the rule, no matter how important that willingness may be in light of the conflict in the Middle East.

Religion helps human beings to give meaning, purpose and direction to their existence in that reality. From this, people derive rules and practices of behaviour that help them to move about in that reality. At the same time, it also concerns profound relations and deeply felt ties that arouse strong emotions. It concerns that which is Holy.
Such strong feelings due to practices, life-rules, places and rights fairly often result in 'claim' behaviour. Religious claims are sometimes translated into exclusive rights and then result in an exclusive attitude with regard to law and justice. These claims are well in keeping with certain social, political or financial self-interests. Those self-interests often operate in parallel with ethnic interests or the interests of certain classes or other social ranks. Whenever religious claims become interwoven with self-interest and a biased view of justice, then that creates a dangerous mix that can easily result in extremism. Politicians manipulate this mix and use it for political ends. Human history is full of this, not least in the 'Holy Land'.[8]

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the vision of justice and peace plays a role, the vision of a reality in which the poor are viewed positively and everyone can freely develop their talents. Jews speak of the *halakha*, the life on the 'path' of God's commandments so as to 'order the world under the kingship of the Almighty' (thus the Aleinu prayer that is recited daily). Christians speak of the discipleship of Christ and the search for the kingdom of God. Muslims speak of the *sharia*, the path, the way to the ultimate Source of justice, God. In the Christian tradition, these endeavours are somewhat spiritualised. After the Second World War, theology opened the eyes of Christians to this message of salvation and justice also relating to this reality. Just as with Jews and Muslims, Christians too are concerned with shaping the reality here and now, in a way that is good in the eyes of the Eternal. To shape a world of justice and peace.

These tendencies – on the one hand, the movement to exclude the other and, on the other hand, the movement toward peace and justice for all – exist alongside each other in a dialectical relationship. We have to take this into consideration if we want to talk about the striving for a just peace in the Middle East.

For Jews, Christians and Muslims, the 'Holy Land' has special significance. As the country that was promised to Abraham, it has an eschatological lustre for them. It is connected with their history, their prophets, miracles. Numerous places and place-names are connected with stories from their traditions. Stories that are holy for them, and that show the way. Some stories are the same, some are different, some are the same stories but with different people. But all are just as cherished and just as closely connected with this stretch of land. Take, for example, the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael. As their patriarch, Isaac is especially important for Jews, just as Ishmael and his mother Hagar is for Muslims.
For Judaism, the land is a 'place of commission'. Promised to Abraham and given as a gift to the twelve tribes of Israel after their liberation from the servant's house Egypt, it is designated in the Torah as their home, a safe haven. Nowhere in the *Tanakh* is the land as such referred to as 'holy'. What is clear is that a 'programme of sanctification' has to be carried out. It is in that perspective that, for example, the specific agricultural legislation has to be understood. At its most profound, it concerns the laws, the divine commissions which the Eternal has given his people, so that they may be holy and in this follow Him. For Jews, the religious affinity of this land lies in this, that only here can they fulfil the greatest number of commandments. Therefore, to live in the land is for many orthodox Jews part of their loyalty to the covenant, to the Torah. Furthermore, Jerusalem has special significance – the city where David ruled and Solomon built the temple. The city and the temple symbolise the destiny and the history of the Jewish people, both in a political and in a religious sense. From sovereignty to exile, from closeness to God's temple to its destruction. No wonder that prayers are said daily for the exile to end and the temple to be rebuilt. No wonder that Jews, wherever they may be in the world, actually turn in the direction of Jerusalem when they pray.

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[8] 'The Holy Land' is a concept that is used by churches in the Middle East. For them, it encompasses the holy sites of Christianity, which are located in Israel as well as in the Palestinian territories. In Judaism and Islam other conceptions of the sanctity of the land prevail.

For Christianity, the holy sites are ‘places of healing remembrance’. This is the place where their Saviour or teacher actually walked upon the earth. Christians have, above all, a tie with the places where the salvation becomes visible to them: Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, Jerusalem. By being there, pilgrims hope to experience that the mystery, the miracle, of then will still shine on them. They take a little bit of the miracle home with them, sometimes in the form of chains and rosaries which they themselves have consecrated. In this way, the holy sites are places of healing. Jerusalem also had a central role for Jesus of Nazareth and the gospel-writers. In his day, the temple still existed and that is why he went there, likely three times a year, for the three pilgrims’ festivals – Passover, the Feast of the Weeks (*Shavuot*) and the Feast of the Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) – just as thousands of Jewish pilgrims along with him. In Jerusalem he died, in Jerusalem he was raised from the dead. In Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit is poured upon his disciples. From this, the church came into being, even though later it moved its centre westwards, to Rome and Constantinople.
For Islam, what matters at its most profound is but one holy place: the city of Jerusalem. *Al Quds*, the Holy, and within it *Haram el-Sharif*, the place where, according to tradition, the prophet Mohammed began his trip to the seven heavens – after having prayed here with Moses and Elias – finally to receive from God himself the rules for prayer. It is the complex of buildings on the Temple Mount, of which the Rock Chapel and the Al Aqsa Mosque are the most important. It consists of fourteen hectares, one-sixth of the walled Old Town, with fountains, gardens, buildings and domes. It is the place (before Mecca) to which Muslims faced at prayer times. And after Mecca was chosen to be the centre of Islam, Jerusalem came to be seen by Muslims as the third city in order of holiness, after Medina. The conflict in the Middle East strengthened that understanding.
For Jews and Christians, Jerusalem represents hope for God’s future of justice and peace. Jerusalem is an eschatological gauge for the three religions. Jerusalem – city of peace – forms an important element in their religious identity.

Under the influence of that solidarity with the land, religiously inspired violence occurs on both sides. Young Palestinian Muslims who – albeit since 1993 – have been committing religiously inspired suicide attacks, resulting in many victims in Israel, are honoured for their faith with posters of the martyrs in the streets of Ramallah. Others in the Muslim community do not recognise themselves in the posters.
In Israel too, one sees incidental forms of honouring martyrs as heroes, albeit that Jewish religious principles make suicide attacks unthinkable. In Hebron, at the centre of the Palestinian territory, is the burial-place of the patriarchs. The place plays an important role for Muslims and Jews, and the mosque and the synagogue have, for centuries, formed a single building complex. Nevertheless, a group of Jewish settlers in Hebron views the town as an exclusively Jewish inheritance that God intends should only be for Jews. One settler, who started shooting and killing Muslims at prayer in the mosque of the patriarchs, is therefore still honoured as a hero; his grave has been established as a memorial. What, at the time, seemed to be an incident, in this way acquires deeper significance. This unleashed an impassioned internal debate within the Jewish community.
So, both among Muslims and among Jews, religiously inspired violence is related to religious claims on ‘holy land’. Not legitimised by the public authorities, but neither is it contested. And sometimes the violence even takes place under their protection.

Above all, the great religious and historical significance of Jerusalem causes many adherents of Islam, Christianity and Judaism to make exclusive claims. Linking these to a jumble of interests results in great and deep conflicts, and forms of extremist thinking and action. Such claims are, after all, easy to keep making and to manipulate in numerous political issues. Jerusalem itself is one of the reasons why the conflict between Jews and Palestinians is so difficult to solve. Extreme elements try to smother attempts at reconciliation with verbal and physical violence. Like-minded movements among certain groups of Jews and Christians find one another. Despite their enormous diversity, Muslims see whatever happens in Jerusalem as affecting them all. This can arouse strong reactions, as was apparent when Israel began excavations next to the Western Wall in 2007. Everyone claims Jerusalem for themselves and thereby burdens each peace process.

But here too there is another side: Judaism, Islam and Christianity know the vision of people who live together in peace. It is from this perspective that the church leaders of Jerusalem speak out time and again for an undivided Jerusalem, with a separate status, in which every religion has a share. The World Council of Churches supports this view. This approach also receives support among Muslims and orthodox Jews, at least, so long as their religious involvement with Jerusalem and the holy Temple Mount is treated with respect.

2.5. Christians and churches in the Middle East

About 12 million Christians live in the Middle East. Some of the churches in this region trace their historical roots back to the earliest time of Christianity. These are the churches of the Oriental Orthodox tradition, such as the Syrian Orthodox Church, which still uses the Old Syrian language in its liturgy, a language closely related to Aramaic, the language in which Jesus himself spoke. Also present in the region are the churches of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, such as the Greek Orthodox Church. There is the Roman Catholic Church, as well as churches of the Eastern Orthodox rite that consider themselves to be in union with Rome and recognise the primacy of the Pope, such as the Greek Catholic Church. Finally, there are the churches of the Protestant tradition (Lutheran, Anglican, Calvinist, Presbyterian) which founded local churches.
The messianic Jews, which form small communities in the large cities, occupy a very distinctive but almost inconspicuous place in the state of Israel. Estimates of their numbers range from 4,000 to 10,000. They play no role in regional ecumenism, but they nevertheless form a special link between Judaism and the Church, because they experience both to the full.
Among Palestinians, there is a Christian minority, mostly Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics. In the Palestinian territories, Christians have a recognised position (it is therefore laid down in law that Bethlehem has a Christian mayor). In Israel, about nine percent of the Arab inhabitants are Christian. In Gaza and in the West Bank, the number of Christians is rapidly diminishing, due to emigration. While they certainly amounted to five percent of the population in 1970, they now total no more than two percent. Many Palestinians seek a good way of getting to the West, away from the repressive atmosphere of the occupied Palestinian territories. Christian Palestinians have slightly easier access to the West, compared with many of their Muslim compatriots. But whether they live in the West, in Israel or in the occupied territories, most Christian Palestinians feel themselves to be Palestinian first and foremost because it is precisely that aspect of their identity which they know to be under threat.

The churches in the Middle East form part of the international ecumenism and, among other, the Orthodox churches are members of the World Council of Churches. Our brothers and sisters from these churches accuse Western churches of having abandoned their Palestinian brothers and sisters in their struggle for justice in their region. It is not only Palestinian Christians who find this to be the case, but also many other Christians in the Middle East. And it is, indeed, the case: in the Western view of the conflict between Jews and Palestinians, often too little attention is paid to what the Palestinian brothers and sisters have to say about this. For many years, their story has never, or hardly ever, been heard or put into words in the West. Palestinian Christians ended up hitting their heads against the proverbial brick wall of incomprehension and of unwillingness.

Because Western churches and Christians are often not very critical of Israel and seldom support Palestinians in public, they are viewed by many Muslims as supporters of the politics of Israel and of the United States. Because of this, Arab Christians are held to blame by Muslims and are often lumped together with western Christians as collaborators with the West. That complicates relations between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East. This distrust, in combination with the Christians' minority status vis-à-vis Islam and a political situation in which civil freedoms are under great pressure, has not always made it possible for them to express themselves freely. More allowance must continually be made for the possible consequences for those who speak out in public and for the Christian community as a whole. For Western churches, however, that may not be the sole reason to cast doubt on their integrity and ignore their voice.

In the meantime, churches in the Middle East, primarily, in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, are now, more than ever, seeking a clear role and position. They are expressly supported in that search process by the World Council of Churches, which is also guided by the local churches with regard to its policy.
In the current developments, churches do have a role to play in the Middle East. A role that, on the one hand, is moderating but also prophetic. A role in which honest questions must not be avoided; questions about justice for those who are threatened, who are rejected, the poor and the oppressed Israeli and Palestinian vis-à-vis the authorities. In this, the churches in the Middle East are seeking international allies. They do this, among other, via the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches (founded in Amman in June 2007). They issued a call to the partner churches in the *Amman Call*, which was drawn up on that occasion. In the conflict between Palestinians and Israel, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, as a partner church, is asked about its ecumenical intentions. Now more so than in the past, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands wants to be asked

about this, by churches and Christians in the Middle East and especially in Israel and the Palestinian territories. The Mission programme of Kerk in Actie, which is part of the WO of ICCO & Kerk in Actie, knows itself – within the framework of the existing policy – to be called to devote serious efforts to this task.

2.6. Islam in the Middle East

The vast majority of Palestinians and of the Arab peoples in the region belong to Islam. This raises the question as to whether there are specific Islamic features with regard to the conflict in the Middle East.

The image that we have is shaped by Hamas, the largely Islamist[9] movement which, since the most recent elections, actually controls the Gaza Strip internally. In the way in which they appear in public, we see a tight discipline that leaves little scope for other opinions in public life.
But Hamas is also characterised by extensive social activities, being highly regarded by the people, and that is certainly not just for tactical reasons, but stems from a deeply felt and religiously motivated sympathy with the people in their misery. Palestinian Christians and secularists too voted for Hamas. Within Hamas, there is a diversity of opinions that are rarely on display. There are those who have fundamentalist opinions, intend to found an Islamic state based on Sharia, and do not want to recognize Israel as a state. Violent extremists determine the image of Hamas. But not all the factions within Hamas can be characterised as Islamist. The fact that a few Hamas members wanted to recognize Israel after the elections, and that a number secretly conducted talks with Israel in Switzerland, shows that there are also more moderate branches. One important faction strives for a *secular* Palestinian state with an Islamic character, just as, for example, the Indonesian model.

