

Report of the Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy

Questions & Answers

1. What do you see as the primary roadblocks to peace in this conflict?

The working group believes the only solution to the pervasive injustice and ongoing violence in the region is for Israelis and Palestinians to engage in legitimate, good-faith negotiations that lead to an end to the occupation. It will be challenging to achieve this end in the midst of internal and external political pressures, significant imbalances in power, fear, mistrust, hatred, and pervasive religious ideology.

2. Why do you describe Israeli policies as oppressive?

Through its military occupation, Israel maintains extensive control over the lives of Palestinians. Harassment, intimidation, and restrictions on movement are the substance of daily life for most Palestinians. Arbitrary closures of checkpoints and limits on movement in the West Bank restrict Palestinians' freedom, employment opportunities, and access to farmland. Construction of Israeli settlements, an extensive network of restricted roads, diversion of water resources, construction of the separation barrier, and military checkpoints are all expressions of the occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people.

3. It seems your critique of Israel is nothing more than antisemitic rhetoric. How can you justify this?

The United Church condemns actions and activities that seek to delegitimize or demonize Israel. Criticisms of Israel vary significantly and must be judged by their intent. Criticism that questions Israel's right to exist or that seeks to undermine its legitimacy as a state is unacceptable. Actions and language that demonize Israel are not helpful and can, in some cases, be antisemitic. Holding Israel, like any other modern democratic state, accountable for its actions is one way civil society strengthens democracy and justice.

The working group does not believe that criticism of Israel is evidence of antisemitism, and heard agreement on this from many Jewish leaders in Canada and Israel. However, when criticism seeks to delegitimize or demonize Israel, it can and should be questioned.

4. Why is the United Church so fixated on the occupation as the primary contributor to injustice and violence in the region?

The occupation of Palestinian territories is the longest existing occupation in the world and is being carried out by a democratic country with implicit support from a number of Western countries, including Canada. This alone warrants special attention.

The occupation perpetuates a system of profound systematic injustice for Palestinians and it needs to end. Allowing Israel to continue to take (steal) Palestinian land will make a Palestinian state impossible. It is also simply wrong!

5. Is this report not just another example of a disproportionate focus on Israel over any number of other worse situations in the world?

The working group believes that Israel can and should be held to a higher standard than surrounding non-democratic countries or authoritarian regimes. It is precisely because of Israel's close identification with democratic ideals that it needs to be challenged on its policies around the occupation.

The working group further believes that since Israel's military occupation is the longest-standing ongoing occupation in the world, special attention and action are warranted. Equally important, Israel's decision to continue to build and expand settlements—in other words, to annex or, more accurately, steal land in the occupied territories—supports the need for criticism of and pressure on Israel in order to protect Palestinian rights.

6. Why should Israel withdraw from the territories?

As part of the occupation, Israel has initiated significant development of illegal settlements in the annexed areas of East Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank. Construction of the settlements, roads, and security apparatus has led to the wrongful dispossession and treatment of Palestinians. Loss of homes, separation from farmland and families, destruction of ancient olive groves, and attacks and abuse from settlers, enabled by Israel soldiers, are all part of the legacy of the settlements. In doing so, Israel has violated international law.

As part of an overall resolution of the conflict, the settlements must be closed, settlers returned to Israel, and land returned to Palestinians.

7. Does the United Church support a two-state solution?

A two-state solution remains the primary hope of most Jewish and Palestinian people. However, Israel's policies in the occupied territories are making it an increasingly unlikely possibility. Ultimately the choice of one or two states must be made by the peoples themselves. In whatever situation emerges, ending Israel's military occupation must be the starting point.

8. Why is the United Church so critical of the separation barrier?

Israel has built the separation barrier almost exclusively on or inside the Palestinian side of the Green Line, effectively annexing Palestinian land. In many locations, the barrier envelops productive agricultural land and gives Israel control of aquifers and other sources of water. In a number of locations, it extends far into Palestinian territory. The barrier separates not only Israelis from Palestinians, but also Palestinians from family, friends, and in many cases their land.

