

A new year's promise: Breaking the Middle East deadlock

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

A new administration in Washington brings the promise of new approaches to deadlocked and dangerous international conflicts. President-elect Obama has indicated his intent to rethink and recast our relationship with Cuba, for instance. Anyone who visits Cuba can see how the U.S. boycott and effort to isolate the Castro regime has provided Cuban leaders with a convenient villain on whom to blame Cuba's weak economy and daily hardships.

A new administration can also bring fresh approaches to the Israel-Palestine conflict, leading to the end that everyone knows is necessary—a viable and secure Palestinian state alongside a viable and secure Israel.

This issue features an exchange on the biblical promise of land to the Jews, with Gary Anderson arguing that Christians cannot simply ignore this promise. Nor can Christians ignore readings like this one, which the lectionary assigns for the fourth Sunday in Advent, from 2 Samuel 7: “And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from your enemies.”

It took a long process for me to begin to understand the importance of the land of Israel to my Jewish friends. When my denomination voted several years ago to divest itself from corporations whose business in Israel is deemed harmful to Palestinian people, a firestorm of angry protest erupted in my community and throughout the country. Many Jewish leaders interpreted divestment as an attack on the economy of Israel and thus an attack on the very existence of Israel. Like many others, I was astonished that what many of us thought was a critique of particular Israeli policies was experienced as an attack on Israel's right to exist.

In response to that debate, a small group of Jewish and Christian scholars, clergy and laity met regularly in Chicago. The conversations were open, honest, sometimes

angry. Our Jewish partners wondered why mainline Protestants were outspoken on Israel's human rights violations and relatively silent about the behavior of states like Cuba, North Korea and China. Our response, not universally accepted, was that we were critical precisely because Israel is a democracy and a close ally, and because our expectations are higher for Israel than for less democratic states or for states that do not receive military aid from the U.S.

What I took away from the experience mostly was a new appreciation for what the land and the state of Israel mean to my Jewish friends. There is simply no equivalence in the religious experience of most Christians. Most of us never had a land that was very important to our identity and our religion. Presbyterians never have had pogroms aimed at us; we were never ghettoized, discriminated against or kept out of clubs, universities and law practices because of being Presbyterian. There is no Holocaust in our religious experience.

I'm praying for new American leadership in the Middle East, a breakthrough in peace negotiations, and renewed conversations among Christians and between Jews and Christians about the land, the Bible and our hopes for peace.