It is not easy to form an impression of Islam in the Middle East. The image of Islam in the West is stereotyped and one-sided. The influence of militant Islam may certainly not be underestimated. But there is also another side. Given the diversity that can be found in the region, many Muslims will identify with the following beliefs:

- God is just and never untrustworthy. He promises to make of the children of Abraham/Ibrahim a great nation. That promise was not only made to Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, but also to Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael. God cannot be malevolent toward His own people. Believers must therefore reject discrimination and racism.
- Jews, Christians and Muslims are three daughters of the same Father, and therefore sisters who are blood relatives. Many religious tenets that are integral to the self-understanding of Muslims bring them into direct relation with Jewish and Christian sources and traditions. This means that they can strive for a single, common language, drawing on common sources and traditions.
- Jews and Muslims have lived together in all places and at all times. It was not rare for the animosity that did exist to be triggered by Christian intervention. Christians and Muslims have similarly lived together, and that is nowadays still the case in Palestine.

When comparing this with the images held in the West, the following stands out. Here, Palestinians are often judged only in terms of their violence and aggressiveness, without closer examination of the causes. This is felt by them to be a dishonest discussion. Most Western politicians and Christians cannot imagine how any Palestinian (in Palestine or in the diaspora) feels: uprooted men or women, child or adult.
In this, the West has a giant arsenal of intellectual arguments on historical, theological, sociological and other grounds at its disposal, and draws on these to develop standpoints that are theoretically well-founded but experienced as abstract and, often as not, serve more to impede rather than facilitate a solution.

Then there is also the question of Islamic anti-Semitism. Does it exist, yes or no? Muslims experience how the image that one has of them in the West is influenced more by Western history than by their own history in the region. The Western sense of guilt about the Shoah leads to the suggestion that all Palestinians, merely because they do not want what Israel wants, are therefore more or less anti-Semitic. But not a single Palestinian – whether Christian, Muslim or secular – feels in any way responsible for the Shoah.

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[9] 'Islamism' is a designation for what is also referred to as 'political Islam': a political ideology whose adherents strive for a social and political order based on Islam. Within that ideology, there are substantial differences in the way in which Islam and sharia (the body of Islamic religious law) are interpreted.

Up to the present day, three factors in the Middle East remain interwoven:

- a widely-held rejection of the position and politics of the state of Israel,
- a hatred against this state and its population based on a history of frustration, and
- culturally and religiously nurtured forms of anti-Semitism.

It cannot be denied that anti-Zionism, anti-Judaism and anti-Israeli feelings in the Middle East play a big role. That includes ideological anti-Semitism. In this, the historical influence of anti-Semitic thinking from the West is undeniable. The term ‘anti-Semitism’ is problematic in so far as one has to consider that Palestinians also see themselves as ‘Semites’. Only by looking for opportunities to talk about this will it become clear as to which role ideological anti-Semitism plays in this.

3. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands and the Middle East

This chapter outlines some of the main features of the policy of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and its predecessors with regard to the Middle East. Issues dealt with, in the following order, are: the policy with regard to Israel,[10] the policy on world service, the policy on ecumenism, the policy memorandum of 2003, and the visit of a delegation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands to the Middle East in 2004.

3.1. Some of the main features of the Uniting Churches' policy regarding Israel

It is because an explanation of the words 'unrelinquishable solidarity' seems to be of great importance for the discussions currently taking place in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, that the focus of this part of the memorandum is on the origins of this phrase and its background.

3.1.1. The Hervormd speaking about Israel since WWII

The Old Testament theologian Th.C. Vriezen (1899-1979) first visited the Mandate territory of Palestine in 1924. Thanks to his intensive engagement with both the Jewish and the Arab inhabitants of the country, he had a sharp eye from the outset for the political and human problems associated with the foundation of the state of Israel. He wrote much about this and in lectures he expounded his points of view, but was at that time a voice crying in the wilderness. The text of his valedictory lecture as professor of Old Testament studies in Utrecht, on Amos 9:7 ('Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?…'), was programmatic; we cite the summary here: 'For Amos (just as later for John the Baptist and not for Jesus), mercy is no legacy – creates no rights towards God or humans. [Mercy] does give rise to sanctification (3:2, 5:14), one of the fruits of which is true humanity.'
Vriezen thus belonged to the pioneers, a few individuals. At the time, his church, the Netherlands Reformed [*Hervormd*] Church (NRC), was above all preoccupied with the theological reflection on Israel's return in history, without concern as to the side-effects for the Palestinians. This church published a study in 1959 about the theological significance of Israel, entitled *Israël en de kerk* (Israel and the church). In the context of a debate on Israel's self-understanding and religious tradition, the chapter 'Israel in the present age' makes mention, among other, of the state of Israel. Here the word 'sign' is used three times: the state as 'sign of our powerlessness' (few Christians, in the true sense of the word, fought for Israel when this people was threatened in its sheer existence), as sign of God's loyalty (despite the disloyalty of us humans) and as sign that this people was, by divine providence, placed on a new path. God bestows on his people the possibility of making his election a reality, whereby it must above all seek to find his Messiah.
As of 1967, the NRC had a theological advisor based in Jerusalem, Dr. J. Schoneveld, who remained until 1980, and was followed by Dr. G.H. Cohen Stuart, from 1982 until 1992.

The relationship of the Jewish people with the land of Israel, with the focus on the state of Israel, is the subject of the synodal resource publication *Israël, volk, land en staat* (Israel, people, land and state) of the Netherlands Reformed [*Hervormd*] Church in 1970. In the preface of this document, of which Prof. Dr. H. Berkhof and Ms Dr. E. Flesseman-van Leer were the key authors, the word solidarity (*verbondenheid*) is already mentioned in the first paragraph: 'The church has the task of proclaiming its faith in God and its solidarity with the Jewish people is integral to this proclamation.' This leads to the question being posed as to whether the state of Israel has special religious meaning for Christians. At an international level too, this was the first time that a church had spoken out in an official text about the significance of the state of Israel. German and other (for example Swiss) churches were to follow only later (1980: the declaration of the Rhineland church concerning the 'Renewal of the relationship of the church to the Jewish people'). In the 1970 report, the question as to the significance of the state of Israel was placed in a historical and theological context, nuanced and finally approved. But the discussions about it were vehement and critical from the outset. In the end, the synod approved the document in its final draft version with 38 votes in favour and 10 against.

In 1988, the synod gave the go-ahead for an ongoing reflection on the relationship between Israel, people, land and state. The starting-point was God's loyalty to his people and, at the same time, 'the voice of the Christians in the Middle East must be heard'. The intifada of the Palestinian people had

[10] It goes without saying that, in this chapter, the term 'Israel' should not be read as referring exclusively to the state of Israel.

broken out, their call for self-determination and their own state was heard worldwide. The committee that was established as a result, consisting of members from the circles of Church and Israel and of World Service, produced an interim report in 1992 and a final report in 1995. In addition to some Bible studies, this report included an aspect of the history of the development of the state of Israel which, until then, had been neglected in our churches: the emergence of the issue of the Palestinian refugees in the period 1947-1949. At the same time, two Palestinian liberation theologians are cited at length, namely the Anglican theologian Naim Stifan Ateek (later the founder of Sabeel, the centre for Palestinian liberation theology) and the Lutheran theologian Mitri Raheb, pastor in Bethlehem. This proves that the church, at that point, was also taking notice of the Palestinian Christian voices.
The problem of the ongoing reflection in 1995 was nevertheless that there were no discernible consequences attached to the report. The intentions that were expressed in the decision-making process were, unfortunately, never realised. These included, for example, making the report available for reflection in the congregations, seeking to engage in conversation with the Middle East Council of Churches and with the Jewish community in the Netherlands. The embarrassment about the ambivalence of this report was probably so great that everyone from Church and Israel and from World Service who should have continued to work on this did not feel able to do so. The two lines of thought were described in the last chapter as follows: 'According to the one line of thought, the talk is of a fundamental difference between the Jewish people and the other peoples [the Gentiles] that remains after Christ. The other line of thought starts out from the essential unity of Israel with the Gentiles. Here one likes to refer to Israel as witness, of God's salvational will with regard to all peoples. It is self-evident that these two lines of thought influence the way in which the issue of Palestinian Christians discussed here is dealt with.'[11]
In short: Israel *and* the Gentiles or Israel *with* the Gentiles? In this difference of one word lies a world of different emotional overtones, which will be presented more clearly in the following chapter with reference to the dilemma 'Israel: notion or nation'?

3.1.2. The role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands

The Dutch Lutherans have, particularly in connection with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), played an important pioneering role in the debate about mission among the Jewish. Ultimately, the LWF rejected this. Moreover, in 1984, the LWF formally distanced itself from Martin Luther's anti-Jewish pronouncements in writing and speech. In the Lutheran European Committee for Church and Judaism, the Dutch delegates were pioneers in the debate about 'Israel, people, land and state' in the 1990s. Disagreements among the member churches of this committee prevented approval of the report which had been specially prepared for this purpose.

3.1.3. The Reformed [Gereformeerde] Churches in the Netherlands – a brief history of the term 'unrelinquishable solidarity'

Whenever it is the relationship with the Jewish people that is at issue, the church ought to be aware of the historical context in which certain ecclesiastical statements were made. This context can change very quickly, meaning that the statements concerned should be checked with regard to their theological durability. A clear example of this is the calling formulated in the church constitution, to give expression to the 'unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people', which was prominent, from 1992 onwards, in the discussions related to the drafting of the new constitution for the Protestant Church. The question that is repeatedly asked is: what precisely are the content, tenor and consequences of that wording? For this reason, there first follows some information about the historical background.

The final version of the text of the church constitution (approved in 2003) reads as follows:
'The church is called to give expression to its unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people. As a community that confesses Christ, the [church] seeks to engage in conversation with Israel with the aim of understanding the Holy Scriptures, in particular as regards the coming of the Kingdom of God.' [12]

When was the term 'solidarity with the Jewish people' first used? And when was the word 'unrelinquishable' added, thereby giving extra emphasis? The formulation – insofar as it concerns official statements from the synod – has its origins in Gereformeerde circles and has since become a

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familiar – and at the same time much discussed – expression throughout the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

The expression 'solidarity with the Jewish people' was first explicitly mentioned in Gereformeerde circles in 1973, shortly after the Yom Kippur war. This occurred in a situation of great embarrassment. The rabbis in the Netherlands had sent a telegram to the board of the general synod of the Reformed [*Gereformeerde*] Churches in the Netherlands (RCN), in which they voiced their disappointment that the churches had in no way expressed disapproval of the 'carefully planned mass aggression' (of Egypt and Syria). 'The absence of a condemnation creates the impression of silent approval of these attacks on the existence of Israel. In so doing, earlier statements of the churches about the right of the Jewish people to their own state have lost much of their credibility.'

The chairperson of the synod proposed, for reasons 'of embarrassment', formally to receive this telegram. The synod did not agree with this. A committee was given the task of drafting a reply. The chairperson of the deputies for Church and Israel said, using words which, to this day, remain relevant: 'Israel rightly looks to us and expects something from us. And it is not enough for us just to be for this and against that. But what are we to do with this, when in addition we remember what Abel Herzberg says, 'that the tears of an Arab mother and of Arab children weigh just as heavily as those shed on the Jewish side.' Precise answers are difficult to give, but as Christians we can do no other than express our solidarity with the Jewish people, because both of our existences are very tightly interwoven with each other. This does not let us off the hook. In other words: that is just where our problems begin.'

At the end of the synod meeting, a reply to the rabbis was formulated, with the word 'solidarity' being mentioned in the first paragraph, namely:
'Because of the belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the General Synod of the Reformed [*Gereformeerde*] Churches bears witness to its solidarity with the Jewish people, now that its existence is once again under threat.'

At the end of this text, the synod acknowledged with shame that Western Christianity was co-responsible for the development of the situation at the time. Therefore, the synod wanted to contribute, according to its capacities, to peace between Israel and the Arab states, and prayed that both parties join it in taking the plight of the Palestinians to heart.

The first mention of the word 'unrelinquishable' is to be found in a statement of the Gereformeerde synod in 1979, when the 'Holocaust' series was shown on Dutch television. The series gave a realistic portrayal of the vicissitudes of a Jewish family during the Nazi period in Germany. This series caused a storm of response. In the synod, there were urgent calls for more attention to be given to rising anti-Semitism. The synod therefore stated: 'The congregations should, especially in the proclamation of the Word, be made aware of the unrelinquishable solidarity of the Church with the Jewish people, and bear witness to this.'
The direction is thus clear: from the church to the Jewish people.
In a booklet in 1982, the representatives of Church and Israel characterised the conflict in the Middle East as 'a conflict of rights',[13] whereby, in addition to the theological motive, the perspective of international law was given greater prominence.

