

Israel embassy and protests draw Baptist reactions

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JERUSALEM (BP)—As the United States opened a controversial embassy in Jerusalem, many Southern Baptists lauded the occasion and celebrated the modern state of Israel's 70th anniversary.

Meanwhile, more than 60 Palestinians were killed and 2,700 wounded by the Israeli military as the Palestinians protested the Trump administration's decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv and recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The protestors also objected to what they view as Israel's violation of their human rights.

Jamal Bishara, an Arab Israeli Southern Baptist, urged American evangelicals to take a stronger stand for the freedom and humanitarian aid of Palestinians in Israel.

Embassy in Jerusalem opens

About 800 people were on hand May 14 at the opening of the new U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, formerly a U.S. consulate. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a Scripture-laced address, according to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, and President Trump addressed the crowd via video.

"Israel is a sovereign nation with the right like every other sovereign nation to determine its own capital," Trump said in a recorded message, according to *USA Today*. "For many years we failed to acknowledge the obvious."

Dallas pastor Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas,

delivered the dedication ceremony's opening prayer.

"As we look back, we see how Israel has been a blessing to the entire world, through her innovations in medicine, technology and energy. But most of all, Israel has blessed this world by pointing us to you, the one true God, through the message of her prophets, the Scriptures and the Messiah," Jeffress said.

Reasons to celebrate

Jim Sibley, a longtime Baptist representative in Israel who teaches at Israel College of the Bible, said Christians have political and theological reasons to celebrate Israel's seven decades of existence as a modern state, beginning May 14, 1948.

"Israel is an island of democracy, where human rights and responsibilities are recognized and honored," Sibley said. "There are excellent reasons for the tremendous and historic ties between the United States and Israel. Israel allows both Jews and Arabs full and equal rights and privileges, including participation in the government, universities and business. So it is a stabilizing influence in the Middle East. Christian communities in other countries in the Middle East are suffering persecution and death. What a stark contrast to the religious freedom in Israel."

In addition, "the modern State of Israel is also a testimony to the truthfulness of God's word and the faithfulness of God to his promises," Sibley asserted.

"In Romans 11, Paul says that God's promises are irrevocable, so when we see the modern State of Israel, we can take comfort that his promises to us are certain, as well. Furthermore, to see the vibrant and growing remnant of Jewish believers in Jesus (Yeshua) here in Israel is also to be assured of his faithfulness," he said.

Ric Worshill, president of the Southern Baptist Messianic Fellowship, a group of Jews who follow Jesus as the Messiah, said the anniversary of Israel's founding is an occasion to celebrate the fulfillment of God's promise to make the Promised Land as "an 'everlasting possession' of the children of Abraham."

Concern for Palestinians

Bishara, pastor of First Arabic Baptist Church in Phoenix, lamented the death of Palestinians in mass protests against the embassy move and Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

Citing Ephesians 1 among other Scriptures, he said the church—not ethnic or national Israel—is the people of God under the new covenant, and political support of national Israel should not be confused with faithfulness to Scripture.

Palestinians in Gaza "are robbed of their freedoms" through "annexation of land" and "taking land from them to build Jewish settlements," said Bishara, who served on the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee's Multiethnic Advisory Council. Evangelicals need to focus increasingly on delivering humanitarian aid to Palestinians, as well as sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with them, he added.

Southern Baptists "have got to be independent of politics" and "speak the truth," Bishara said.

Support the right of Israel to exist

Russell More, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said Southern Baptists can celebrate Israel's 70th anniversary even if they disagree on finer points of international politics or biblical interpretation.

“One need not hold to any particular view of prophecy to see the importance of the state of Israel,” Moore said. “The Jewish people are the kinsmen of our Lord, according to the flesh. The current state of Israel is the guardian and protector of the Jewish people after the worst genocidal atrocity the world has ever known, the Holocaust.

“Moreover, anti-Semitic hatred and violence have not gone away, and have even shown an uptick in recent years. Much of the hostility toward the Jewish people of the Middle East is really little different from the horrors we have seen over and over again through the years.

“Support for the state of Israel does not mean that we necessarily agree with every decision the government there makes, but it does mean that we support the right of this democratic nation to exist and to flourish, free from terrorist threats against it. On this, we should all agree.”

The Southern Baptist Convention has adopted several resolutions expressing support for the modern state of Israel. Most recently, it committed in 2016 to “bless Israel,” “support the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign state” and “pray for God’s peace to rule in Jerusalem and for the salvation of Israel, for the gospel is ‘God’s power for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew’ (Romans 1:16).”