Praying for the Mideast

by John Buchanan in the February 6, 2013 issue

The Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. Some rights reserved by
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*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within
your walls, and security within your towers." —Psalm 122:6*

It's not possible to say anything about Israel and Palestine without offending
someone. American Jews are offended when American Christians criticize Israel for
its treatment of the Palestinian people; for Israel's continuing construction of
settlements on land needed for a future Palestinian state; for civilian casualties that
occur when Israel is pursuing militants who are carrying out rocket attacks that
target Israeli civilians; for what seems to be a lack of commitment to any process
that might result in an independent Palestinian state.

American Christians are offended when Jewish neighbors imply and sometimes
charge that any criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic. Christians remember how Jews and
Christians stood shoulder to shoulder during the civil rights movement, challenging
unjust laws and practices in this country, and wonder why so few Jewish voices and
organizations are criticizing Israel's construction of settlements.

Efforts to do something positive, like investing in Palestinian businesses, are met
with criticism from the political left for not holding Israel accountable for human
rights violations and from the right for supporting a government that either sponsors
or chooses to ignore rocket attacks on Israel.

Yet polls suggest that almost everyone understands that peace depends on an autonomous, viable and secure Palestinian state sharing a border with a safe and secure Israel. Why doesn't the two-state solution happen?

Political dynamics inside Israel are complex. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has governed with a coalition that includes parties representing the country's growing far right, whose leaders seem to have no interest in peace.

Meanwhile the West Bank is governed by Fatah, by far the more moderate Palestinian party, and Gaza is controlled by Hamas, which continues to call for a Palestinian state in the area that includes the state of Israel. On paper at least, Hamas is committed to Israel's demise, and its leaders refuse to back away from or soften that stance.

Commitments to the Palestinian people's sovereignty and security have led the American church to try to influence that policy with targeted boycotts and divestment—actions that helped end apartheid in South Africa. More recently, a group of American denominations wrote a letter to Congress asking that it reconsider military aid to Israel in light of Israel's violations of the human rights of the Palestinian people.

The statement was remarkable in its failure to recognize the threat that Israel faces. Hamas and Fatah are moving closer to each other. Hamas wants Israel to be destroyed and either sponsors or ignores rocket attacks. Egypt's new government may be influenced by Islamists who are intolerant of Israel's existence. The Syrian uprising may topple the Assad regime and be hijacked by militant Islamists. Jordan's U.S.-friendly government is under pressure from an unhappy citizenry. And now American churches are suggesting that the U.S. should reduce military aid to Israel. No wonder Israelis are afraid and American Jews are uneasy.

The most hopeful thing I have read recently was a *New York Times* report about the rabbis and lay leaders at an Upper West Side synagogue who sent an e-mail to congregants supporting the UN vote to upgrade Palestine to nonmember observer status. The statement called the vote a "great moment for us as citizens of the world . . . an opportunity to celebrate the process that allows a nation to come forward and ask for recognition."

Jews and Christians must join to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" and specifically for political leadership in Israel, the West Bank, Gaza and the U.S. that will have the

courage to take the risks peace will require. A starting point might be for Israel to stop building settlements on land the Palestinians will need for a viable state, and for Fatah and Hamas to stop arguing and work to eliminate rocket attacks on Israel and threats to Israel's existence.