Divestment as a Strategy to Ends Israel’s Occupation

With some 10,000 members and supporters, and a board of advisors that includes high-profile American Jews and Israeli peace activists, Jewish Voice for Peace is one of the largest and oldest grassroots Jewish peace organizations in the United States.

For years, through its call to suspend military aid to Israel until it ends its occupation of Palestinian lands, Jewish Voice for Peace has led the call for material pressure on Israel. Now, other prominent groups have joined in the effort to resist funding the occupation, while maintaining a positive relationship with the Israeli people.

In July, 2004, the Presbyterian Church made a decision to investigate selective divestment from companies that profit from Israel’s occupation. As a result, a number of mainline Jewish organizations have called on Christian organizations to oppose divestment. All the while, the actual content of the Presbyterian Church’s decision has been misreported as a decision to divest from Israel. In fact, the PCUSA merely decided to investigate divestment from companies, both American and Israeli, that profit from the occupation.

At JVP, we fully support selective divestment from companies that profit from Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. This includes American companies like Caterpillar who profit from the wholesale destruction of Palestinian homes and orchards. It also includes Israeli companies who depend on settlements for materials or labor or who produce military equipment used to violate Palestinian human rights.

We believe that general divestment from Israel is an unwise strategy at this time. We believe that economic measures targeted specifically at the occupation and the Israeli military complex that sustains it are much more likely to produce results.

However, we absolutely reject the accusation that general divestment or boycott campaigns are inherently anti-Semitic. The Israeli government is a government like any other, and condemning its abuse of state power, as many of its own citizens do quite vigorously, is in no way the same as attacking the Jewish people.

Further, it is crucial not only to criticize the immoral and illegal acts of the Israeli government, but to back up that criticism with action. Socially responsible investing, divestment, and boycott campaigns have proven to be effective tools for both individuals and institutions working to make governments accountable to international human rights standards. The mere fact that some groups have chosen different or more aggressive tactics from us does not necessarily make them anti-Semitic.

Each year, US corporations receive an alarming subsidy from US taxpayers, primarily in the form of US military aid to Israel. The total amount of US aid given to Israel since 1949 represents the largest transfer of funds from one country to another in history. Seventy-five percent of US military aid to Israel must by law be spent in US corporations, making corporations, not Israel or Israelis, the primary recipients of US aid. This means that US corporations are primary beneficiaries of Israel’s continued and brutal military occupation of Palestinian lands.

The lopsided American foreign policy may seem to be in Israel’s interest, but it actually works to the detri-
ment of the Israeli people. Continued militarization of Israeli society increases the exposure of Israeli women and children to violence in their daily lives, and has helped lead the country to economic crisis. At the same time, this unbalanced US foreign policy has devastated the Palestinians. Americans of conscience must work to balance that policy in favor of a peaceful solution. It is not discriminatory that Americans working for a just peace focus their attention on Israel’s occupation and take concrete steps to end it, like divesting from companies profiting from Israel’s occupation.

Neither the US nor Israel will change their policies in favor of peace through their own goodwill. This is not the way of governments. Tangible pressure must be brought to bear if policies promoting a better future are to take root. The time has come for groups to bring that pressure to bear.

We salute the Presbyterian Church for their courage in taking on this critical human rights issue, and are grateful for the visionary leadership of the Sisters of Loretto and the Sisters of Mercy who insisted on holding the Caterpillar Corporation to account for their sale of weaponized bulldozers to Israel.

And we remind the many groups that are alarmed by the Presbyterian Church’s actions that the best way to stop the growing divestment movement is to eliminate its root cause—Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestinian land.

We call on all Americans of conscience to join the Presbyterian Church, the Sisters of Loretto, Sisters of Mercy, and Jewish Voice for Peace in taking tangible steps to create a better future for Israelis and Palestinians together.

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Therefore actions that oppose the Occupation are, in fact, pro-Israeli. Furthermore, we believe that such actions are in keeping with our vision of a Judaism that is based on the principle of justice.

Well designed divestment campaigns can help focus public discourse on the Occupation. They can also have a positive material impact, as has been shown by such projects as the grape boycott to support the United Farm Workers and the opposition to South African apartheid.

Therefore, NIMN supports selective divestment and/or selective boycott campaigns that target corporations that profit from the Occupation. A prime example is the Caterpillar Corporation, which manufactures the D-9 bulldozers that are used to destroy Palestinian homes, farms, and orchards.

We underscore our belief that the Occupation is not only destroying Palestinian society, but Israeli society, as well. Selective divestment from companies that profit from this destruction is not only appropriate, it is both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli.

Therefore, NIMN urges its members and supporters to investigate and actively support selective divestment and boycott campaigns that target corporations that profit from the Occupation.