The expression 'unrelinquishable solidarity' was to be repeated at subsequent synods, and was finally given a permanent place in the Gereformeerde church constitution, in 1991: 'The churches are called to give expression to the unrelinquishable solidarity of the congregation of Christ with the Jewish people, and to seek opportunities for Jews and Christians to bear witness to each other.'[14]

In the background, two different aspects of the church's relations with the Jewish people were therefore involved in the historical development of the term 'unrelinquishable solidarity':

1 The church's realisation – which, in any case had been growing since 1967 (when the Hervormd 'post Jerusalem' was established) and 1973 (Yom Kippur War) – that the state of

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13 Representatives of Church and Israel, *Israël en de Palestijnen. Een conflict van rechten*. (Israel and the Palestinians. A conflict of rights.) Leusden 1982

14 Article 88a

Israel constitutes an essential part of the Jewish identity worldwide, and that the existence of this state is currently under threat.

2. The growing acknowledgement of the church's sense of guilt over the Christian involvement in the Shoah, also via the role of silent spectators. Because of the Holocaust film (1979) and the classic book by Hans Jansen, *Christelijke theologie na Auschwitz* (Christian theology after Auschwitz, 1980), the subject of Christian anti-Semitism, but also attention to Judaism as a living faith was, for years, high up on the church's agenda.

As regards this second issue, the sense of guilt on the Christian side, it makes it clear, in any event, that an exclusively ethnicity-based approach towards the state of Israel is not sufficient for a church-based approach in this matter. Western Christianity's own historical position as a directly involved party to the conflict remains wrongfully neglected. If churches really want to speak and act contextually, they need to be aware of their own position as subject, of their own role both as regards the development as well as the persistence of the problem, and their shared responsibility to help reach a solution, according to the capacities available.
The Israeli writer Amos Oz views the two parties to the conflict, Israel and the Palestinians, as being victims of the same cruel parent, Europe; indeed, as victims that each sees the image of that parent projected in the other, and that is why they hate each other.

The choice of the qualification 'unrelinquishable' should be understood, for all that, against the background of an age-old history, in which the church has become very much estranged from its roots in the Jewish people, with all the disastrous consequences that that entails for Israel – and, in another way, also for the church. This choice of words needed to underline that the church has had a fundamental insight: it cannot (any longer), ever again, think of itself as separable from the Jewish people. It cannot give up that solidarity. Taken on its own, this statement only says something about the relations with the Jewish people. It was never meant, implicitly or explicitly, to characterise other relations of the church as being of lesser importance.

In the last phase of the amendment to the Gereformeerde church constitution, the question that was central to the discussion concerned the substance of being a witness to the Jewish people. It became clear that the church's relationship with the Jewish people may no longer be characterized in terms of the urge to convert, but rather in terms of an attitude of dialogue between equal collocutors.
What was remarkable about the relevant article in the church constitution was the observation of a shift in terminology from 'Jewish people' [*volk Israël*] to 'Jews'. The former emphasised both the ties with the biblical use of language and with current politics. The latter, above all, evoked the association with the Jewish community in our midst.

What is striking is that this solidarity too was not confessed as a *given*, but as a *calling*. Where the church constitution made mention of the church's calling, it invariably concerned issues of substance relating to identity. It was through Israel that the church could also be called to account. At the same time, giving as concrete expression to the calling as possible remained a challenge. This formulation therefore required a debate within the church about its concrete realisation – a debate concerning the church's identity and that of many of its members. That is precisely why the debate, which is still ongoing, has been conducted with great dedication and vehemence.

The Dutch word *verbondenheid* – translated in this text as 'solidarity' – resonates with other Dutch words, namely *band* (tie, bond, link etc.), *binding* (tie, bond), *verbinden* (join, connect, combine). Even with the word *verbond* (alliance, pact, covenant etc.) which, while not grammatically correct, does succeed in terms of word association – one might also think of the term *geallieerden* (allies).
Clearly the church spoke in a one-sided manner about the solidarity with Israel and substantiated this in terms of past and present: 'Because of the belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (so said the synod of the RCN in 1973) and 'because the existence of each of us is interwoven with that of the other in the most concentrated manner' (so said the chairperson of the deputation in 1973).
These thoughts are further expounded in chapter 4 of this memorandum, among other addressing the question as to what extent the church's expectation of the future is also at stake. Consider article I-1 of the church constitution, in which the church describes itself among other as 'sharing in the expectation gifted to Israel' and – therefore – 'stretching out for the coming of the Kingdom of God'.
What is clear, in any case, is that here the church only ever refers to itself: *the church* cannot continue without this solidarity, whereas Israel does not envisage the church as constituting such an essential

part in its own self-understanding. The relationship between Israel and the church is therefore asymmetrical.

3.1.4. Church practice

Both the Netherlands Reformed [*Hervormde*] Church as well as the Reformed [*Gereformeerde*] Churches in the Netherlands recognised at a given moment that the church's discussions with Israel also had to be sought *in* the state of Israel. Mention has already been made in this memorandum of the 'post-Jerusalem' from the NRC, between 1967 and 1992. From the outset, the Reformed [*Gereformeerde*] Churches in the Netherlands had close ties with the international Christian settlement of Nes Ammim in West Galilee, intended to bring about signs of reconciliation. From 1974 onwards, the RCN took on the financial responsibility for the pastor in Nes Ammim. The Gereformeerde clergy who were based there thus formed a good link between Israel and the Dutch Uniting churches.
Both the aforementioned two theological advisors, as well as New Ammim and the various Gereformeerde clergy who served there (of whom Dr. Simon Schoon was the first), were thorough in their theological reflections on the coming into statehood of Israel and the resulting conflict with Palestinians and neighbouring Arab countries. However, it took a long time before there was real cooperation with the world service agencies of the churches. It has always proven difficult for the Uniting churches to get proponents of different stances to converse with each other.

3.1.5. Conclusion

The article in the church constitution is only indirectly concerned with the church's relations with the *state* of Israel. Primarily, it is about defining the church's position with regard to the Jewish people (*het volk Israël*) worldwide. If the church wants to make a stand in the now nearly 60-year-old conflict between the state of Israel and its neighbours (both the Palestinians and those neighbouring Arab states that have not yet signed a peace agreement), then it must be more circumspect in how it views the state of Israel. This issue too is further dealt with in chapter 4.

3.2.The main features of World Service policy

The church is also held responsible for its diaconal qualities. In keeping with their vision and mission, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and its predecessors have tasked World Service, and later Kerk in Actie (Church in Action), with addressing issues of justice and peace, power and powerlessness; combating discrimination and oppression; and combating the effects of poverty and hopelessness. Kerk in Actie does this in various countries. The choice of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands to be active in another country via Kerk in Actie depends on all sorts of historical and practical considerations. Our churches' engagement with the Jewish people and their history made interest in the Holy Land a matter of course.
At the same time, World Service wanted to work for justice, reconciliation and mercy without distinguishing between more and less friendly parties. Distinctions are made on the grounds of need, the possibilities for Kerk in Actie to do something meaningful about it, the position and possibilities of the victims – and of the governments involved – themselves to do something about it, and the question as to who else is helping or can help. Justice without regard for who is the beneficiary is, after all, quintessentially an Old-Testament notion (Deut. 16:18-20). A needs-based approach and a rights-based approach are complementary.[15] With regard to the state of Israel, the position of the Palestinians in Israel and the position of Palestinians in the occupied territories, Kerk in Actie has not wanted to work in any other way than it does in other areas. Given the nature of diaconal service and the situation in Israel and the Palestinian territories, the attention of World Service was above all on the problems experienced by the Palestinians. This occasionally brought Kerk in Actie into conflict with those who wanted Israel to be treated as a special case, and resulted in plenty of discussion, among other within the church. Sometimes the discussion caused time to be marked. At the same time, this position has caused many Palestinian Christians to feel recognized and valued.

There is certainly an issue as to what extent the ministry of justice can be carried out by means of (international) legal mediation, or whether it also involves a broader perspective of peace and justice,

[15] When determining a needs-based approach, one takes the needs of the intended beneficiaries as the starting-point. One 'gets fish or at most a fishing rod'. A rights-based approach is intended to strengthen the legal position of the intended beneficiaries. The concept of rights is broader than legal rights. It goes to the very heart of 'the right [of access] to the fishing waters'.

a process that requires being involved with each other. It is a question that is also under discussion in other situations (East Timor, Ambon, Northern Ireland) elsewhere in the world. This question about working together becomes all the more urgent and also more difficult to answer when you both talk to each other about shared religious roots and yet also have a history of violence in common (the Shoah). A history in which Western Christians for the most part emerged unscathed, as spectators and sometimes as perpetrators, and in which Jews became the very victims of unrestrained violence. In the churches this question is viewed differently than it is more generally in secularised Dutch society.

How attentive Kerk in Actie is in listening to these concerns was apparent in the discussion which came about when Kerk in Actie ended its participation in United Civilians for Peace (UCP) at the beginning of 2007.[16] UCP was one of the organisations with which Kerk in Actie cooperated with regard to its work in the Middle East, both in making information available and in lobby activities. UCP developed to the point where it was making public statements on behalf of the participating organisations, including Kerk in Actie. Statements that were issued by UCP on behalf of the participating organisations do not, however, necessarily reflect the way in which Kerk in Actie would express itself. While acknowledging the importance of UCP, Kerk in Actie decided to withdraw from UCP as a member organisation. Kerk in Actie decided to continue its own work of lobbying for justice, peace and reconciliation and thereby give expression to the concern of all parties to the conflict. Kerk in Actie's policy on the Middle East remained unchanged. Partners of Kerk in Actie's work are churches and church organisations in the region, the World Council of Churches, and other organisations and individuals, Israelis and Palestinians, who are well-intentioned in their striving for peace that does justice to both peoples. Kerk in Actie wants to give a voice to their vision, support their lobby work, and jointly provide emergency help to the most vulnerable groups. The starting point for all of these relations is the need for mutual recognition of the aspirations of both peoples and the wish to be made to feel responsible for this. Together with its partners, Kerk in Actie also wants society in Western countries and the churches to feel responsible. To this end, Kerk in Actie wants to present itself as being in favour of peace, in favour of dialogue, in favour of human rights, and to avert suggestions of bias. Kerk in Actie needs to communicate this clearly, both in the church and in politics. To this end, Kerk in Actie will continue to make liberal use of the information offered via UCP and others. Kerk in Actie also remains ready to take part in individual UCP projects on a project basis. In this, Kerk in Actie is required to account for the way in which it fulfils its role, both to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands – its members and its synod – but also to its partners in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

In practice, diaconal service will result in multifaceted interventions, involving, for example, cooperation with organisations working on a specific need, such as blind children or work with the elderly, which receive insufficient support from the public authorities, and are not sufficiently helped by others. This will require a way of working that improves the prospects of the intended beneficiaries, and/or sets a good example for other organisations that are active in the same field of work. In addition, it also means support for organisations in the Palestinian territories and in Israel that organise and carry out awareness-raising and lobby work for peace and justice (including human rights) directed at Israeli society, the public authorities and parliament, as well as at Palestinian society, the Palestinian Authority, government, parliament and/or rulers.
It means support for programmes that help Jews and Palestinians – Muslims and Christians – to work for justice and peace. Because Kerk in Actie rejects violence absolutely as a means to an end, it means that choices have to be made: not just any organisation will be considered suitable for cooperation.
Just as there are specific needs among Palestinians that Kerk in Actie can play a role in alleviating, so there are among Jews. With regard to the latter, we think among other of programmes that can help overcome traumas in the lives of people who became victims of attacks, or who have to commit violence because of their duties in the military. The YMCA (a partner of ICCO) carries out much similar work in the Palestinian territories. But there is also a great need in Israel. There too we have to find the right partners to work with. Church and Israel have some experience in this field (with the partners Bereaved Parents for Peace and The Parents Circle).

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16 The complete text of the information given to the general synod is available on request from the synod secretariat.

If there is a single field of diaconal service (a 'healing ministry') in which Kerk in Actie could be present on both sides of the divide, then certainly in this field. Our own disunity concerning these heart-wrenching problems could also be accommodated herein.

Because of its ecumenical calling, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands has chosen to support churches and Christian communities in the Middle East, so that they can play a role in favour of a just peace in the Middle East. What these churches have to tell about the situation and their struggles must be heard in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. In addition, because of its diaconal calling, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands itself wants to work for change by giving practical expression to the ministries of reconciliation and community, of justice and of charity, together with a broad range of Palestinian and Jewish organisations. In doing so, Kerk in Actie takes into account the unequal balance between the various 'players' in the conflict with regard to power, opportunities and the possibilities of overcoming problems. In the ministry of justice and reconciliation, Kerk in Actie does not want to restrict itself to the legal aspect of justice, but also focus its attention on the building of bridges. Kerk in Actie has the task of implementing this policy, in concerted action with Church and Israel, by means of the combined staff structure of ICCO & Kerk in Actie.

