

For as long as many of us can remember, the Middle East has been defined by a bitter Israeli-Palestinian conflict that seemingly defies resolution. And for about as long, many people appear to simply accept the conflict as inevitable and irresolvable even if they have vague feelings about who's right and wrong.

Indeed, a Pew Research Center study a few years ago found that a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a top priority for just 23 percent of the public.

Christians must reject this no-can-do attitude for several reasons.

First, this is about real people and real suffering. For over 65 years, Palestinians have been without a country, abiding second-class citizenship and humiliating powerlessness. For their part, the Israelis have lived in continual fear, surrounded by militants who threaten the very existence of their state. In this conflict, there are no winners, and Christians have suffered with both sides.

Second, the conflict has had disastrous effects on the whole region. The lack of resolution has embittered millions of people, especially many Muslims who because of the conflict deeply resent Israel and its ally, the United States. The continued conflict endangers all surrounding countries, making the region a tinderbox for provocations that have already provoked wars and threaten further conflict.

Third, our brother and sister Christians in the Holy Land are directly involved, caught between bitter factions. Mostly for this reason, Christians are disappearing from a region that is their home and that, like Jews and Moslems, they consider holy.

Last Easter, Pope Francis asked an audience how many of them pray for Christians who are persecuted and asked them to be "genuinely concerned about their plight, just as one would be for a family member in distress." When one of them is suffering, he asked, "Am I indifferent or is it like someone in the family is suffering?"

For Christians, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a matter of taking sides but of feeling and showing compassion for both sides and working and praying for peace. Ironically, after decades of peace efforts, there is no shortage of suggested solutions. U.S. Catholic bishops and leaders of many faiths have for a long time promoted a two-state solution, for instance. What is lacking is political will and that depends to a great extent on the interest of the public.

The conflict will continue to defy resolution only if we let it. Other seemingly intractable conflicts - such as those in Northern Ireland, apartheid in South Africa, and the raw feelings that followed World War II, have been resolved. Given the right amount of patience and fortitude, why should we presume that the Mideast conflict is irresolvable?

Last year, Secretary of State John Kerry, with the full support of President Barack Obama, launched an effort to reach a framework agreement as a basis for resolution. Secretary Kerry expects to formally propose the agreement soon, and with that in mind, he recently met with Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders, asking for their support. That support can take the form of prayer and fasting, staples of the Lenten season and traditions in all three

faiths, and of speaking out, letting the public and our elected officials know that we stand with those who seek peace.

Religions have often been accused of provoking wars and disputes among people. We can't let that accusation stick.

“Let us not become weary in doing good,” says the writer of the Letter to the Galatians in the Christian Bible, “for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”