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We are writing as deeply committed Jews to thank the Presbyterian Church for acting as a true friend to our people. Their decisions to condemn Israel’s Wall in the West Bank, to disavow Christian Zionism, and to begin selective divestment of holdings in multinational corporations doing business in Israel/Palestine represent an important step forward in the struggle for Palestinian freedom and an end to the conflict. We are saddened, although not surprised, that they have been accused of anti-Semitism because of these principled actions.

All too often, when a non-Jewish group or individual speaks out against blatantly unjust Israeli policies and actions, they are accused of acting on that unreasoning hatred of Jews and Judaism that is commonly called anti-Semitism. Yet to an anti-Semite, Jews are inherently evil, and can only be improved by ceasing to exist as Jews. Issuing a moral rebuke such as a targeted divestment shows a respect for Jews and Judaism that is fundamentally incompatible with anti-Semitism. Such an act is predicated on the belief that the recipients of the rebuke are capable of reevaluating their actions and turning onto a more just path. We can think of no greater act of friendship than to risk being defamed in order to remind one’s friends of their own ideals when they, themselves, have forgotten them.

In the book of Proverbs, revered by Jews and Christians alike, it is written, “A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you; the wise, when rebuked, will love you.” (9:8). The Presbyterian Church has shown the integrity, and the courage, to rebuke the state of Israel for its bitter oppression of the Palestinians. Whether it was intended or not, this rebuke speaks also to the many Jews who support Israel’s oppressive policies, or stand aside and leave them unopposed. Now we must face the test of our own integrity, and our own courage: we must choose how we will hear the message of divestment. Will we be scoffers, hating our friends for challenging our misdeeds, or will we be wise, loving them for reminding us of the pursuit of justice that is our highest calling, and the expression of our better selves?

The answer, of course, is that the response will be mixed, and, at first, the scoffers may well predominate. Yet we believe that the day will come, be it in five years or fifty, when the Presbyterian Church’s action in this matter will be remembered with love and gratitude by Jews around the world. We are proud to be among the first to say, “Thank you!”

Sincerely,

Jews Against the Occupation
After years of diplomatic and political efforts aimed at inducing Israel to end its Occupation, while watching it grow ever stronger and more permanent, ICAHD supports a multi-tiered campaign of strategic, selective sanctions against Israel until the Occupation ends; i.e. a campaign targeting Israel’s Occupation rather than Israel per se. We believe that in most cases merely enforcing existing laws, international as well as domestic, would render the Occupation untenable and would pull Israel back into compliance with human rights covenants. We also favor selective divestment and boycott as tools of moral and economic pressure.

Since sanctions are a powerful, non-violent, popular means of resisting the Occupation, a campaign of sanctions seems to us the next logical step in international efforts to end the Occupation. While it will develop over time, ICAHD supports the following elements at this time:

• Sales or transfer of arms to Israel conditional upon their use in ways that do not perpetuate the Occupation or violate human rights and international humanitarian law, violations that would end if governments enforced existing laws and regulations regarding the use of weapons in contravention of human rights;

• Trade sanctions on Israel due to its violation of the “Association Agreements” it has signed with the European Union that prohibit the sale of settlement products under the “Made in Israel” label, as well as for violations of their human rights provisions;

• Divestment from companies that profit from involvement in the Occupation. In this vein ICAHD supports initiatives like that of the Presbyterian Church of the US which targets companies contributing materially to the Occupation and certainly the campaign against Caterpillar whose bulldozers demolish thousands of Palestinian homes;

• Boycott of settlement products and of companies that provide housing to the settlements or which play a major role in perpetuating the Occupation; and

• Holding individuals, be they policy-makers, military personnel carrying out orders or others, personally accountable for human rights violations, including trial before international courts and bans on travel to other countries.

ICAHD calls on the international community—governments, trade unions, university communities, faith-based organizations as well as the broad civil society—to do all that is possible to hold Israel accountable for its Occupation policies and actions, thereby hastening the end of this tragedy. While we also call on the Palestinian Authority to adhere to human rights conventions, our support for selective sanctions against Israel’s Occupation policies focuses properly on Israel which alone has the power to end the Occupation and is alone the violator of international law regarding the responsibilities of an Occupying Power.

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This document is not an official publication of the Presbyterian Church (USA). It was prepared by members of and is endorsed by The Middle East Task Force of Chicago Presbytery, formed thirty years ago to educate its members and others on the plight of Palestinian Christians in the Middle East. We hope this document promotes awareness and understanding of the church’s overture on shareholder engagement and divestment. For more information, e-mail: metfchicago@hotmail.com.