3 3 Ecumenical policy

Insofar as the churches and Christians in the Middle East have a role to play in the ecumenical policy of the Uniting Churches, this has largely remained out of the limelight. There were indeed contacts, but especially via World Service and via the international ecumenical organisations, notably the World Council of Churches.
Within the RCN, there was a Middle East Commission in the 1990s in which, alongside the deputies for Mission and World Service and the deputies for Church & Israel, the deputies for Ecumenism were also involved. The aim was, as far as possible, to involve everyone, starting out from their own perspective, in the preparation and internal harmonisation of the RCN's policy regarding the Middle East. With the transition to a single support organisation for the Uniting Churches/Protestant Church in the Netherlands, this commission was disbanded.
In addition, there has, for some time, been talk among RCN deputies for Ecumenism about the possibilities of initiating bilateral relations with one or more of the churches in the Middle East, to complement the relations maintained via the Council of Churches in the Netherlands with the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). A recommendation in the final report of the deputies to their own synod, with the aim of nevertheless following this approach in a broader context, was indeed approved by the Gereformeerde synod but not realised, in particular because strict priorities were needed in the policy of the Department for Missionary and Diaconal Work and Ecumenical Relations (MDO), leaving very little scope for new initiatives to be carried out.
During the last 15 years, three joint conferences have been held by the Council of Churches in the Netherlands together with the Middle East Council of Churches, in which profound theological discussions have been held about the significance of the Jewish people for church and theology. However, again and again, it has been apparent that the 'replacement theology' – which argues that the church has completely replaced the people of Israel in God's work of salvation – enjoys widespread support in the churches in the Middle East, so that the Dutch emphasis on the abiding theological significance of the Jewish people is not recognised. There was even less understanding shown for the conclusions that this entailed for land and state. The Uniting Churches were well represented in the delegations.
The Council of Churches in the Netherlands has regularly concerned itself with the conflict in the Middle East. 1997 saw the publication of the booklet *De vrede van Jeruzalem. Een bijdrage aan de bezinning over de toekomstige status van Jeruzalem* (The peace of Jerusalem. A contribution to the reflections on the future status of Jerusalem.) Two conclusions are drawn in this booklet: religious arguments may not be used in determining territorial claims, and international law offers the best possible framework for resolving the conflict concerning Jerusalem. Because not all of the member churches were able to accept this as a formal stance of the Council and/or its member churches, the emphasis was placed on this being a contribution to the ongoing discussion.

At the launch of the Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum[17] – in Amman, June 2007 – the Protestant Church in the Netherlands was also present, in the person of its general secretary, Dr. B. Plaisier. There were also representatives of ICCO & Kerk in Actie. Its participation in this forum may be seen as

[17] See section 2.5 of this memorandum.

a step by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands in the process of renewal and consolidation of its ecumenical engagement with the situation in the Middle East.

3.4. The policy memorandum of 2003

This present memorandum is, as has already been said, a sequel to the much shorter – eight-page – policy memorandum *Het Israëlisch-Palestijns-Arabisch conflict* (The Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict) of September 2003. Expression is given therein to the hopes and concerns with regard to this conflict, together with a short analysis of the conflict. Much of what was referred to in that earlier document is dealt with again and in much more detail in this present memorandum. For example, the 2003 memorandum argues in favour of negotiations, based on the recognition both of the right of Israel and of the right of the Palestinians to an independent political existence and security. Claims based on religious convictions are rejected. Attention is drawn to the significance of the right to return or compensation (to be financed internationally) for Palestinian refugees.
The unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people is also dealt with, as too is the church's diaconal calling with regard to the Palestinian people.
Use of the currently much used term '(double) loyalty' is advised against, because it causes more confusion than clarity.
It is important to note that, in the aforementioned policy memorandum, the relations with the Palestinian people are discussed exclusively in terms of diaconal service. The ecumenical engagement with Palestinian Christians and churches was left out of the picture at the time.

3.5.The visit to the Middle East

In November 2004, a delegation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands visited the Middle East. The reason for the visit was the concern of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands about the intensification of the conflict since 2000. Among the delegation members were two church board members, Dr. B. Plaisier (general secretary) and Ms. I. Fritz, in addition to representatives from within Kerk in Actie circles and of Church and Israel.
The delegation was impressed by the will for peace expressed by so many interlocutors on both sides. The delegation members were shocked by the hopeless situation of Palestinians in the Lebanese refugee camps and in the occupied territories. The delegation called anew for an end to the violence by both parties and the return to the negotiating table. Attention was also drawn to the vulnerable position of the churches there. With regard to the policy principles, the delegation affirmed the main features of what had already been discussed in the policy memorandum of 2003.

The solidarity with the Jewish people and the commitment to the Palestinian people that the Protestant Church upholds seemed to strengthen rather than weaken the church's options. This was the premise on which understanding could be sought for the position of the other.

The recommendations of the delegation were later made more specific, at the request of the church board. The delegation recommended the development of common policy criteria for Kerk in Actie and for Church & Israel, to avoid the stance of one neutralising or undermining the stance of the other. The delegation also recommended that the church and its churchwide services organisation make clear what it means to be in solidarity with the Jewish people, whereby much thought should be given to the way in which the internal discussions are led.
The church board approved these recommendations, whereupon they were used in the preparation of this policy memorandum on the conflict in the Middle East.

4. Outline of main theological issues

4.1. The letter to the Romans read in light of the issues

Biblical notions and often also biblical texts play a large role in the discussion within the church about the relations between Jews and Palestinians. That is intrinsic to being church: the church continually takes its orientation, as best able, from the Word of God. That is why this subject matter continually demonstrates that within the church there are very different ways of understanding what is written. Opinions quickly differ about the authority of Old Testament as well as New Testament promises, about prophetic visions and apostolic warnings.
The Protestant Church in the Netherlands cannot, in any case, restrict itself to connecting select Bible texts and directly extrapolating from this the policy called for from the church.
For the church, the significance of the Scriptures lies first and foremost in the way in which it sets human history in perspective. To say a little more about this, a short outline of the main thematic threads in the letter of Paul to the Romans can perhaps prove helpful. It is, after all, especially chapters 9 to 11 of this biblical book that have decisively influenced the churches with regard to the abiding loyalty of God to his covenant with the Jewish people. All the more reason not to detach these chapters from the letter as a whole – or of interpreting them as a sort of intermezzo within the letter – but to place them in their broader context.
The first chapters of the letter to the Romans have played an important role in the (re)discovery of the Gospel of God's mercy, in particular in the time of the Reformation. People may know themselves to be justified 'by faith alone', 'by mercy alone', 'by Christ alone', and this is expressed in all sorts of ways in the first seven chapters. But it does not end there. To put it in theological terms: justification entails sanctification. From chapter 8 onwards, attention is given to the Spirit-led life. Then it says: 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.' (8.14)

What is striking is how the perspective then immediately broadens. It is not just exclusively about the individual human being in his or her relationship with God. Rather, it is about nothing less than the whole of creation. 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God' (8.19). She groans when in labour pains, is subjected to futility and anxiously waiting in hope. That is the broad context in which the 'children of God' find themselves. However, they are not themselves the immediate answer to the groaning of creation, but it begins with them joining in with the groaning of creation. Spirit-filled life starts with the *Kyrie*, in the call for mercy, in which the congregation identify themselves with the suffering creation. More specifically with respect to the subject matter of this memorandum, the concern for the victims of violence and injustice – in the diaconal ministry – begins with identification with the victims, with com-passion for them, which is, of course, inextricably bound up with sharing in the suffering of Christ (cf. 8.17). Creation waits for the children of God to become recognisable.
It is against that background that Paul then addresses his compatriots about Israel (9-11). That is where his sorrow becomes very real. The first thing that he says about them is precisely this: 'to them belong the adoption' (9.4).[18] One cannot say anything about children of God without referring to this from the outset. And then other words are mentioned, key words for the congregation of Jesus Christ, every one of which point to their being rooted in Israel: adoption, glory, covenants, giving of the law, worship and promises (cf. 9.4 in the NBG Dutch Bible translation). And: 'It is not as though the word of God had failed. (…) This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants' (9.6, 8).
Paul wrestles all the more with the perplexing question as to why many from Israel do not recognise again and accept Jesus as the Messiah. It is precisely that enigma which causes him to make statements whose profound significance has, through the centuries, barely been grasped by the church: 'God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.' (11.2). 'As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.' (11.28-29) Paul continues to maintain that the congregation is grafted onto the 'rich root of the olive tree' (11.17) that is Israel, and that in

[18] The original Dutch text quotes here from the NBV Bible translation which, when translated literally, reads: "God has adopted them as his children".

God's counsel there is a connection between the salvation of Israel and that of the Gentiles (11.25-27). In the end, it has to culminate in a song of praise to God's mercy (11.20-32) and unsearchable wisdom (11.33-36), also in this – for him - bitter enigma that is Israel. With that, the eleventh chapter ends.

From chapter 12 onwards, Paul does not move on to business as usual. God's mercy, which is praised in song at the end of chapter 11, implies a calling to the worship of a Spirit-led life (12.1). Again, it is not the individual believer's attitude to life that is the main issue. Rather, it is first and foremost about the understanding of together being 'one body in Christ' (12.5). That is then made very concrete; it is about more than giving help and consolation, giving without hidden motives, showing compassion, caring for the needs of the saints, for solidarity and for modesty. The saints, they are the fellow Christians, but here too we cannot fail to notice that Paul uses an Old Testament designation for Israel. Paul outlines what the life of the congregation would look like, were it Spirit-led. They are thoughts that can also be meaningful for the way in which congregations and churches relate to each other within ecumenism, as members of the one body of the Lord.
But the congregation sketched out by Paul is not turned in on itself. It lives in a world in which there can be talk of persecution and hostility. That is why, in Romans 13, he also speaks about the governing authorities, and therefore also about questions regarding the legal order and justice. The public authorities are there 'for your well-being', as servants of God; 'deacon' is mentioned twice in the original Greek (13.4). In the mutual relations, love and mutual acceptance rule, according to the example of Christ, who – as 'deacon of the Jews'! – has accepted the Gentiles, to the glory of God. In this way, the kingdom of God can become visible, in 'justice, peace and happiness through the Holy Spirit' (14.15).
If there is one thing that becomes clear here, it is that everything is interconnected. Sharing in the suffering of Christ, sharing in the suffering of creation, being allowed to share 'in the rich root of [Israel]' (11.17) and 'contributing to the needs of the saints' (12.13) – cf. 15.26, where the congregation in Jerusalem comes into the picture – are seen from one and the same perspective of Spirit-led life. Put in biblical terms: diaconal ministry, solidarity with Israel and ecumenical commitment to fellow Christians reinforce one another. And all this derives meaning and sense, at its most profound, from God's mercy.
The above sketch outlines some fundamental thematic threads in the letter to the Romans. These concern a salvation-historical vision that may underpin the concrete actions of the church, because the essence of the church and its calling are thereby determined.
This does not as yet make it obvious what concrete steps will follow in response to the questions dealt with in this memorandum. It becomes more complicated when the church knows itself called to remain consistent on fundamental matters, in such a complicated human and political situation as that in the Middle East. In the lives of people there, Jews and Palestinians, hope and expectation continually succumb to feelings of hopelessness and bitterness. There, the lives of people are overshadowed by fear of the other. There are victims and perpetrators, but the roles are sometimes easily reversed, and most of those affected see themselves, anyhow, primarily as victims – and sometimes see in this a legitimacy to then also become perpetrators of violence.
This is all translated to the political level. There, (international) law plays a role, but so too does power, which all too often is at odds with the law. In this, security prevails over all else – and precisely for that reason life may become even less safe. Politicians operate in a web of continually recurrent dilemmas.

4.2. The church and international law

The question for the churches is how rights and duties of the state of Israel and of the Palestinian Authority, that are based on international law, relate to theological motives that can play a role in relations with the Jewish people and with the Palestinians. Here one finds different lines of approach, both within and outside the church.

a. International law is, for some, the only criterion for judging the situation in the Middle East. All parties have to by guided by this – and only by this – in order to reach a political solution. They thereby try to exclude any risk of a theological legitimisation of the political standpoints and interests. That is why they regard any theological argumentation in this political matter as undesirable and impossible. One line of approach with comparable consequences is to be found among certain secular thinkers, who want to exclude religion from having any role in the public domain.

b. Others share this vision of the significance of international law as the only criterion in judging the situation in the Middle East, but from another starting-point. They do not exclude theology, but seek it in a positive theological judgement of (international) law.
c. More or less opposite to this is the line of approach according to which (supposed) Bible-theological motives claim exclusive rights. In that case, arguments at the level of international law are only regarded as relevant insofar as they may possibly give factual support to similar theological motives. But when push comes to shove, such arguments are not really relevant.

