

The Struggle for Unity on Israel/Palestine

Reflections on AFSC's Apartheid-Free Pledge

By Steve Chase

At Salem Friends Meeting, we hold a variety of views and opinions on the current siege on Gaza, but as Quakers we are called to make a statement... This conflict is not something which we can wait to address; this is a present and dire moment that requires response.

-- Salem Friends Meeting Statement 6/23/24

Today's Religious Society of Friends is rightly proud that our Quaker ancestors opposed slavery before any other Christian denomination. We are also rightly impressed that many of these Friends became organizers and activists in the broader abolition movement. This history reminds us that, at our very best, Quaker faith is committed to respecting "that of God" in everyone and working for peace, justice, and equality.

Yet, as noted by Quaker historians Donna McDaniel and Vanessa Julye, it also took Quakers in the American colonies over a hundred years of intense discernment and contentious debate before they finally spoke in one voice against the sin of slavery. Even then, many Quakers in local meetings hesitated to participate in the broader anti-slavery movement. Only ten percent of US Quakers boycotted slave-made plantation goods, and several of the most active Quaker abolitionists were often marginalized, or even removed from membership, by their home meetings. For a long time, some local meetings even refused to admit African Americans as members.

My question is can we build a deeper faithfulness and stronger unity than this as we work for a just peace in Israel/Palestine?

Unity and Disunity on Israel/Palestine

Unity among Friends on Israel/Palestine is growing. Prodded by the horrific war crimes committed by the military wing of Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the massive US-backed Israeli assault on Gaza ever since, eight major Quaker organizations have issued a joint statement entitled "[A Different Future Is Possible: A Shared Quaker Vision for Peace in Palestine and Israel.](#)" The co-signers of this statement include American Friends Service Committee, Canadian Friends Service Committee, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Friends World Committee for Consultation, Quakers in Britain, Quaker Council on European Affairs, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, and the Quaker United Nations Office.

Echoing allies in Jewish groups like If Not Now, Rabbis for Ceasefire, and Jewish Voice for Peace, this joint Quaker statement calls for a permanent ceasefire, the mutual release of

captives, restoration of humanitarian aid to Gaza, the creation of a just and lasting political settlement, and withholding US/Western aid to the State of Israel until it accepts these basic conditions. Besides addressing Israel, the military wing of Hamas, and Western governments, the joint statement also calls on Quakers everywhere to:

1. *Urgently call and fervently work for a permanent ceasefire and amplify our voices in our communities and at the local, state, and national levels.*
2. *Encourage decision-makers calling for a ceasefire and working for peace.*
3. *Organize and participate in teach-ins, actions, and protests until a ceasefire and a just and lasting peace are realized.*
4. *Actively support an end to Israel's occupation and equal protection and rights for all people living under Israeli control and commit to actions as meetings/churches until this reality is realized.*
5. *Divest from corporations profiting from militarism, including the occupation of Palestine.*
6. *Support those in Israel and Palestine who are working for peace.*

The good news is that a significant number of Quaker monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings in the United States have already endorsed the joint statement, or something like it. Many have even begun taking bold action as part of the growing interfaith campaign for peace and justice in Israel/Palestine.

That said, there has also been a countervailing pattern of hesitation and resistance to the core elements of the joint Quaker statement. This was certainly true at Friends Meeting of Washington, where I am a member. Back in December 2023, after several emotionally-charged meetings, we were not able to come to unity on hanging a banner on our fence that read:

Seek Peace and pursue it. -- Psalms 34:14
Never Again, For Anyone
Ceasefire Now!

Some members even called those of us who proposed the banner “Hamas supporters” and “antisemites.” Tensions and frustration were high and some of us wondered if we could ever find a faithful way forward.

While I found the angry name calling a bit shocking, I recognized where it came from—a fully justified concern for Jewish safety and rights that was combined with little understanding or empathy for the rights and safety of Palestinians. This outlook is familiar to me. From my teen years to well into my late 20s, I shared this perspective and believed that the Palestinian people had little or no legitimate grievances against the State of Israel, that Palestinians were only motivated by unprovoked hate and anti-Jewish bigotry, and that those who criticized Israel’s policies towards the Palestinians were either “antisemites” or “self-hating Jews.”

