

## Why Progressive Christians Should Oppose Divestment

David N. Myers and Daniel Sokatch

As progressive Jews who care deeply about the state of Israel, we at times find ourselves critical of Israeli government policies. In fact, we believe that the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian people—which David Ben-Gurion recognized already in 1967 as an albatross around Israel’s neck—is politically disastrous, morally unsustainable, and ultimately self-defeating. We also know that many fair-minded people, Jews and non-Jews, can hold to this view without succumbing to anti-Semitism.

And yet, we deem as misguided recent proposals within some Christian denominations (Presbyterians most prominently) to consider divestment from companies that do business with Israel. We well understand the deep Christian connection to the Holy Land, and the concern of Christians for those who dwell there. We also know that most Christians desire a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one that recognizes the rights of both peoples to self-determination and security. And yet, we feel strongly that divestment is the wrong tack at the wrong time. Here’s why:

- 1) Selectivity of Focus: Although we condemn the Israeli occupation, we hardly think that Israel, among all the nations of the world, is the only country worthy of the harsh sanction of divestment. Tragically, our world is full of brutal and oppressive regimes that routinely violate the human rights of their own citizens (or others). Why then focus exclusively on Israel? Is it the world’s most egregious violator? Our Christian friends must recognize that the singular focus on Israel raises alarm bells, in large part because of past Christian anti-Semitism. In the present case, the call for divestment shifts responsibility for the conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land entirely to Israel. But as we well know, the two parties have been locked in a struggle over this land for well over a century. Yes, Israel holds the balance of military power at present, and thus must shoulder a major share of responsibility. But it is also the case that the Palestinians and their leaders must accept responsibility for their actions. Unfortunately, the call for divestment surrenders to an un-nuanced, unhistorical, and ultimately unfair reading of the Middle East conflict.
- 2) Flawed Historical Analogy: The strategy of divestment was used to greatest effect in the case of apartheid-era South Africa. Recent attempts to apply it to Israel often hinge on the equation of apartheid and Zionism. We acknowledge that the history of Zionism up to the present yields examples of figures devoted to the “transfer” of the native Arab population from historic Palestine. And we also acknowledge that Israel’s occupation has produced dangerous social, political, and legal inequities between Jews and Arabs. But we reject the claim that Zionism, as a whole, is a racist ideology. Zionism was marked by diversity and difference from its inception, but there was general consensus

among the various strains that the primary goal of the movement was to create a Jewish national society in the Land of Israel, and thereby free the Jewish people from the clutches of anti-Semitism. In this regard, the State of Israel served an especially important function as a place of refuge for Jews after the Holocaust. Except for some fringe elements within it, the Zionist movement did not place as its goal, as did the apartheid regime in South Africa, the imposition of a discriminatory, racially hierarchical, and religiously mandated regime upon another people.

- 3) Efficacy: We fear that a push for divestment will not only have little positive impact on Israel's policy, but might cause unproductive entrenchment in Israel. Many Israelis who were once supportive of the Oslo peace process now believe that peace with the Palestinians is unattainable. And with the outbreak of new waves of anti-Semitism, especially in Europe, many Israelis believe that much of the world is aligned against them. In this environment, it is critically important not to push reasonable and open-minded Israelis further away from the path of reconciliation. It is also important to take steps to counteract the common but overstated claim of some Jews in Israel and abroad that the world's Christians, drawing on a long history of anti-Semitism, are arrayed against them.
- 4) Timing: The divestment proposals ironically come at a time when Ariel Sharon, no hero of ours, has made an historic decision to disengage from Gaza—and thereby eliminate Israeli control over 1.3 million Palestinian lives. We hope that this is but the first step in a process that will lead (probably not on Sharon's watch) to Israeli disengagement from the West Bank. In any event, there is a clear and overdue sign of movement on the part of the Israeli government. The call for divestment sends the wrong message at the wrong time. In all likelihood, it will have little impact on the actual conflict; at the same time, it risks doing serious damage to Jewish-Christian relations, which have been assiduously cultivated since the Holocaust.

Some of our Christian friends may ask: what is the alternative to divestment? How can we use our moral and political authority to constructive ends? It strikes us that the fairest and most effective means of inducing change in the Israel-Palestine conflict is not to divest, but to insist on active American involvement in mediating the conflict. As Israel's best friend in the world and yet as a critic of its occupation and settlement policies, the United States government has the requisite credentials to push toward an equitable solution that respects the integrity of both Israelis and Palestinians. We call upon our Christian brothers and sisters to join with us in demanding American re-engagement in the Middle East peace process. At the same time, we must come together as progressive people of faith to seek out new, constructive paths to peace based on our shared values. And we must use all of our common good will and spiritual values to support Israelis and Palestinians who believe that peace is the only viable option.

**David N. Myers teaches Jewish history at UCLA and Daniel Sokatch is executive director of the Progressive Jewish Alliance.**

**The Progressive Jewish Alliance, based in Los Angeles, is a young, non-profit, non-denominational, inter-generational membership organization for those who are committed to social change. PJA views itself as a progressive voice in the Jewish community, and a Jewish voice in the progressive community.**