The latter line of approach is to be found especially in Christian pro-Israel circles, which attach great significance to a literal interpretation of biblical promises about the future of Israel. This position has until now been resolutely rejected by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. The church 'shares in the expectation granted to Israel' (article I-1 of the church constitution), but this eschatological solidarity with Israel does not imply for the church that biblical promises can be read as elements of a political manual. The question as to how theological motives then do relate to (international) law, and what significance is thereby attached to international law, thus remains as yet unanswered.

A vision of that relationship can fit in with the theological tradition regarding the position of the governing authorities, as worked out in the Theological Declaration of Barmen, which is referred to in article I-5 of the church constitution of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, because of its 'significance for its confession today'. Article 5 of Barmen puts it like this: 'Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. [It fulfils this task] by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The Church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things.'
In this way, the position described above under a) – which holds that all theological argumentation in political matters is undesirable – is rejected. Some consider this position to be a logical consequence of the Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine[19], which is thereby, however, interpreted in a one-sided manner. This envisages a stark demarcation between, on the one hand, God's reigning through Christ and through the Spirit, especially in the church, and, on the other hand, God's reigning through worldly governing authorities. Politics thereby acquires a large degree of autonomy.
The position of Barmen and of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands is a different one. This can be characterised as an acceptance in principle of the governing authorities and therewith of the legal order, while at the same time maintaining the right and duty of the church – in line with the prophetic voices in the Scriptures – to speak out critically prophetically about the specific actions of the governing authorities. After all, the governing authorities are required to be obeyed, unless there are momentous arguments to the contrary. The words of Acts 5.29 – 'We must obey God rather than any human authority' – have, for example, played a large role in the Calvinist tradition concerning the relationship between church and governing authorities, and have corrected an all too one-sided emphasis on the duty to obey the governing authorities, as formulated in Romans 13.
In the same positive critical manner, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands also in principle accepts international law, argues in favour of continuing to build an international legal order, and comes out in favour of upholding human rights. The church assumes that states are bound by international law and have to behave accordingly. This position is closest to the line of approach listed above as option b). The theological justification for this position can, of course, vary. One may think of a theology developed in the *œcumene* about the kingdom of God, which can also be detected in article I of the church constitution. In Roman Catholic circles, one is more likely to resort to a vision of human values such as justice and international solidarity, as formulated by the Second Vatican Council. In the Gereformeerde tradition, a vision was developed of the law as an element in God's all-encompassing mercy. God's mercy is not limited to his work of salvation in Christ and through the Spirit, but also finds expression in the resistance to the power of sin in human life and co-existence, among other in the law.

At the same time, the church knows that the prevailing law is not perfect. On the one hand, if all is well, it is a product of moral considerations about the most just regulation of a national society or

[19] Another interpretation of this classic Lutheran vision, in its elaboration, comes close to a view that long held sway in the RCN, whereby the church "as institution" was required to refrain from making political statements, because that was seen as the exclusive task of the church "as organisation", that is to say of the individual believers, and in their political parties.

international relations, as the case may be. But the prevailing law is, at the same time, determined by actual power relationships. In a constitutional state, elections determine who has the power to make or change laws. In the case of international law, the members of the Security Council, for example, play a big role in determining what may or may not be laid down in a resolution. National (geo)political interests play a role in this. This, too, can be illustrated in numerous ways in the case of the situation in the Middle East. That is why it can also be necessary for the church to express serious criticism about the prevailing law – in the name of justice as a moral standard! What passes for 'law' sometimes has to be unmasked as injustice. These power factors, to a lesser extent, play a role in the development of human rights treaties. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is heavily influenced by Western legal traditions, it universal character is, in principle, broadly acknowledged.

With regard to the Middle East, the church will therefore, for as long as possible, refer to international law and the standard of human rights. In addition, recognition is required of, on the one hand, Israel's right to an independent political existence and to security, and, on the other hand, the Palestinians' right to self-determination – an independent political existence, security and its own economic development. These form the premise for any future negotiations. Taken altogether, that is: peace. Among both peoples, there are those who claim the entire region from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. Others claim a part thereof. The conflict can only be resolved through negotiations, on the basis of international law. What is more, the international community should be actively involved, because of the major geopolitical interests, because of the need for international guarantees and also because of the great difference in power between the state of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. While it cannot be ruled out that a different solution is accepted as the result of good negotiations, what seems most likely is that negotiations will result in some form of two-state solution. Viability and equality of both states are, in that case, fundamental criteria.

It is important that the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, in its contacts with representatives of Judaism and of Islam, also raises issues for discussion with regard to the significance of international law. This concerns, among other, the relationship between, on the one hand, religious convictions and feelings, and, on the other hand, political claims.
Of no less importance is the achievement of an inter-religious dialogue about the question as to what extent one can and must speak of universally applicable human rights. For the churches within the ecumenical movement, the theological basis for this lies in the 'human dignity' that is established in the biblical references to the human being as 'image of God'. Insofar as better mutual recognition can be achieved through inter-religious dialogue with regard to this matter, faith communities can also better champion those who see their fundamental rights as being under threat.

4.3. The relationship of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands to the Jewish people

In the memorandum *Leren leven van de verwondering* (Learning to live out of a sense of wonder), the Protestant Church in the Netherlands says this about its relationship to the Jewish people: 'The Protestant Church is part of God's worldwide church, in which Protestants have their own place. Moreover, we know that God's church is rooted in Israel and we let ourselves be told through the Scriptures that we have in common. We cannot exist without a deep solidarity with the Jewish people'.[20] The Protestant Church herewith clearly speaks out with regard to the abiding relationship of the church with Israel, as is also the case in the church constitution. Article I-7 states: 'The church is called to give expression to its unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people'.[21]
The historical context in which the term 'unrelinquishable solidarity' came into being has already been discussed. But, as yet, there has never been an adequate detailed theological underpinning of the terminology, not even in the development of the church constitution of the Protestant Church. In the meantime, not everyone is satisfied with the expression, because it articulates an exclusivity of Israel that is not compatible with the calling of the church to give expression to God's love for the world irrespective of the individual person. Others are not attracted to the word 'unrelinquishable' for another reason: for them, solidarity with Israel is completely self-evident, and they hear in this word the threat that it could also be otherwise, and that there could come a point in time when it could be possible to relinquish that solidarity. That is why this section of the memorandum looks more closely at the theological underpinning of the solidarity with the Jewish people confessed in the church constitution.

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20 *Leren leven van de verwondering*, 2004, 5.

21 *Kerkorde en ordinanties van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, 2003, 10.

4.3.1. Theological solidarity with Israel

What is unique about the solidarity with Israel is the confession of Jesus as Messiah. Through faith in him, believers from among the Gentiles are related to the *Tanakh* as the Word to which Jesus wanted to give expression.[22] According to Paul, the purpose of the *Tanakh* is finally achieved in Jesus (Romans 10.4). Via this *Tanakh*, they learn to understand themselves as *goyim*[23] in the family of peoples in which Israel is called God's first-born son. This state of being first-born (or election) should be understood by the Gentiles (the brothers and sisters of Israel) not exclusively but inclusively: the first-born encompasses all of them. The book Genesis shows that each first-born has the calling to make present and bestow blessings in representing the father to the first-born's brothers and sisters. At the same time, the brothers and sisters may know themselves to be blessed in the first-born through the father. Nowhere in the Scriptures is this place of Israel in the family and the history of the peoples revoked, nor is it discontinued in the confession that in Jesus (too) this state of being first-born has achieved its purpose. On the contrary, the significance of his/this state of being first-born is only clear within this theological tradition.
On the basis of this discovery in the *Tanakh*, believers from among the Gentiles know themselves to be called to give the people of Israel the place and space they are due. God has, after all, a special bond with this people to be present among and via this people to bestow blessings on all. His faithfulness to them is so great that their continued existence is bound up with the continued existence of heaven and earth (Jeremiah 31.35-37). Paul calls the believers from among the Gentiles not to become arrogant with regard to Israel. Even though, for the sake of Jesus, we may be rooted with them in the Word of God, they remain – even when disbelieving – the consecrated people (Romans 11.17 onwards).
The church should never forget that Jesus was a Jew, raised in the Jewish tradition, living with the *Tanakh*. Though he comes 'from above', he is at home in Israel. All his words have the world of Israel as their point of reference. Outside that world, his words quickly acquire another meaning. That is why the church takes great interest in hearing directly from [the people of] Israel how they lived and live with the *Tanakh*, so that the church can learn from this. The church realises that this relationship is asymmetrical. [The people of] Israel themselves have never asked for this attention and have even experienced the name of their fellow Jew, Jesus, being used against them.
Nevertheless, the church continues, for the sake of Jesus, to call itself fellow citizen and co-tenant, no longer excluded from the citizenship of Israel (Ephesians 2.11-22).
It is because the church lives so much from the salvation that Israel is rooted in as of old, that the church continuously seeks out this root in Israel.
This understanding is expressed in the confession of the Protestant Church. Pastor B. Wallet writes in *De toelichting op de Kerkorde van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (The explanatory notes on the Church Constitution of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands): 'The name Israel refers to the Israel that we meet in the Holy Scriptures and from there in the history to the present day. There lie the roots of the faith of the Church. This basic principle is of such importance that it has been included in the clause about the name'.[24] Here, Israel does not stand for an abstract notion of 'the people of God', but for a real nation, a real people, with a real history, that began in the biblical era and continues to the present day.
The name Israel mentioned in article I-1 of the church constitution is detailed in article I-7 as 'the people of Israel' [in the official translation: the Jewish people]. Some have understood this as jettisoning our loyalty with Israel as a state. That is not the purpose of this article. On this, Wallet writes: 'In clause 7, it is not precisely stated what is meant by the people of Israel. What this formulation is about, is Israel as it understands itself. Clearly this people is not the same as the state, but the former also cannot be separated from the latter. Moreover, it does not refer just to the Jews who live within or outside the state, but just as much to the Israel of the Scriptures and the tradition. It thereby also conveys a sense of the colourful diversity of the people that we know from the Bible and from contemporary Judaism'.[25] The concept that bears the name 'people of Israel' is therefore a very broad one.
God goes his own way with his people of Israel. He did this both prior to and after the coming of Christ, and he continues to do so, irrespective of the exegesis of the church. Given the history of the church,

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22 Tanakh: Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Scriptures).
23 Goyim: gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) peoples.
24 P. van den Heuvel (ed.), *De toelichting op de Kerkorde van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, Zoetermeer 2004, 19.
25 *De toelichting op de Kerkorde van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, 26.

there is every reason to be extremely cautious in our exegesis of Scripture with regard to the Jewish people.
In the aforementioned quotation, Wallet highlights the fact that the reference in the church constitution to 'the people' of Israel has everything to do with Jewish self-understanding: their own identity is related to their own history and existence as a people. There is therefore no talk of an unambiguous self-understanding of Israel; within the broadly shared experience of a common identity, there is sometimes vehement fighting about the issue of how religion, language, culture, ethnicity and political vision help shape identity. The church remains reticent about that internal Jewish debate. Too often, and for too long, the church has defined Israel in terms that objectify and theologise – and, for the most part, unjustly so and with serious consequences for this people. That is why it is a matter of Israel as it understands itself', and why we, as church, want to talk with Israel (as subject) about Israel's identity.

After the replacement theology, which was popular in Christianity because we ourselves wanted to assume the place of first-born, based on a wrongly understood concept of election, we now let Israel carry out its own exegesis of the Scriptures and are serious in recognising this, even when we hear a broadly-based 'no' to the confession of Jesus as Messiah. This is also part of having respect for Israel's self-understanding.
For a long time, the church viewed itself as the heir that had assumed the place of the first-born, Israel. In that theology, the new covenant replaces the old, the baptism replaces the circumcision, the gospel replaces the law. With that, the living Israel is no longer relevant: it has had its day and was rejected by God when it did not accept Jesus Christ as Messiah.[26] The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 was, for a long time, seen as proof of this rejection.
Incidentally, this replacement doctrine still plays a big role in the Eastern Orthodox churches. Since most of the Eastern Orthodox churches became members of the World Council of Churches (1961), the case for this doctrine is more strongly argued there than was previously the case. The churches in Europe – and, undoubtedly, the churches of the Protestant tradition[27] – have recognised the destructive effects of this denial and the suppression of the living Israel. The Dutch churches played a big role in this. After the Second World War, they recognised in various ways that the people of Israel still live among us and that God has not abandoned his people. In its confession of the unrelinquishable solidarity with the people of Israel, the Protestant Church gives expression to its acknowledgement of this.
Moreover, we touch upon an additional motivation as to why the name Israel should not be thought of as an abstract notion, but as referring to a real people: the Evil in the world also does not think in abstractions, nor does it only turn on faithful Jews. Anti-Semitism has always been threatening and even destructive for anyone who belongs to the people of Israel, at times when one was not even aware of this origin.
It is not just because of confessing the God of Israel as Lord and for the sake of Jesus that the church is in unrelinquishable solidarity with Israel, but also because of the gift of the Spirit. Just as the coming of Christ took place in the context of God's abiding relationship with Israel, so too the gift of the Spirit. The promise of the gift of the Spirit is related to promises made to Israel about the future (Joel 3.1-2, Ezekiel 36.26-27; 39.29) and the pouring out of the Spirit anticipates this (Ephesians 1.13-14; cf. Malachi 3.17). The pouring out of the Spirit also goes – to the initial astonishment of Jesus' disciples – beyond the borders of Israel (Acts 10) to the Gentiles. Through the selfsame Spirit, the Gentiles come to know the God of Israel as Father (Romans 8.15), and they confess Jesus as Lord (1 Corinthians 12.3). In this respect, the Gentiles also share in the blessing of Israel. As Paul explained: 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people' (Romans 15.10), and then follows this with a blessing that they be strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in the hope for the fulfilment of God's promises. These promises cannot be considered as detached from Israel. In this way, the Spirit creates a new solidarity of the Gentiles with Israel. Through Jesus, who is 'the servant of the circumcised' (Romans 15.8), the Gentiles are brought to praise the God of Israel. All this by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15.13).