9. But if you lived in Israel, wouldn't you want a separation barrier to guarantee your safety and security?

There are strong arguments that security alone does not justify the location of the barrier inside Palestinian territory. If security were the only motivation, the barrier could be constructed on the Green Line. The working group is also not convinced that the separation barrier was solely responsible for ending suicide bombings. Suicide bombings ceased even though many sections of the wall remain incomplete. Other factors leading to the end of suicide bombings include

strict measures implemented by the Palestinian Authority against militants, a ceasefire, and a widespread consensus in Palestinian society that violence has been counterproductive.

10. This report seems to suggest that Israel's concern about its security is exaggerated—that it uses this as an excuse to justify the actions needed to protect itself.

It is impossible to overstate the threats to the existence of Israel, which are felt throughout the country and by Jews throughout the world. Security is a critical issue for Israeli citizens and is the predominant justification given for Israel's decisions relating to the occupied territories.

However, without a just resolution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, Israel cannot be at peace and secure. Just as Palestinians must reject violence as a tool to resist the occupation, Israel must reject violence and stop claiming threats to security to justify its oppressive decisions concerning the occupied territories.

11. Does the United Church support Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state?

Speaking of Israel as a Jewish state without defining what that means is a troubling and challenging issue for the 20 percent of the population of Israel that is Palestinian. Therefore, the working group recommends that any United Church affirmation of Israel as a Jewish state must be accompanied with a clear explanation of its meaning—specifically, as a homeland for the Jewish people and a democratic state that ensures complete equality of social and political rights to all of its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or gender. With this understanding, it is possible for the United Church to continue to affirm Israel as a Jewish state.

12. How can you expect negotiations to continue when one state won't recognize the legitimacy of the other?

Israel does have a right to name its own character. However, requiring Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state should not be a precondition for peace negotiations. Instead, mutual statements of recognition can and should be part of negotiations.

13. Why is the Right of Return such a critical issue?

For many thousands of refugees expelled during the creation of Israel in 1948, and for those who have lost their homes through other means or expropriation since, the right of return is an immensely important commitment of the world community to justice for Palestinians. For Israel, the Palestinian right of return presents code language for the destruction of Israel. The loss of a Jewish majority through the influx of millions of Palestinians would mean the end of Israel as it currently exists.

The working group recommends a negotiated settlement to the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees that maintains the demographic integrity of Israel.

14. You admit that there are extremists among the Palestinians, yet you reserve your harshest critique for Israel. How can that be justified?

The United Church of Canada has consistently condemned all acts of violence by all parties in this conflict. Civilians on both sides have suffered from acts of violence. Statistics about deaths and injuries are available and show a large and disproportionate impact on Palestinians.

Violence takes many forms, and aspects of the structural violence of the occupation similarly affect both peoples but again have a very disproportionate impact on Palestinians.

15. Why has the United Church said nothing about the Palestinian Authority law of imposing the death penalty for selling land in the occupied territories to Jews?

The United Church has consistently rejected the use of capital punishment in any and all cases. The report focuses on the broad issues of the occupation. It does not deal with many other forms of human rights abuse that exist on both sides. The report rejects demonization of either Palestinians or Israelis as wrong and unhelpful in the path toward peace.

16. The report is very critical of Christian Zionists—why?

The working group is deeply concerned that the occupation, particularly the building of settlements, is being supported financially and politically by Christian Zionist movements throughout North America. These organizations and churches operate out of a theology that the working group believes to be false.

In the most extreme expressions of Christian Zionism, the return of Jesus depends on every Jew in the world being gathered in a greater Israel and fully occupying all the historic land, including the West Bank. This political theology leads to the belief that it is against God's will for the settlements to be withdrawn. Rather, settlements must continue to expand until every piece of the West Bank is fully occupied by the Jewish people.

The impact of Christian Zionism must be countered by those in the Christian community who hold different interpretations. The influence of Christian Zionism has had a large impact on political decision-making and has overridden the voices of Palestinian Christians. In their most negative effect, Christian Zionist views have reinforced radical settler positions in Israel and undermined the potential for a peaceful resolution of the occupation.

