

Time for Constructive Divestment

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As a witness to conflict in the Holy Land, the Episcopal Church has long supported a negotiated two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to stop the violence and end Israel's illegal occupation and settlements on Palestinian land. In 2005, in support of such a solution, the Episcopal Church undertook a policy of corporate engagement with companies with which our church is invested and "which operate in the Occupied Territories ... whose services contribute to violence against either side, or contribute to the infrastructure that supports and sustains the Occupation, such as settlements and their bypass roads, the security barrier where it is built on Palestinian land, and the demolition of Palestinian homes." The same Executive Council resolution encouraged positive investment in the economic infrastructure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a policy that was reaffirmed by the General Convention in 2012.

Since our church began this strategy of "constructive engagement," the number of Israeli settlers in the occupied Palestinian West Bank and East Jerusalem has increased from approximately 430,000 in 2005 to over 650,000 today. This is an increase of 150 percent since the 1993 signing of the Oslo Peace Accords, when there were approximately 256,000 settlers in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. The settlements, which are illegal according to international law and contravene official U.S. policy going back decades, are built with the encouragement (explicit or de facto) and infrastructural support of the Israeli government. For more than two decades, Israel has used unresolved peace talks as cover to expand settlements in the very lands where a Palestinian state is proposed.

These "facts on the ground" have eroded the prospects for a two-state solution and hopes for peace. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent statement, in the days before the Israeli election, that there would never be a Palestinian state on his watch is but a confirmation of what has been unfolding already in the occupied territories for decades.

The expansion of the settlements, even as peace talks have been ongoing if intermittent, is an egregious violation of international law. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states, "The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies." United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 from 1967, adopted shortly after the occupation began, calls for the withdrawal of the Israeli armed forces from the occupied territories. The U.S. government considers aspects of the occupation and the settlements to be illegal and illegitimate, even as the U.S. sends over \$3 billion in military aid to Israel each year.

This status quo — permanent occupation with no solution in sight — is unendurable for the 4.4 million Palestinians who are now living in the third or fourth generation of occupation. In the West Bank, Palestinians experience the demolition of homes and farms, both as forms of collective punishment and land encroachment; unequal and discriminatory treatment and distribution of resources, such as roads and access to water, in the territories; the negative employment, educational, and health effects of having to pass through multiple security checkpoints, often with harassment, that turn short journeys into long, unbearable commutes; mass incarceration of Palestinians, including youth, many of whom are held under "administrative detention" without charge or access to trial for extended periods; photographic "mapping" of children roused out of bed in their own homes in the middle of the night, in the name of security, by Israeli armed forces; and the indignity of being governed by another country in which they have no say, and one whose prime minister recently rallied votes to his side by inciting racism against Palestinians.

Meanwhile, Gaza is an open wound, an open-air prison, as a consequence of shortsighted Israeli and Egyptian policy. Since the removal of 8,000 Israeli settlers in compliance with international law, Gaza has remained under

Israeli military occupation and endured three devastating Israeli military assaults, with dreadful psychological consequences for the population, nearly half of which is under age 18, and a blockade that has crushed Gaza's small economy.

The Episcopal Church's policy of constructive engagement and positive investment was undertaken with hope, and at the outset it was not wrong. However, as the occupation hardens and growing settlements make a Palestinian state increasingly untenable, it is time for the Episcopal Church to join the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA and the pension board of the United Methodist Church, both of which took measured action toward increasing economic pressure on the settlement policy in 2014. As our own Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated in a message to the Presbyterian Church, dated June 10, 2014:

Realistic Israeli leaders have acknowledged that Israel will either end its occupation through a one- or two-state solution, or live in an apartheid state in perpetuity. The latter option is unsustainable and an offense to justice. We learned in South Africa that the only way to end apartheid peacefully was to force the powerful to the table through economic pressure.

Divestment from certain carefully chosen companies will reduce our complicity and profit from the specific tools of occupation and settlement, align our investments with our principles, and serve, along with the actions of other churches and institutions, including a growing number of Jewish organizations and voices both in Israel and the United States, to help exert pressure for a just and peaceful end to the destructive status quo of permanent occupation.

In this call for a measured escalation of pressure on the settlement policies of the Israeli government, we affirm our profound love, concern, and continued prayer for all the people of the Holy Land, both Israelis and Palestinians. As always, we absolutely repudiate violence on all sides of the conflict. We recognize the deep roots and long history of this conflict, and that there are legitimate and historic grievances held by all sides, even as we reject attempts to equate honest and legitimate criticism of unwise policies of the government of Israel with anti-Semitism. However, the hardening of the occupation, the inexorable expansion of the settlements, and the deepening violence seen in the assaults on Gaza in 2014 lead us to call for the Episcopal Church to take this next step for justice and a lasting peace.

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