

Joint Statement to Protestant Churches on Potential Economic Sanctions against Israel

**American Jewish Committee
Anti-Defamation League (ADL)
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Union for Reform Judaism
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism**

November 29, 2004

We appreciate the opportunity you extended to further our conversation and to speak specifically to why we feel divestment and economic actions focused on Israel are wrong. We do so in the spirit of candid, respectful and direct dialogue, which we agree must be a hallmark of our conversations - on even the most contentious issues.

We begin with what binds us: Our Scriptures reveal that God created all of us in God's image -- human dignity and equality is a core value of Jewish and Christian traditions. We are all made less when the value of human life is cheapened in any way. Further, our traditions call upon us to be peacemakers. In Hebrew, the word Shalom doesn't just mean "peace" but wholeness and completeness. Peace comes about by our labors to complete the work of creation. We must work towards the day when every human is granted the dignity, security, and beneficence that is the promise of the created universe.

Any place in which a single human being suffers, we should suffer. There is suffering enough in the land of our common inheritance on both sides of the conflict. We are deeply committed to the welfare and security of the Jewish people, both in the State of Israel and around the world. But let us make clear from the outset that the plight of Palestinians is also in the forefront of our minds. We know that unless there is peace and security for the Palestinians, there can be no peace and security for Israelis and Jews. We know that the Christian concern for the Palestinian people, many of whom are your Christian sisters and brothers, comes from a deep commitment to the alleviation of human suffering. Our common goal is the realization of a just and lasting peace, to end suffering and to restore dignity and security to all in the Holy Land. We must marshal our efforts together to bring this peace about.

While we do not accept the moral equivalence between those who initiate terrorism and those who take defensive actions to stop it, between those who intentionally attack innocent civilians and those who in attacking terrorists hiding in civilian areas harm innocents, we recognize that there have been disagreements and there has been intransigence on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. There have been many proposals and, we imagine, you share our disappointment over the failure to end this conflict.

While the past is not the blueprint for the future, we want you to understand that history and the events of the past are a critical part of our memory and influence the ways we

imagine strategy and outcomes for the future. The past, as we understand it, is worth reiterating here. In 1948, the nascent Israeli state accepted a two state solution, which was rejected by Arab leadership. For nineteen years, Israel was isolated and boycotted; there were constant attacks against Israel. All this preceded the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967.

Even after 1967, when Israel offered to return land, the Arab League unanimously passed the three “No’s,” denying Israel’s right to exist and opposing any negotiations. The Palestinian National Council endorsed the policy calling for Israel’s destruction. This memory is compounded by countless statements by Arab leaders, before 1967 and since, calling for the total annihilation of the Jewish State. Meanwhile, successive governments of the State of Israel have accepted in principle a two-state solution. The continued objective of some of those responsible for the current violence is the eradication of Israel.

It is not unreasonable to presume that, after a resolution of the conflict, those opposed to Israel’s existence will continue in their beliefs. They pose an ongoing threat to Israel unless they are effectively policed by the Palestinians. You can understand why we feel that such self-enforcement against anti-Israel violence is a condition precedent for peace. By extension, violence stands as the primary obstacle to peace. These concerns are exacerbated by the continuing anti-Semitic and anti-Israel rhetoric we hear and see, including textbooks that exclude the State of Israel, and schools and camps that inculcate negative views of Jews and too often legitimize violence.

While a negative history should not and cannot limit the imagination of what is possible, memory also helps ground us, reminding us from where we come. What is particularly sad for us is that far too often our Christian brothers and sister, most particularly the mainline Protestant denominations, have remained too silent in the face of this persistent hatred, rejection, and violence aimed at Israel.

The sense that we, the mainstream Jewish community and the Ecumenical Protestant community, share a deep commitment to social and economic justice, human and civil rights and peace brings us close. We are natural allies. Our joint efforts to bring an end to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, as part of our larger commitment to end violence in the Middle East, should bring us ever closer.

We were, therefore, startled that there are those within the Ecumenical Protestant community who believe an economic lever should be employed in a discriminatory fashion specifically against the State of Israel. We assume that this conviction is what undergirds the recent suggestions of the employment of a strategy of divestment and corporate action – the use of economic sanctions to advance a particular political outcome. And we believe that this policy undermines peace, promotes extremism, exacerbates conflict, damages the relationship between Jews and Christians that have been nurtured for decades and is dangerously ill-matched to our passionately shared vision of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Instead, divestment is a bludgeon that provokes extreme responses from all sides.