17. This report is critical of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement, suggesting that some of its goals are unacceptable. Why?

The working group acknowledges the participation of many people throughout the world in campaigns directed against the occupation and working for a just peace for the region. The challenge with the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement as a whole is that it involves too broad a spectrum of participants with significantly varied and sometimes unacceptable goals. Some campaigns cross lines of legitimate criticism of Israeli policy by the use of language that delegitimizes Israel's existence.

18. Isn't an economic boycott of settlement products the same as a boycott of Israel?

This report does not recommend a boycott of Israel or of Israeli goods. Its focus is on goods produced in the settlements. The working group believes that economic action against the occupation is warranted. Such action needs to be focused specifically against the products of the occupation. It needs to raise awareness that the occupation can no longer be justified. The goal of such action needs to be clearly defined: that it is immoral and unethical to support the existence of the settlements, so any and all products produced in the settlements and through the occupation should be avoided.

19. What purpose will an economic boycott of settlement products serve?

The settlements are illegal. Canada's own foreign policy agrees. So do the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations. Avoiding any and all settlement products follows from this. To buy settlement products is the same as buying stolen goods.

20. How will you identify which products to boycott?

Israel does not distinguish settlement products from its general exports. However, it is possible to identify some specific products. Several European countries also require products imported from Israel to clearly distinguish those made in the settlements. If Canada would likewise adopt policies that required Israel to clearly identify settlement products, it would ensure that there would be no confusion between products legitimately produced in Israel with illegal products produced in the settlements.

21. The report does not favour the use of the term “apartheid state” to describe Israel—why not?

The charge that Israel is guilty of apartheid is highly controversial. The argument is that Israel's practices in the occupied territories, including occupied East Jerusalem, are similar to the racist practices of South Africa from 1948 to 1994.

The working group believes the charge of apartheid applied to Israel shuts down conversation, disempowers those who desire and work for change in Israel, and does more to harm than to help the potential for successful peace negotiations. The working group therefore recommends that use of the language of apartheid be avoided. United Church action should focus on working toward ending the occupation and withdrawing settlements.

22. How do you respond to the accusation that your report compares the suffering of Holocaust victims to that of the Palestinians?

The United Church has not nor would it compare the Holocaust to any other event or experience. The report makes the argument that a final resolution of the conflict in the region will be achieved only when dignity exists for all of Israel/Palestine's people. Because of this, the report rejects any attempts to demonize either Israel or the Palestinians. This is why it recommends against the use of apartheid language to describe the current situation in the occupied territories. And it is why the report affirms Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people and Palestine as a homeland for Palestinian people. Dignity for all is a deeply religious concept that the working group tries to carry throughout its report.

23. What right does the United Church have to say anything about the Middle East conflict?

The United Church has a long history of connection with the region through overseas personnel, visits, prayer, development aid, and actions of solidarity. We deal with many situations of conflict and oppression in the world. The church has about 120 partner relationships in almost 40 countries. We respond to requests from partners for assistance. This is one of those situations. Palestinian Christians have asked churches around the world to intervene. They have called out for help.

24. Why isn't the United Church focusing on the situation of Christians elsewhere in the Middle East? What about Christians in Egypt or Syria?

The United Church is a member of the World Council of Churches, which is engaged in active support of Christians throughout the region. The World Council of Churches is convening a global conference in 2012 to address the new challenges Christians are facing in the Middle East.

The Middle East Council of Churches represents many Christian communities in the region. The United Church is an active partner with the MECC and responds carefully to requests for action or assistance. It is important that we all listen to what Christians in the various countries of the Middle East are themselves saying and asking.

25. How do you respond to people who say there will never be peace in the Middle East?

The working group believes peace is possible because the group has met Israelis and Palestinians who are willing to risk much for peace. Peace is possible because believing otherwise means nothing will be accomplished. It is also a fundamental Christian belief that with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). As followers of Christ, we are called to live out of hope, forgiveness, and love that not even death can overcome.