

# Christians Must Not Block Path to Middle East Peace

Some U.S. Christians have tried to draw detours on the “road map” to peace in the Middle East. They need to step back from the table and allow residents of that region, who actually must follow that map, to negotiate its course with help from advocates of lasting peace.

For many years, Christians who think they have figured out the scenario for the end of time—and believe the geography of Israel and Palestine holds a key to that scenario—have inserted their influence into Middle Eastern affairs.

While they are not the sole cause of Israeli-Palestinian bloodshed, their views and involvement hinder the peace process. On the one hand, they give intransigent agents within Israel the sense they can act with impunity, counting on strong political forces within the United States to back them, no matter what. On the other hand, they exacerbate the hopelessness-born anger of Palestinians, who feel they have nothing to lose and will be condemned, no matter what.

People of all faiths—and particularly Christians, Jews and Muslims—should be concerned about and strive for peace in the Middle East. The strip of land along the Jordan River is holy ground. More importantly, all the people who live there were created in God’s image and should be able to live in peace, without fear of suicide bombers or military mortar.

The stage for this conflict was set thousands of years ago. Jews, Muslims and Christians regard Abraham as the first patriarch of their faith. They point to a couple of starry nights in antiquity, when, the Bible says, God promised Abraham his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and would dwell in a land God would give to them. (Genesis 12, 15).

Jews and Christians recognize the fulfillment of that promise in Isaac (Genesis 18,

21), the son of Abraham and his wife, Sarah, and Isaac's descendants, who became the 12 tribes of Israel. Others view Abraham's other son, Ishmael, born of Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar, as the fulfillment of God's promise to produce descendants who became "too many to count" (Genesis 16). At Sarah's urging, Abraham sent Ishmael and Hagar into the wilderness, but God looked down on them in mercy and promised to make "a great nation" of Ishmael (Genesis 21). Despite God's blessing on both sides, the offspring of Isaac and Ishmael have fought almost ever since.

Many people today, including millions of conservative evangelical Christians, point to God's promise of land to Abraham and God's fulfillment of a "nation" through Isaac as divine sanction for the modern nation of Israel. Others counter that claim for various reasons. Some note that in Christ, God made a new covenant with God's people, and followers of Christ are the "new Israel," leaving the Israelis' claim theologically groundless.

Others stress the modern nation of Israel is quite secular and carries no special connection to a divine promise of existence. Still others point to the Palestinians' long occupation of the land and conclude Palestinians hold at least as much claim to the land as Jews.

Many American Christians have written the modern nation of Israel a political blank check for yet another reason. Their interpretation of the Book of Revelation leads them to believe the pivotal events at the end of time will take place in the Holy Land. Consequently, they believe this end-times scenario can only be completed if the Jews control the region. Inspired by their theological understanding of the apocalypse, they want the region to be controlled by Israel.

Unfortunately, some of the gravest political atrocities of all time have been conducted under the name of Yahweh, Christ and Allah on that sacred but sin-sodden soil. This poses an important question: Does any group have a right to impose its theological understanding of history upon the peace process in Israel and Palestine?

The answer is no, for several reasons:

-The theological position of any one group might-and very well may-be wrong. For example, the dispensational premillennialism that drives some Christians to endorse Israeli hardliners without question is not a majority view among conservative, Bible-believing Christians. Fervent Christians hold a variety of views about the end times, all of which leave room for various interpretations of current Middle Eastern political philosophy. And that says nothing of the strongly held theological views of Jews and Muslims.

-A rigid eschatological understanding that presumes God can work under only one set of political circumstances borders on-if not crosses over into-idolatry. God is bigger than 21st century political borders. Furthermore, Jesus taught that only God the Father knows the time and place of the Second Coming and the end of the age. Political attempts to engineer history so that God is bound to act in a certain way contradict Jesus' teachings and strike at the sin of Eden-humanity's attempt to take the place of God.

-All the people who live in the Holy Land have been made in God's image and are precious in God's sight. Yes, most U.S. Christians feel a close affinity for Israel and wish to see Jews there living free and secure. However, the Palestinians also have a right to safety and security. Children and civilians on both sides have been the victims of violence. As people who worship the Prince of Peace, we should desire to see the peace of the Holy Land secured for all who dwell there.

The Holy Land strains our capacity for hope. The pages of its history are drenched in blood, and the most recent chapter is as stained as any. Yet we who see that land as sacred should pray and advocate for peace upon its peoples.

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