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[26] In this regard, an interpretation of Matthew 27.25 that has been disastrous for Jews has, for centuries, continued to be influential.

[27] Compare the report *Kirche und Israel. Ein Beitrag der reformatorischen Kirchen Europas zum Verhältnis von Christen und Juden* (Church and Israel. A contribution of the European churches of the Reformation concerning the relationship between Christians and Jews), which the then Leuenberg Church Fellowship (now the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, in which some 100 Protestant churches are gathered), accepted in 2001.

The Gentiles are involved with Israel in God's movement toward a new heaven and earth. The church knows of this and should play a role in this as *postillon d'amour*. It shares in the expectation granted to Israel and yearns for the coming of the Kingdom of God.
The solidarity of the church with Israel may certainly be called unique. Of no other people – no matter how much we know and feel ourselves to be in solidarity with that people – can one speak in terms of such theological rootedness.

4.3.2. Sharing in the expectation

In the New Testament, the hope of Israel is set in the context of the expectation of the kingdom of God. It continues to be about the hope for Israel as a real people. In Acts 26.6-7, the hope for which Paul is being tried is linked with the hope for the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Luke 22.30). The promise about the land is not repeated, but, following from the Old Testament, the geography is connected with the hope for Israel (there is talk of a movement from and to Jerusalem; cf. Acts 1.8). Not just in the letter to the Romans (see 4.1), but also in the letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 2.11-21) and to the Galatians (Gal. 3.26-29) is the salvation for the Gentiles linked to the promise of salvation for Israel. Nowhere is the reality of the Old Testament promises for Israel renounced (promise about the land, return, kingship of God), just as nowhere is a claim made for the fulfilment of these promises either. The coming of Jesus, too, does not result in the fulfilment of all promises for Israel: the hope for Jerusalem remains.
A spiritualising interpretation of the New Testament has caused the church increasingly to grow further away from sharing with Israel in this hope – with all the negative consequences that this entails for Israel, up to and including the Shoah. Although, through the centuries, there have also been expressions of solidarity with the Jewish people, the church – which also means the Protestant Church – has to understand that the Jewish people, on the whole, feel deserted by the church and therefore follow the theological debates about the relationship of the church with Israel with the necessary restraint and suspicion. The fact that Judaism is talked about with respect and appreciation in the Protestant Church, that there is an understanding of the tainted earlier history of the church, and that there is profound reflection on the relationship with Israel (in the broadest sense of the word), is surely recognised and valued on the Jewish side. However, the church should remain aware that the Jewish people have also continued to follow their own path in history, and that the church must not have the pretension of being able to determine the nature or direction of that path.

Where do Israel and the Gentiles hope that their lives will lead them? What is their destiny? There is a wide range of expectations in Judaism and in Christianity about this. In the church constitution, article I-1 refers to the church which, 'sharing in the expectation granted to Israel, looks forward to the arrival of the Kingdom of God'. According to clause 7, the church, as Christ-confessing faith community, seeks to converse with Israel 'concerning the understanding of Holy Scripture, in particular as regards the coming of the Kingdom of God'. This expectation is also formulated in the texts of many prayers. The prescribed prayers that are said throughout the world by the Jewish community and that crystallise the centuries-old faith, also verbalise the expectation of the future. The prayer *Shemoneh Esrei* (The Eighteen) is an example of this. It is prayed three times a day. The benedictions from the tenth to the fifteenth in this prayer are about the hoped-for Messianic future, whereby first all the scattered exiles of Israel shall be gathered from the four corners of the earth. Jerusalem shall be rebuilt, and then the shoot of David shall announce the final liberation. It is, above all, images from the Prophets that give shape to Israel's expectation about the future. Some see this expectation as events that are thus set to occur in the future, while others see this as metaphors for expectations for which there are no other words.

No wonder that the number of Messianic expectations increased again in the wake of the foundation of the state of Israel. After all, the exiles were being gathered from everywhere: from Europe that lay in ruins, but also from the Arab countries where, after the establishment of the Jewish state, the Jewish communities were no longer welcome. Was it the start of the ultimate Messianic redemption? This is named in the prayer for the state of Israel, albeit rather cautiously: 'the beginning of the sprouting forth of our redemption'. However, this thought may not be viewed as the definitive vision of the Jewish people with regard to the foundation of the state of Israel. For non-religious Jews, the state is a residential area just as other peoples also have a residential area.
For religious Jews, the land has a specific significance. Little by little it becomes clear in the five books of the Torah that the land is also included in the commission of salvation. Israel is special, fulfils its calling by means of the specific commandments about being observant with regard to one's fellow

human being and to the land (agriculture), as can, for example, be seen in Leviticus 19 (the so-called holiness code) and in Deuteronomy 15 (the seventh year). Herein lies the importance of the land, according to the talmudic tradition, that only in that one country can all the commandments of the Eternal be realised. Therefore rules mentioned in the Torah concerning agriculture are only valid in the country, and the same applies to the temple service. When the Jewish people are driven out of this land, it sees this primarily as a punishment, being placed at a distance from the Eternal and His salvation. The life in exile, in the state of dispersion, is seen as an existence in brokenness. The desire for the promised land, for Jerusalem, is kept alive at all times. The church recognises, as was phrased in words of the Hervormde synod from 1995, 'that, for the church, the election of Israel also retains its significance after Christ, whereby the abiding ties of this people with this land are recognised'.[28] Within the Protestant Church, views differ on how to answer the question of whether the foundation of the state of Israel can be associated with the aforementioned expectation about the future, based on images from the Prophets. From the perspective of the earlier theological history of the Protestant Church, the following can be said about this matter. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands cannot view the return of the Jewish people to Palestine as separable from God's faithfulness to his own people of the covenant. The church also understands that the state of Israel forms an integral part of the identity of the Jewish people. The church views these motives as underlining the fact that, in accordance with international law, the state of Israel can lay claim to an independent, political existence and to security.

4.3.3. Putting justice into practice

In the theological debate, the question as to how to apply the principle of justice (for which the state of Israel can also be held to account), is often wrongly linked to the confession of solidarity with the Jewish people. In this memorandum, these two lines are kept separate: the church confesses its calling to give expression to solidarity with Israel, and the church confesses its calling to put justice into practice. This distinction is crucial and one that we want to elucidate further here.

In section 4.3a of this memorandum, the case is made for considering the solidarity of the church with Israel to be unique and not to be compared with other relationships of solidarity. This solidarity with Israel is a fact. It is neither dependent on the behaviour of Israel, nor is it dependent on whether or not the Jews are behaving ethically. God is in solidarity with his people for better or worse, even though He knows their weaknesses and sins, even though they kill His prophets, even though they turn against Him. His abiding call to them, above all, to keep on putting justice into practice, never causes his love and solidarity to diminish. 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?' (Hosea 11.8-11) A church that confesses the God of Israel, knows of this deeply-felt solidarity. In line with this, the church will have to keep reminding itself that the state of being first-born was never based on being 'better' than the others, but only on God's choice. Were the church to forget this, then it runs the danger of applying higher standards for Jews than for others (including itself) and thus of applying double standards. In the past, the disappointment – whether or not justified – about behaviour and faith of Jews has not infrequently turned into vilification, hatred and worse. In this way, the church unfortunately gives sustenance to the heathen anti-Semitism that sets its face against the existence of Israel in the world.
Given its history, the church will have to be aware of this pitfall, even in the current affairs of the present day.
Having said this, we realise that, by invoking the name 'Israel', the association with the state of Israel is a natural conclusion and that this is liable to be deemed offensive in the light of political current affairs. The confession of solidarity with the Jewish people is thereby put under pressure, even though the identification of 'people' with 'state' is wrong and an incorrect interpretation of the church constitution. When there is also no distinction made in the debate between the politics of the state of Israel (about which one can be either positive or negative) and the existence of the state of Israel (which is not up for discussion, just as would apply to any other state), then the confusion is complete. As church, we will therefore have continuously to clarify the meaning of our theological solidarity with the Jewish people, a solidarity that is still far from having been exhaustively considered, including as regards the place of Israel in Christian theology.
Solidarity as formulated in this section of the memorandum places no restrictions on our putting justice into practice, irrespective of the individual person. In that solidarity, the church seeks to engage in

[28] In the decision of the General Synod with regard to the report *Israël, volk, land en staat, een voortgaande bezinning* (Israel, people, land and state, an ongoing reflection).

conversation with Israel, above all concerning the coming of the Kingdom of God (cf. article 1-7 of the church constitution). The church calls on all states to put biblical justice into practice and, in so doing, knows itself to be just as inspired by the testimony of the Old Testament prophets, as by the words spoken by Jesus Christ about justice seen in terms of the kingdom of God. The church does not need to feel restrained in talking to the Israeli government about this either, so long as it is sure that it is not applying double standards. What is more, within Israel itself there is already plenty of criticism, both political and religious.
Solidarity as formulated in this section places no restrictions on the care we give to victims all over the world – irrespective of nationality or ethnicity. Neither is preference given to any people, nor are any people ranked as less important.
In the *œcumene*, we, as Protestant Church in the Netherlands, will have to propagate and explain this way of thinking and acting – something that, as yet, is far from generally accepted – as may be expected of us on account of the confession formulated in the church constitution.

4.4. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands and the churches in the Middle East

The previous section of this memorandum dealt with the special solidarity with the Jewish people, which has its own influence on the commitment of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands to the Jewish residents of the state of Israel. This section addresses the question of what it means to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands that a minority of the Palestinian people – and a minority of the Arab peoples generally – belong to the worldwide Christian faith community. How does the ecumenical solidarity with these churches influence our relationship with them?

The church's unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people is determined by faith in Jesus of Nazareth, whom the churches recognise as the Messiah. Thinking about Him and faith in Him can at no time be dissociated from His roots in Israel and from the expectation granted to Israel, in which the churches, thus also the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (article I-1 of the church constitution), may share. It is in that light that the church reads the promises to Abraham and to Israel, in which the salvation granted to Israel gains a significance that transcends all borders between peoples. The church hears the universal tenor of the expectation of Israel, in words such as those in Genesis 12.3: 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'[29] or those in Isaiah 49.6: 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.' The church recognises these promises again in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In and through Him, people from among the Gentiles were and are brought into communion with the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ.
In the light of the Scriptures, the ecumenical solidarity of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands with churches and Christians in the Middle East is not separate from the solidarity with Israel. Even less so is the former in opposition to the latter! The church does not allow itself to be compelled to choose which must prevail: solidarity with Israel or with the churches and Christians in the Middle East? For the church, both forms of solidarity are, given the aforementioned theological reasons, unrelinquishable.

The vision of the ecumenical movement is the unity of the church, but that is not all. The unity of the world, in which justice, peace and the integrity of creation are understood as signs of God's coming Kingdom, has continuously been associated with this vision and forms the most profound meaning of the ecumenical vision. The question now is: precisely which 'unity of the church' is meant, and what does that say about our relationship with churches and Christians in the Middle East?
In ecumenical reflections on these issues, that unity is currently more closely defined with the help of the biblical concept 'communion' (*koinonia*[30]). The solidarity associated with this has numerous aspects, but here too the starting-point is formed by God's grace in Jesus Christ. His suffering and dying, His resurrection and the pouring forth of His Spirit form the foundation of the communion that churches have with each other and that they strive for. Ecumenical solidarity is, therefore, more than the obvious solidarity of people who 'happen' to share the same beliefs. It is much more than a spontaneous preference for that which is familiar. It is about a 'communion with Him', about a state of 'being given one another in Christ'. From the very outset of his first letter, John focuses attention on Jesus Christ, 'the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it' (1 John 1.2). He immediately follows this up by making clear how this influences the mutual communion: 'we

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[29] In Dutch, the NBG Bible translation of 1951 is preferred here. The NBV Bible translation of 2004 is not convincing here: "All peoples on earth shall wish to be blessed like you."