From my own experience, I also know that people can question their starting assumptions, pray for guidance, learn more, deepen their empathy, and ultimately transform

their perspective about what justice demands in Israel/Palestine. I told my own personal story of transformation in the Pendle Hill pamphlet *Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions? A Quaker Zionist Rethinks Palestinian Rights*. As the months unfolded after October 7, I began to see this same transformation happening at my Meeting. After apologies for harsh words, a recommitment to respectful dialogue, and months of mutual learning and discernment, we endorsed the joint Quaker statement on Israel/Palestine at our July 2024 business meeting.

From the Joint Quaker Statement to the Interfaith Apartheid-Free Pledge

Building on this remarkable achievement, FMW's Peace and Social Concerns Committee asked our Meeting in September to join [Apartheid-Free Communities](#), an AFSC-convened coalition of 400 religious, human rights, and business groups that agree to the following Pledge:

WE AFFIRM our commitment to freedom, justice, and equality for the Palestinian people and all people;

WE OPPOSE all forms of racism, bigotry, discrimination, and oppression; and

WE DECLARE ourselves an Apartheid-free community and to that end,

WE PLEDGE to join others in working to end all support to Israel's Apartheid regime, settler colonialism, and military occupation.

To date, one yearly meeting, a quarterly meeting, and some monthly meetings in several states have adopted the Pledge. Many, however, have not and the Pledge may be more controversial to endorse than "A Different Future Is Possible." There is a subtle, but important difference between the two statements. While the joint Quaker statement acknowledges that "a growing number of international human rights organizations have documented that Israel's treatment of Palestinians meets the legal definition of apartheid," it does not explicitly agree that Israel's military occupation of Palestine is a system of apartheid. The Apartheid-Free Communities Pledge does, which some Friends seem to feel is "a step too far."

I have personally seen this hesitation at both my monthly meeting and as a guest at Illinois Yearly Meeting's Annual Sessions last June. In both cases, the sticking point for Friends was not the first three lines of the Pledge. Nor was there any objection to saying we support an end to Israel's oppressive military occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. But, in both Illinois and Washington, DC, there were considerable concerns raised about naming this "apartheid." As one person said at FMW's September 2024 business meeting, "Doesn't 'apartheid' just refer to the white supremacist regime that ruled South Africa? If so, how can the State of Israel be described as an apartheid regime?"

Over the next month, FMW's Peace and Social Concerns Committee responded to this concern in two different ways. First, we acknowledged that the word "apartheid" was coined by the racist minority regime in South Africa, but explained that the term has since been given a

wider legal meaning under international law. It was first codified as a crime against humanity in the 1977 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, and then strengthened in the 1998 Rome Statute to the International Criminal Court.

Second, the Committee noted that while there are real differences between the South African system and other apartheid regimes around the world, all of them share the three defining characteristics of apartheid under international law:

1. An intent to maintain domination by one group over another.
2. A context of systematic oppression by one group over another.
3. Inhuman acts by the dominant group against another.

While these responses proved persuasive, there was still a question for a few of our members whether these three characteristics are descriptive of Israel's treatment of the 7.5 million Palestinians now living under its control in Israel/Palestine. Our Committee addressed this question in various ways. First, we pointed out that when South African anti-apartheid activists Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela visited Israel/Palestine on fact-finding missions, they reported that Israel's regime was far more oppressive than the apartheid system in South Africa. Second, we asked members of the Meeting who had worked in Israel/Palestine or taken part in fact-finding delegations to speak to other Friends about their direct observations.

To provide even more systematic evidence about the many apartheid policies adopted by the State of Israel since at least 1967, our Committee shared links to the research reports by [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), the Israeli human rights group [B'Tselem](#), and the Palestinian group [Al Haq](#). In addition, it shared the advisory finding of the [International Criminal Court](#), which ruled in July 2024 that the decades-long Israeli military occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem was illegal and constituted the crime of apartheid.

