

Double duty

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 28, 2011](#) issue



The Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock. [Attribution Some rights reserved](#) by [kudumomo](#).

When George Mitchell quietly resigned as special envoy for the Middle East, I was dismayed. I've always thought of him as a man of strong convictions but also as a pragmatist, a practitioner of politics as the art of compromise. Did he find the Israel-Palestine puzzle so intractable that he concluded that his efforts on behalf of the U.S. government were futile?

Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, observed recently that while Israel continues to be successful economically, it is increasingly isolated internationally; indeed, it is regarded by most of the world as the chief obstacle to Middle East peace (*Time*, May 2). Although the Middle East is in a particularly difficult time, with Hamas and Hezbollah on Israel's borders, the future of the Jewish state is at stake.

Churches, including my own, have a long relationship with the people of the Middle East and a mission presence nearly a century and a half old. We established schools, colleges and hospitals in the region and have ecclesiastical relationships with indigenous Middle Eastern churches. Our partners on the ground want and need American church support as they work for an end to the military occupation by Israel and for the self-determination of the Palestinian people.

At the same time American churches are partners with the American Jewish community. Many congregations are enriched by healthy and respectful relationships with neighboring synagogues. On a national level Christians and Jews have long been partners in working for peace and justice.

Sometimes the Jewish community sees Christian sympathy for the plight of the people of Palestine and their cause as hostility toward Israel and as insensitivity to the fact that Israel is surrounded by hostile nations and organizations. Criticism of Israel's policies is sometimes regarded as anti-Semitic.

I believe that Christians need to respond to this situation by doing two things: support the cause of a secure and viable Palestinian state that will live peacefully beside a secure and viable Israel and at the same time reach out to the Jewish community and to our Jewish neighbors in friendship and love and shared commitment to the common good.

Time is running out on the dream of a viable Palestinian state even though most people know that such a state is necessary for the sake of the entire region. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu believes that he can scold President Obama and count on unqualified support from American Jewish organizations. Is it too much to hope that U.S. Jewish leaders will publicly or privately tell the prime minister that he must take political risks for the sake of peace? And that continued settlement expansion, for instance, flies in the face of any verbal commitment to peace and a viable Palestinian state?

Is it too much to hope that Hamas will stop insisting that Israel must be destroyed? Nation-states do not ordinarily declare that neighbors have a "right to exist." But neither do nation-states ignore a neighbor whose charter calls for the elimination, presumably violently, of that state. Why can't Hamas simply say: Give us the right to exist as a state and we'll stop trying to eliminate you.

The Israeli prime minister's fragile coalition includes far-right parties that abhor the thought of any accommodation to Palestine's needs and rights. His counterpart, Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas, must deal with Hamas as a partner in government.

Do these challenges make any initiative too simple, too naive to undertake? Or will someone do something to break the impasse and move toward the peace the whole world so desperately needs?