[30] Words that are based on this, can be found, among other, in the following Bible texts cited above (in section 4.1 of this memorandum): Romans 11.17 and 12.13.

declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' (1 John 1.3).[31] That communion is liturgically expressed and experienced as a reality of faith in the celebration of the Holy Communion, the 'communion of the body and blood of Christ'. In practice, if all is well, it gains expression in all sorts of ways. For example, in care and attention for one another and in sharing with the fellow human being who is dependent on our care. The diaconal ministry is, after all, also rooted in this celebration of the meal. The communion is also expressed in closely listening to each other, when the other is less well-known to us, and in critical conversation with one another, when the other makes challenging choices.
The Protestant Church in the Netherlands and its members have, until now, not been well-informed about churches and Christians in the Middle East. Through the *Gereformeerde Zendingsbond* (Reformed Mission Alliance) there are contacts with Messianic Jewish groupings that are also dedicated to meeting with Palestinian Christians. Of course, there were the ecumenical contacts described in more detail above, especially via the World Council of Churches. All this has hardly filtered through to the congregations and individual church members. Many are not even aware of the existence of churches in the Middle East. The much greater visibility of Israel as a state, and the necessary review of the church with regard to its relationship with the Jewish people, have been contributing factors. The policy memorandum of 2003, too, in effect ignored the ecumenical relations. The unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people and the ecumenical communion with Christians and churches in the Middle East may not be played off against one another, just as these two forms of engagement may not be maintained and strengthened at the expense of others.
In practice, choices have to be made with regard to contacts with people and groups in the Middle East. From the above it is clear that, in this, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands has, first of all, to seek its partners in the Jewish community and among the sister churches. But, in this, justice and peace form the wider context. That is why it is necessary also to address the way in which the Protestant Church in the Netherlands relates to those who, because of their vulnerable position, are dependent on the care of others.

4.5. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands and Islam

The situation in the Middle East is, in addition to the challenge of a multicultural society in the Netherlands, an additional reason for the Protestant Church in the Netherlands to reflect on its relationship with Islam. The scope of this report does not permit us to examine the many questions about faith and theology that thus emerge. In this respect, what is determinant is the theological assessment of the common historical roots that Christianity and Islam have in Judaism, and of the way in which Jesus Christ is depicted in the *Qur'an.* Views about this have not yet crystallised in the church.

Meanwhile, the church constitution does provide a basic rule for the way in which church and congregations behave in contacts with Muslims: 'In its meeting with other religions and philosophies of life, the church carries out its work of witness and service by engaging in conversation in a manner that is respectful and by looking for possibilities to carry out joint tasks'.[32]
The primary task of church and congregation to witness to the salvation in Jesus Christ, through proclamation and service – cf. article I-8 of the church constitution – therefore does not exclude, but rather includes, respectful conversation with Muslims and cooperation with them.
Seen in those terms, more is needed than just disseminating information, advising and debating within the church about Islam, the aim being to meet and cooperate. The church will also be able to enter into relations with Muslim organisations, platforms for religion and philosophies of life and/or dialogue groups, with a view to setting up joint projects.
And that, after all, requires and stimulates the necessary reflection on aims, consequences and implications of cooperation with Muslims: what are the implications of the Jewish-Christian tradition of the church for the dialogue with Muslims?

What is valid as regards the internal conversation of the church and for the conversation that it seeks with the Jewish people 'concerning the understanding of Holy Scripture, in particular as regards the

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[31] Here, the Dutch Statenvertaling (State Translation) en NBG Bible translations are closer to the source text, by translating 'having communion' (*gemeenschap hebben*) instead of 'being allied' (*verbonden zijn*).

[32] Ordinance 14.7.5, based on article XVI clause 4. Cf. the formulation in ordinance 8.1.5, which, to the congregation, sounds practically identical.

coming of the Kingdom of God' (article I-7 of the church constitution), is also valid as regards the conversation with Muslims: a respectful dialogue requires the preparedness, above all, to want to understand the other as the other understands him- or herself. Only then can a critical conversation also get underway.
In that light, it is important that the church be mindful of the diversity of views within Islam, not only in the Netherlands, but also in the Middle East.[33] That does not mean that the dangerous aspects of certain radical and militant movements are not referred to; rather the opposite.

4.6. Outline of a theology of diaconal ministry

Engagement on behalf of the victims deserves special attention, those among the Palestinian and Jewish peoples who – irrespective of their background or convictions – pay the price for the decades-old political stalemate and the various forms of violence that result from this. That too impacts on the engagement in respect of certain groups and people.

In 2004, the synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands took as its cue the memorandum *Diaconaat spreekt niet vanzelf* (Diaconal ministry is not self-evident), to discuss at length what is characteristic of the diaconal ministry as vocation and task of the church and of the congregation, and what the role of Kerk in Actie should be in this.

In the discussion about the nature of the diaconal ministry, the Jewish tradition has its own relevance. A key role is played by the biblical terms *tzedakah* (justice) and *chesed* (mercy/solidarity) and the rabbinical elaboration thereof. In the rabbinical concept *gemilut chasadim* (literally 'doing deeds of solidarity [*chesed*] in return'), the characteristics of God become the task of human beings: they who clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the sick (and so on), tread in God's footsteps and thereby make God's *chesed* visible.

The Progress Report Strategic Policy Diaconal Ministry 2005-2008 *(Voortgangsrapportage Strategisch Beleid Diaconaat 2005-2008)* describes it as follows: 'The diaconal ministry takes as its starting-points:

- the dignity of each human being as creature and bearer of the image of God;
- the understanding that human beings are given to one another and live in solidarity and dependence;
- the insight that the earth and all that the earth issues forth is given by God to all human beings;
- the path of Jesus Christ, in whom God's mercy for a broken world and fallible human beings has become visible.

The diaconal ministry is the practical expression of the faith community's commitment to mercy and justice, to peace and integrity of creation. The diaconal ministry tries – in and from the Service of the Table [Holy Communion] – to really celebrate, share, make visible and mediate what God's purpose is for human beings'.

The diaconal calling of the church is thus expressed in the Service of the Table [Holy Communion]. At the table it is a question of serving and sharing the salvation in Christ, with communion, integrity, reconciliation, suffering and resurrection as central themes.
With this, the diaconal ministry is broader than the provision of relief aid. In addition to care provision, it is also about development, sustainable security of existence and quality of life, according to the synod. Mercy is about solidarity with the suffering human being: a solidarity that is made reality in care provision. Justice is about respecting human rights – for example, with regard to the equality of rights of Arab citizens of Israel – but also about chances for social and economic development and structural poverty reduction. Reconciliation is not only about forgiving, but also about doing justice to victims.

The service that is integral to the diaconal ministry is not only about giving care, but also about equipping people to escape poverty. The role of the servant is not that of a slave, but of proactively seeking ways and means to achieve integrity, peace and justice, and reconciliation with justice.

In following up on the memorandum about the strategic policy of the diaconal ministry 2005-2008, it is said that, more than ever before, the emphasis has to be placed on a rights-based approach in addition to a needs-based approach. Both approaches are important in determining to whom the

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[33] See section 2.6 of this memorandum

diaconal ministry should be extended and how this should be done. They form a key to the policy choices of the global diaconal ministry.

5 Conclusions, policy framework and consequences

In the previous chapters, the endeavour is, first of all, to describe the historical, legal, ecumenical and interreligious components of the current situation (chapter 2).
Next, the church's policy as hitherto put into practice, is outlined in terms of its basic principles and consequences (chapter 3).
The fundamental questions to which this gives rise, are explored from a theological perspective in chapter 4, so as to be able to determine a basic position that helps the church in the near future, to develop and account for its policy.
Chapters 2 to 4 also offer a great deal of material that is suitable or capable of being adapted for discussion in church and congregation. This can be of service to opinion formation in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.
We conclude this memorandum by drawing conclusions and outlining the most important policy parameters and associated consequences.

5.1. Conclusions

The following elements emerge from the considerations presented in the previous chapters. They form a necessary link to more concrete policy proposals, and can be seen as the terms of reference within which that policy ought to be given shape.

5.1.1. Unrelinquishable solidarity

The theological considerations once again make clear that the solidarity with the Jewish people [literally: 'the people of Israel'] is and remains unrelinquishable for the church. That remains a fundamental point of principle. This, in turn, leads to recognition of the fact that for many in the Jewish community throughout the world, the state of Israel being a Jewish state is part of their Jewish identity. Adopting that basic position does not make it any easier for the church to shape its policy with regard to the conflict. How can the church therein give 'expression to this unrelinquishable solidarity'? Over the years, the church has had to discover that this is not at all self-evident. The church's own history makes this all too plain. What we have here is a relatively new insight that is still in the process of gaining a firm foothold in the life of the church. Above all, as we saw in the previous chapters, it involves an asymmetrical relationship: seen from a Jewish perspective, it is even less self-evident. That should also make the church humble in how it deals with this matter. When the church says that we 'share the Scriptures with Israel', that is a confessional statement, on the basis of which it is seeking to engage in conversation with Israel. But when, in its contacts with representatives of the Jewish community, the church thinks, for example, that it can cite words from the Torah and the prophets in order to criticise the state of Israel, then this is sometimes seen as going too far. Restraint would be advisable here: in the conversation with Israel, it must be clear what leeway there is. Neither may theological positions serve to cover up injustice. For this reason too, arguments drawn from international law can be more effective in the actual conflict situation than biblical motives.

5.1.2. The framework of international law

International law constitutes the pre-eminent point of reference for solving the conflict in the Middle East. This too is obvious from the considerations in this memorandum. It is not for the church to map out the political solution to the conflict. The church is not capable of doing this, and it is not part of the church's vocation. But neither can the church remain completely detached from the reflections and discussion about this. The following starting-points for a political solution can also be supported by the church, without it straying too far into the realm of day-to-day politics.
International law provides the primary framework for achieving justice and peace. Within Judaism, Palestinian Christianity and Islam, there are believers in the region who, based on their faith, lay claim to territory, or at least to certain 'holy places'. The church continues to reject the use of religious arguments – such as those based on a vision of Greater Israel – that lay claim to territory, irrespective of whether such a claim is based on Jewish-Zionist, Christian-Zionist or Islamic basic principles.
On the grounds of international law, Israel should continue to be acknowledged as being a political entity that is guaranteed under international law. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and certain Arab neighbouring countries and powers, is therefore a political problem that should be solved by way of the political frameworks. Moreover, the recognition of the right of both Israel and the Palestinians to an independent political existence (self-determination), to security and to adequate opportunities for economic development, is of primary importance. Seen in that light, there are various difficult issues on the agenda that can only be resolved by mutual agreement on the basis of equality.

Ultimately, the aim is to reach a negotiated agreement that enables the peoples concerned – and especially those who for so long have lived in fear, grief and anger – finally to claim their rights.

5.1.3. Borders

One of the burning issues for which such a consultation must find a solution is that of the final borders between the Israeli and the Palestinian territories. The starting-point for this is given under international law by the position of the borders on 4 June 1967, on the eve of the Six-Day War. In this regard, both the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, as well as those in the Gaza Strip, should be considered for evacuation – unless otherwise decided by mutual agreement on the basis of equality. Following on from this, a solution that is creative, courageous and manageable for all concerned – including religious believers! –is needed with respect to the question of the status of East Jerusalem.

5.1.4. Refugees

The most far-reaching issue is, without doubt, that of the refugees. Israel regards the return of large numbers of refugees to the territory of the state of Israel as unacceptable: this would, sooner or later, jeopardise the Jewish character of the state of Israel. Moreover, Israel disputes whether all those who are registered as refugees, really merit that status. The most awkward political negotiations on this matter will therefore concern the possibility of financial compensation for the losses suffered by the refugees.

Israeli attempts to include compensation for Jewish refugees on the agenda of the negotiations with the Palestinians, continually founder on the argument that the Palestinians are not to be held responsible for this, and that Israel must, instead, raise that issue with each of the Arab countries concerned.

5.1.5. Two-state solution?

The considerations in this memorandum point toward the two-state solution as being the most obvious. Nevertheless, it is for the negotiating parties themselves to decide whether to opt for this solution or another. We reiterate the key prerequisite, that a definitive settlement be reached by mutual agreement on the basis of equality.

A one-state solution, whereby the state of Israel is *replaced* by a Palestinian state, with – or even without! – a Jewish minority, is, for reasons of international law and humanity, not an option, even if a number of Palestinians would presumably prefer this.