This, too, proved persuasive. At our October business meeting, there was now strong agreement that the State of Israel—with the financial, military, and diplomatic support of the United States—had constructed a complex apartheid regime over the Palestinians living in Israel/Palestine. We also agreed it would be useful for us to join an interfaith coalition seeking to change this status quo. The only remaining hesitation was voiced by a long-time Friend who shared his lingering worry about the phrase “settler colonialism” in the Pledge. This Friend questioned whether it is accurate to use the term “settler-colonialism” when a historically persecuted people seeks safety by moving its most threatened members to a part of the world that their ancient ancestors had once called home.

Is Settler-Colonialism a Feature of Israeli Apartheid?

This question was a big part of the deliberations at the Annual Sessions of Illinois Yearly Meeting. At their June gathering, these midwestern Friends endorsed the joint Quaker statement, but put off a decision on the Apartheid-Free Pledge for six months in order to discuss the settler-colonialism question in more depth. One Friend spoke for several in

attendance when he said he was actually ninety percent there. He agreed that the Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories live under an apartheid regime enforced by a permanent military occupation. He even agreed that “settler-colonialism” is a fair description of the unrelenting growth of illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories since 1967. His hesitation was that the term “settler colonialism” might also imply that there was something unjust or colonial about the early Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

In my plenary talk that night, I agreed with this Friend that Israel did begin implementing a settler-colonial strategy in the remaining Palestinian territories it conquered in 1967. Indeed, while knowing it was against international law, and that many Israelis opposed it, the State of Israel immediately began transferring a growing number of Jewish Israeli citizens into Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem to build settlements and dispossess Palestinians.

During the June 2023 Friends United Meeting’s fact-finding delegation to the West Bank and East Jerusalem, I saw the fruits of this policy. On that trip, co-led by North Carolina Quakers Max and Jane Carter, we saw many examples of annexation, land and water theft, home demolitions, mass incarceration, Israelis burning Palestinian crops and shooting at Palestinian farmers, and violent Israeli settler and soldier attacks against hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages. My message to Illinois Yearly Meeting was that this is more than enough to name Israel’s policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories “settler-colonialism.”

At the same time, I also shared my conviction that Israel’s settler-colonialism has roots that go back to the early years of the Zionist movement and did not just emerge out of thin air in 1967. To explain my view, I shared what I had learned about three prominent Zionist leaders. The first was Theodore Herzl, a Jewish intellectual living in Vienna who is widely viewed as the founder of the Zionist movement. He earned this reputation by writing the movement’s 1896 manifesto, *The Jewish State*, and organizing the first World Zionist Congress in 1897, which was attended by over 250 Jewish ethno-nationalists from 15 different countries.

At that Congress, this tiny group of Jewish activists addressed an issue of concern to the vast majority of European Jews--the very real problem of anti-Jewish bigotry, which in the late 1800s included serious legal and social discrimination in Western Europe and violent pogroms against Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Their proposed solution was that European Jews should organize themselves to gain Great Power support for Jews leaving Europe in mass and creating a militarized, Jewish state in Palestine, where the Jewish population at the time made up less than five percent of the Palestinian people. At the time, this proposal was opposed by the vast majority Jews in Europe and the United States.

A big part of the Jewish push-back against the Zionist movement was because it was, in Herzl’s own words, “somewhat colonial.” Even before publishing his manifesto, Herzl admitted in his diary that Zionist Jews will need to displace and dispossess Palestinians to create his envisioned “Jewish State.” The corporate charter Herzl co-wrote for the new movement’s Jewish-Ottoman Land Company also explicitly included the goal of displacing

Palestinians to “other provinces and territories of the Ottoman Empire.” To be fair, though, Herzl was not a violent man and he hoped that his settler-colonialist objective could be achieved through Great Power pressure, persuading more Jews to join the Palestine Jewish Colonial Association, and providing financial incentives to “the indigenous population” to leave Palestine to make way for a new Jewish majority.