1. For Jews, any policy that seems to discriminate against Jews is fraught with inescapable associations. A policy of divestment or corporate action resonates in the Jewish consciousness with historic boycotts against Jewish companies and later Arab boycotts against the State of Israel; they are experienced by Jews as part of a pattern of singling out Jews for attack. To determine and continue policies that knowingly tap into the deepest fears and pain of another individual or people is, in our tradition, a serious failure of relationship. Our first critique of divestment is that it polarizes people and communities so that the policy of divestment, and not peace, becomes the central issue. It provokes such a strong response in Israel and within the Jewish community that constructive Christian involvement becomes less possible. Simply put, the bitter debate over divestment drowns out the real conversation about how to end the conflict.
2. Divestment as a policy focused solely on Israel places you in concert with those who, looking at all the state violence in the world, shamefully, paint only Israel as a pariah nation. We understand and respect your calling to invest in a morally responsible manner. But you also stand powerfully against prejudice and discrimination against individuals and nations. Even if it is not your intent, divestment efforts that are not universally applied but rather focused uniquely on Israel, no matter how nuanced and explained, smack of discrimination. While some formulations have been fairer in addressing both sides of this conflict in their call for the use of economic levers, these are still seriously flawed and problematic. Singling out the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the exclusion of other regions and nations, which raise far more egregious human rights abuses, still treats Israel with a double standard that is dismaying and bewildering to the Jewish community. Further, to many, the inclusion of Palestinian violence feels far more like form than substance since Israel will be disproportionately affected, leaving the impression it remains the primary target of such economic levers.
3. Such a policy ends up being linked with the anti-Apartheid activities that once united us. In fact, the mantra of many of Israel's detractors has been to draw repeated parallels, including terminology (Apartheid fence) and strategy (sanctions and divestment). The purpose of the anti-apartheid divestment strategy was to delegitimize and end the apartheid regime. It will be impossible to disabuse most Jews, here and in Israel, and the American public that no such comparison is meant.
4. Divestment may well undermine willingness by Israel to imagine peace. While we recognize that Israel is a nation with a powerful military, it is important to remember that decades of terrorism and international isolation since 1967 have left Israelis feeling threatened and isolated. Divestment, with all of its historical connotations, seriously threatens to deepen that isolation. Together and independently, Christians, Jews and Muslims must give the parties to the conflict the confidence they need to move toward peace. For the Israelis, concessions on land, settlements, the relaxation of security and the resulting improved conditions for Palestinians will not come as the result of further isolation. History has shown that the greatest strides by the Israelis have come as the result of international support. Divestment as a policy is more likely to provoke and to be used as justification for more extreme and less conciliatory policies by the State of Israel.

5. Divestment also validates and supports Palestinian intransigence by giving hope that, ultimately, the world will allow Israel to be destroyed and Palestinian extremist dreams realized. Most Israelis feel, and we agree, that much terrorism is grounded in a rejection of Israel's right to exist – one reason why attacks increased during the period following the signing of the Oslo Accords. Palestinian terrorism, before 1967 and since, has targeted schools, buses, cafes, discos, hotels – places where innocents, particularly children and families, congregate. Peace will not come until, along with the return of territory, there is a commitment on the part of the Palestinians to move quickly to destroy the terrorist infrastructure, to foreswear violence and to express their grievances without the use of terrorism and other forms of violence. The primary responsibility for ending extremist terrorism rests with the Palestinian leadership. Any policy that gives Palestinian extremists hope that they can wait until Israel is weakened prolongs the agony and will exacerbate violence.

At a time when politics in general have become so divisive, here and abroad, our efforts should be aimed toward reconciliation. There are many meaningful coexistence programs that are necessary to foster a generation of Israelis and Palestinians that will work and live side-by-side – and move past the teaching of hate and the resort to violence. There are many ways you can and, we feel, should witness on behalf of Christians and all Palestinians. In fact, we believe, no witness of the Christian community could be more powerful than the actions of so many Israelis and Jews who fight for an equitable two-state solution and for securing the security and human rights of Palestinians and all Israeli citizens alike.

Although we may embrace different narratives that bring us to this point, we share unmistakably similar goals – two states, living side by side, in peace and security. As leaders of the Jewish and Protestant communities we need to deepen our understandings of these different narratives. We need to develop ways to communicate our concerns and advance our shared principles. We are committed to creating opportunities to further our common cause – such as joint missions to the region, where we can endeavor to see the land as the other does – so that we can bring our joint vision to American, Israeli, Palestinian and other leaders. Our collective voices can play an instrumental role, working together to help Israeli, Palestinian and other Middle Eastern leaders to pave a path toward the cessation of violence and a resumption of negotiations. From there, we can imagine the peace that is at the core of all three of our traditions.

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