As regards their ideal, a great number of Palestinians – secular, Islamic and Christian – are unanimous: they dream of a single, bi-national state on historical soil, with both Arab Palestinians and Jews, on the principle of ‘one man, one vote’. For the state of Israel, such an outcome is completely unacceptable, because it would directly call into question the Jewish character of the state of Israel. According to international law, Israel cannot, as a sovereign state, be forced to adopt such a position. Sheer necessity makes many Palestinians ready to accept the two-state solution.

5.1.6. Human rights

The test for any solution lies not only in the question as to whether political leaders reach agreement within the framework of international state law. Above all, it is about the respect for internationally recognised human rights – from freedom of religion and expression to the right to self-fulfilment and health – in a new political constellation. It is about ‘human security’, a situation that is, in all respects, safe for people who are real, who are suffering and persecuted.

In this connection, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands is conscious of the need to continue drawing attention in the public debate, both to the abiding fears of the Israeli population about terror attacks, as well as the abiding deprivation of rights in the case of the Palestinian population, especially in the occupied territories, and so stand up for justice.

5.1.7. Building bridges

The church expressly distances itself from exclusively religious-based claims that are not in line with international law, and opts instead to do its best to keep open and make use of existing opportunities for contact with people and groups who feel caught up in the conflict. The question now is: how can the church, in practice, give expression to the various forms of engagement described and substantiated in chapter 4?

No matter which form of engagement is involved, the primary prerequisite is always the search for contact and the maintenance of communication. From contacts with Jewish organisations and partners in the Netherlands and in Israel, we learn, among other, about what is going on in the internal debate among Jews about politics and identity. That conversation with Israel, in all the facets that the church

order portrays in ordinance 1-2, should be pursued unabated. It is, above all, a prerequisite for the task of the general synod, as mentioned in that ordinance, to 'promote understanding and the combating of anti-Semitism'.
For that reason, it is important to encourage meetings between Jews and Palestinians that cross over the boundaries of ethnicity, language, culture and religion. The church, after all, also has (opportunities for) contacts with Christians and churches in the Middle East, with Muslims and Muslim organisations in the Netherlands and with Palestinian organisations in the Netherlands.
But what form are these contacts to take? There is a real danger that contacts with one party will diminish the contacts with the other. Each party therefore holds the other perpetually 'hostage', as it were. This gives the church the appearance of being continually engaged with the one, *but* also with the other. That 'but' acts as a reservation, a restriction in the engagement. It does not work. The ongoing challenge is therefore to give shape – in an honest and upright way – to the engagement with a given interlocutor and *at the same time in that communication* create awareness of the church's similarly intense engagement with the 'other party'. In this respect, the church will have failed if, in contacts with Jewish partners, it does not give expression to its ecumenical engagement with sister churches in the Middle East and its diaconal engagement with Palestinian victims of injustice and violence. Equally, the church will have failed if, in its ecumenical contacts, it does not give expression to its unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people. In practice, it is clearly not easy to strike a good balance in this matter and build bridges, that is to say, work to increase trust with specific interlocutors without disavowing the solidarity with others. But this is precisely where the church has to find its own identity and role.

5.1.8. Political engagement
Whenever the church deals with political issues, influence on policy-making – based on the insights gained in conversations with the aforementioned partners and in the church's internal conversations – is a primary field of action. The church enters into conversation with political representatives and, in doing so, tries to exert influence by presenting its views in a persuasive manner. Influencing policy is an important aspect of contacts made by the governing board of the general synod, as well as in the ongoing work of Kerk in Actie and ICCO. Civil society, as we know it in the Netherlands, offers plenty of opportunities to that end, and political representatives are correspondingly prepared.
Only when the frameworks of conversations are taken seriously, is it meaningful to talk about a prophetic role of the church. The more one recognises and becomes familiar with the church as a genuinely committed interlocutor, the less likely one will be to react dismissively with regard to public statements from the church. When there are shocking developments, the church is asked to speak out publicly about violence and injustice. Such statements by the church are quickly dismissed as 'one-sided, prejudiced and devoid of expert knowledge' by those called upon to be accountable for the suffering of others. It is therefore all the more important that a deeply-felt engagement with people in need is discernible in the content and tone of any declarations.
The church should, in any case, be reticent – in its church meetings and in the work of the churchwide services organisation – about making such statements, and continually ask itself to what extent they actually serve the interests of justice, peace and reconciliation. Long-term and intensive engagement is more important than just repeatedly reacting in public to the latest developments. The church must avoid confining itself to what is in fact a 'knee-jerk reactions policy'.

5.2. Policy framework

The memorandum *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Context of the Arab World of the Middle East – A contribution to opinion formation in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands* leads the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and its churchwide services organisation to the following policy framework.

1. *The solidarity with the Jewish people is unrelinquishable for the church (article I-7 of the church constitution).*
    a. The church respects the way in which Israel understands itself;
    b. the church rejects any form of replacement theology, in which God's abiding faithfulness to his people is denied;
    c. the church underlines the importance of what is laid down in ordinance 1-2-2, namely that one of the general synod's tasks is to promote understanding and the combating of anti-Semitism;

d. the church wants, together with Jewish interlocutors, to engage in a critical reflection on solidarity, specifically in relation to international law.

2. *The church knows itself, as manifestation of the one holy apostolic and catholic or universal Christian Church, to be in solidarity with the churches in the Middle East (cf. article XVI-1 of the church constitution).*
    a. The church knows itself to be called to strive for fellowship and cooperation with these churches;
    b. this implies the need to consult with them regularly about the policy of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands with regard to the situation in the Middle East.

3. *The church carries out its work of witness and service in its encounter with Islam by taking part in the conversation in a respectful manner and by looking for opportunities to carry out joint activities (cf. ordinance 14-7-5).*
    a. The church knows itself to be called, wherever the opportunity arises, to engage in conversation with representatives of Islam in the Netherlands and, where possible, also in the Middle East, as a means of contributing to growing mutual understanding.

4. *The church recognises the challenge in its engagement with the Jewish people, the churches in the Middle East and with Islam respectively, of also continually creating awareness – in an honest and upright manner – of its engagement with the church's other interlocutors.*

5. *The church regards (international) law and human rights as set out in international treaties as the primary point of reference for reaching a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict***.**
    a. The church recognises the right of the Jewish people and of the Palestinians to an independent political existence (self-determination), to security and to adequate opportunities for economic development;
    b. all parties to the conflict are subject to international law and to the UN resolutions concerning Israel and the Palestinian territories, and are expected to respect the judgements of the International Court of Justice;
    c. human rights, which the churches have played an important role in formulating, need to be brought into the deliberations from the outset, because they express the fundamental values that are common to all humans, and form the basis for peace and justice in international society;
    d. a just solution to the conflict can only be reached by mutual agreement on the basis of equality;
    e. religious arguments regarding territory should be examined for their compatibility with international law.

6. *The church knows itself to be called, among other in its diaconal work, to bring justice to victims of injustice and violence, and to seek ways of helping them escape from their misery (cf. ordinance 14-9-1).*
    a. The church expresses its concern about the militarisation of Israeli society and its implications for the (psychological) well-being of many Israeli citizens who are traumatised by the war years or by attacks;
    b. the church expresses its concern about the militarisation of Palestinian society and its consequences for internal relations among the Palestinian people;
    c. the church expresses its concern about the consequences of the Israeli occupation and Israeli security policy for the well-being of so many Palestinians;
    d. the church knows itself to be called to direct its attention to opportunities, wherever it encounters them, to bring healing to those who suffer from traumas caused by violence and suffering, whether as victims or perpetrators, irrespective of their origin, faith or social position.

5.3 Consequences of the policy framework for the church, including the churchwide services organisation

1. *For the church (including its churchwide services organisation), the outlined policy specifically means the following:*

a. troubled by the ongoing segregation of Jews and Palestinians, the church will continue to argue for and work on effective programmes of meeting and cooperation, so as to overcome the mutual distrust;
b. together with churches and local organisations, the church will work towards building bridges between Jews and Palestinians, between Muslims, Christians and Jews in the region, so that Jews better understand the call of Palestinians for law and justice, and Palestinians are more heedful of the fundamental Israeli need for security;
c. the church will focus its attention on initiatives in the Middle East that can bring law and justice closer to the population in Israel and the Palestinian territories;
d. in its information supply to congregations, the church will (continue to) raise the issue of human rights abuses in the region with the relevant authorities;
e. the church will develop or support aid projects with regard to the psychological well-being of traumatised Israeli citizens and Palestinians;
f. the church will undertake charitable works (tackling poverty, aiding refugees, marginalised people and victims of violence and lack of rights, in the Middle East), irrespective of creed and nationality of those concerned;
g. the church will enter into consultations with ICCO to harmonise the policy laid down in the policy framework of this memorandum with ICCO's policy in regard to the Middle East.

2. *The development of policy with special regard to the Jewish people:*
   a. the church will continue – in close consultation with the Protestant Council for Church & Israel – to devote itself to having an open conversation with Jewish organisations in the Netherlands and in Israel;
   b. the church asks the Protestant Theological University to make the encounter with contemporary Judaism integral to the training of clergy and church workers;
   c. the church asks the Protestant Theological University to make Israel integral both in the curriculum of the training of clergy and in the programmes of continuing education and refresher courses. The church bases this on what is stated in ordinance 1-2 about the conversation with Israel. Special attention should be given to the danger of anti-Semitism and of replacement theology.

3. *The development of policy with special regard to the relationship with the churches in the Middle East:*
   a. the church will continue to devote itself to having an open conversation with the churches in the Middle East;
   b. the church will explore how the Christian community can serve peace, and how we can support one another in this endeavour. International ecumenical contacts on the ground are relevant here;
   c. the church will regularly invite representatives of (the) churches and the Jewish community in the Middle East to attend its synod meetings;
   d. the church will, wherever possible, devote itself to extending the bilateral talks with Jewish interlocutors and with representatives of churches in the Middle East respectively, to become three-way talks;
   e. the church will, in the Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum and in conversations with church leaders in Jerusalem, argue in favour of forms of consultation with Muslim leaders; on the basis of the Amman Call, the church will seek to enter into conversation with representatives of churches and Christians in the Middle East about the unrelinquishable solidarity of the church with the Jewish people. All this relates directly to issues of justice and peace. It must also be possible to discuss questions about the dangers posed by conscious and unconscious forms of replacement theology.

4. *The development of policy with special regard to the relationship with Islam in the Middle East:*
   a. the church will, wherever possible, promote conversations between Muslims, Jews and Christians about the conflict in the Middle East and the underlying motivations;
   b. the church will organise a meeting with representatives of these communities to share our respective visions about Jerusalem, and to identify common values with regard to Jerusalem, justice and peace.

Appendix 1

Overview of talks held by (members of) the governing board with organisations and persons

A. Hearings with the full board, as announced in the synod meeting of November 2007

- Tuesday 15 January 2008
Platform Appèl Kerk en Israël (Platform Appeal Church and Israel)
Centraal Joods Overleg (Central Jewish Platform)
Christenen voor Israël (Christians for Israel)
Stichting Een Ander Joods Geluid ('A Different Jewish Voice' Foundation)
Werkgroep Keerpunt (Task group 'Turning Point')
Stichting Steun Messiasbelijdende Joden ('Support Messianic Jews' Foundation)

- Thursday 17 January 2008
Overlegorgaan voor Joden en Christenen in Nederland
(OJEC – Consultative Body for Jews and Christians in the Netherlands)
Protestantse Raad voor Kerk en Israël (Protestant Council for Church and Israel)
United Civilians for Peace
ICCO (Interchurch Organisation for Development Co-operation)
Vrienden van Sabeel Nederland (Friends of Sabeel Netherlands)
Werkgroep Vanuit Jeruzalem (Working group 'From Jerusalem')

B. Further talks conducted by members of the board

Church president G. de Fijter, general secretary Dr. B. Plaisier and the editor-in-chief of this memorandum, Prof. Dr. L.J. Koffeman, spoke on Wednesday, 23 January 2008, in The Hague, with Mr Harry Kney-Tal, ambassador of Israel, and on Thursday, 7 February 2008, in The Hague, with Ms Somaia Barghouti, the official representative of the Palestinian Authority in the Netherlands.

A delegation of the board, together with representatives of the national church office, met on Thursday 31 January 2008 with a delegation of the World Council of Churches during a regular working visit to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

Some members of the board, together with the members of the editorial committee of this memorandum, held a meeting on Monday 25 February 2008 in Utrecht, with Dr. Naim Ateek and Ms. Cedar Duaybis, representatives of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem.

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This memorandum was written in Dutch by an editorial team, consisting of Ms Marieke den Hartog, Mr Feije Duim and Prof. Dr Leo J. Koffeman (editor-in-chief). Numerous experts from the church's services organisation and elsewhere were consulted with regard to various sections of this memorandum.
The groundwork for section 4.3 was done by an external working group, consisting of Dr André Drost, Pastor Bart Gijsbertsen and Dr Henk Vreekamp.

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