

## The Catholic Church and Middle East Peace



### Background:

After World War I, France and England colonized a large swatch of land in what we call the Mideast, after the defeat of the Ottomans, who were allies of the Germans. Among the English territories was Palestine, about 10,000 square miles at the end of the Mediterranean Sea. This area had been home to Israelites for centuries before they were exiled by the Romans in 60 AD. (The Romans named the area Palaestina from a term in Herodotus.) After this expulsion, the area's population and its administration varied, but by the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim tribes had settled in the region and their descendents became the Palestinians; this group lived has lived in the area for 14 centuries.

During the Zionist movement in Russia, which began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, small groups of Jewish settlers had been returning to Palestine. Responding to Jewish Zionists in England, the British agreed in the early 1920s to assist in the development of a Jewish state in that region. After World War II, in 1947, the United Nations, trying to deal with Jewish refugees who had survived Hitler and Stalin, declared a new Jewish state in Palestinian territory, even though a majority of the new state's residents were Palestinian Muslims. This led to a violent conflict with Arabs in the surrounding region, and in 1948 and 1949, the Palestinian residents of the new state of Israel fled or were expelled to refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. (The West Bank and Gaza Strip were taken over by Israel in ensuing conflicts and are now ruled as occupied territories).

For the last 60 years, over 3 million Palestinian refugees and their descendents have remained stateless, with many still in refugee camps, a situation that has caused outrage in many parts of the Muslim world. Violence on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has continued despite the efforts of the United Nations and world leaders to broker a lasting peace. Many world leaders, including recent popes, are promoting a two-state solution, which would allow the Palestinians a nation of their own.



The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem

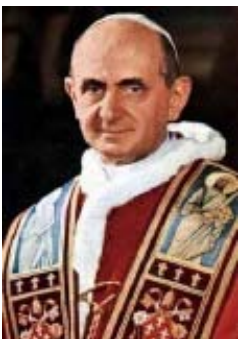
## History of the Catholic Church's Involvement:



Pope Pius XII

On the eve of the outbreak of the first Arab-Israeli war in **1948**, **Pope Pius XII**, addressing the delegates of the Arab Committee for Palestine, recalled that “peace can only be achieved in truth and justice” for both sides of the conflict. Pius XII’s concern for a peaceful solution in between the Israelis and Arabs in the Middle East was repeated in his encyclicals of 1948, 1949 and 1956.

**In 1949, Pope Pius XII** created the Pontifical Mission for Palestine to aid refugees with basic supplies, health workers, education and training. This Pontifical Mission has been functioning for 60 years.



Pope Paul VI,

**In 1964, Pope Paul VI**, visited Israel as a “pilgrim of peace” to the Holy Land, and called for “reconciliation” of the Israelis and Palestinians. In 1974, Paul’s encyclical *Nobis in Animo* discussed the social problems and conflict existing in the Holy Land.

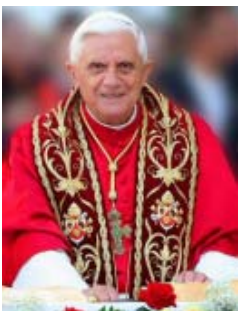
**In 1979, Pope John Paul II**, expressed his wish and “fervent hope” that peace could be ensured in the Middle East with “due consideration for the rights and legitimate aspirations of all peoples concerned.” John Paul made many statements, and many efforts, to promote peace in the Middle East during his long papacy.



Pope John Paul II

**In 1982, Pope John Paul II** met with the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to ask for a cessation of violence and to affirm that the Vatican recognized the right to a Palestinian state as well as to affirm the need for security in Israel. In 2000, John Paul II visited Israel and prayed for peace at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. He supported the international peace processes that worked to find a way to bring the Israelis and the Palestinians to some agreements that would begin peace negotiations.

**Pope John Paul II** was clear about his unequivocal opposition to violence on either side, whether perpetrated through acts of terrorism or through acts of repression. He was consistent in his recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to a homeland and thus to their being recognized not only as refugees but as a people possessing specific and legitimate rights. He also believed in the legitimacy of the state of Israel and its right to established and secure borders.



Pope Benedict XVI

**Pope Benedict XVI** has followed John Paul II in calling for an end to the long and bloody conflict in the Middle East with a two-state solution. During his recent trip to both Israeli and Arab areas of the region, he declared: “I plead with all those responsible to explore every possible avenue in the search for a just resolution of the outstanding difficulties, so that both peoples may live in peace in their own homelands with secure, internationally recognized borders.”

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## The U.S. Bishops on the Middle East:

**In 2007, the USCCB** stated: “The Middle East is a land holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, but tragically it is also a land that yearns for a just peace. USCCB has a long history of working to address the conflict. Palestinian leaders must recognize Israel and clearly renounce terrorism, take effective steps to stop it, and bring to justice those responsible. Israel’s often-aggressive military response, its expansion of settlements, and its construction of a wall deep in Palestinian areas increase misery and tension that often breed violence. The route of the “barrier” presents a further impediment to creation of a viable Palestinian state that is necessary for a two-state resolution of the conflict. The dire humanitarian situation in the Palestinian Territories is not in the best interests of either Israelis or Palestinians.”



Furthermore, the Bishops noted that “peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel would contribute to stability in the region. It would also deny terrorists a highly symbolic issue which they now exploit.” USCCB continues to work with Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders in the U.S. to make a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians a top priority of U.S. foreign policy.

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## Prayer for Peace in the Middle East



*May those who call Abraham “father”  
Recognize that peace is their birthright.  
May those who pray to the God of Abraham,  
Jew, Muslim and Christian,  
Recognize that peace is God’s command,  
And challenge, to all his children.  
May we reflect on the Church’s call  
To end the violence in the Middle East  
And to act as agents of reconciliation.  
May the power of peace uproot the terrors of violence,  
And may the “swords be beaten into plowshares”  
So all people in the Middle East may know  
The taste of peace they so hunger for.*