Other Zionist leaders were more hard-nosed and militaristic. A good example is the Russian Zionist leader Ze’ev Jabotinsky, who in 1925 proclaimed that, “Zionism is a colonizing venture and, therefore, it stands or falls on the question of armed force.” Why? As Jabotinsky explained:

Every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonized. That is what the Arabs in Palestine are doing, and what they will persist in doing as long as there remains a solitary spark of hope that they will be able to prevent the transformation of “Palestine” into the “Land of Israel.”

Jabotinsky was on the extreme right-wing of the Zionist movement, and was opposed by many Jews, but his settler-colonial outlook was shared by more moderate Zionist leaders like David Ben-Gurion, who became the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel. Ben-Gurion also believed that ethnic cleansing and the subjugation of the Palestinian people was necessary to create a viable Jewish State whose population would be at least eighty percent Jews. In 1937, he wrote a letter to his son, saying “the Arabs will have to go, but one needs an opportune moment for making it happen, such as a war.”

Jabotinsky’s and Ben-Gurion’s hoped-for war was launched by armed Zionist militias ten years later and it soon escalated into a wider regional war through most of 1948. The Zionists called it the War of Independence, but the Palestinians called it the Nakba, which is Arabic for “catastrophe.” For all the positives that emerged for the Jewish immigrants to Palestine during and after the Nazi years, the founding of the State of Israel was certainly a catastrophe for Palestinians. They ended up paying the price for Europe’s crimes and for the US and British refusals to allow mass immigration of Nazi-persecuted Jews into their countries. The impact was staggering. Fifteen thousand Palestinians were killed during the Nakba, over 500 Palestinian villages and towns were wiped off the map, and three quarters of the Palestinian population that used to live in what became Israel were expelled to the remaining twenty-two percent of historic Palestine and surrounding countries.

After the newly declared “Jewish State” of Israel won the war in 1948, the 750,000 displaced Palestinian refugees were not allowed to return to their homes, farms, and businesses in what had become Israel. This was true even though their right of return was guaranteed under international law and specifically authorized by UN resolution 194 and, later, by resolution 3236. In addition, the small minority of Palestinians remaining in what became the State of Israel were placed under military rule and not allowed to become voting citizens until 1966. Even then, they faced severe legal restrictions that made them second class citizens.

Today, of course, we cannot change what happened in the past. Yet, as citizens of the United States--the main global power supporting the State of Israel's policies since 1948--we have a moral responsibility to push for a just political settlement where all the people living "between the River and the Sea" enjoy security, equality, human rights, and self-determination. As a Palestinian village priest in the West Bank explained to our Quaker delegation, "It does not matter if your name is Moshe, Mohammad, or Mathew, all are precious in the sight of God." That is the essence of the Apartheid-Free Communities Pledge and why I believe it deserves our support.

A Step Too Far or Not Far Enough?

It remains to be seen what Illinois Yearly Meeting will decide, but Friends Meeting of Washington agreed at its October business meeting to sign on to the Pledge and become active in the interfaith Apartheid-Free Communities Coalition. After a month of deliberation, we discerned that the Pledge was not a step too far, but actually the next needed step in our prophetic witness promoting peace and justice in Israel/Palestine.

Additional steps are still needed. As FMW Friends painfully acknowledged at our October business meeting, the problem now is not just US-backed Israeli apartheid, but the increasingly genocidal policy of collective punishment and mass murder that has been raining down on the 2.3 million people of Gaza for over a year. Addressing this unprecedented catastrophe--and the recent escalation into a wider regional war--will require much more than statements or pledges. It will require us to engage in relentless peace advocacy, increased humanitarian assistance, and strategic nonviolent resistance. As our friends in Jewish Voice for Peace say, "Never again is right now."

Steve Chase is a long-time Quaker activist, educator, and writer. He is a member Friends Meeting of Washington and is FMW's Liaison to the American Friends Service Committee. In 2017, he began his public ministry on seeking a just peace in Israel/Palestine with the publication of his Pendle Hill pamphlet, Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions? A Quaker Zionist Rethinks Palestinian Rights. His commitment to this ministry was only deepened by taking part in the Quaker Palestine Israel Network and Friends United Meeting's June 2023 service-learning delegation to Israel/Palestine.