

Mennonite Church Canada

Resolution on Palestine & Israel : FAQ



Delegates at the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 2016 in Saskatoon voted in favour of a resolution guided by grace and committed to prayerful discernment in a shared quest for a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians. It is a call to affirm the efforts of those committed to non-violent ways of overcoming injustice, a call to congregations to deepen their understanding of relationships in the Holy Land, a call to avoid investing in activities that profit from occupation of disputed Palestinian territories, and an encouragement to ask our federal government to support measures that end the occupation and work for just peace. This FAQ offers explanations to commonly asked questions about the Churches' decision.

In the Old Testament, God’s covenant with the people of Israel includes the promise of the land we know today as “Israel and Palestine.” Don’t Palestinians just need to leave their homes and stop rebelling against this promise from God?

God’s promise to Israel of a homeland is conditional. In the Bible, Israelites are a people who have a special covenant with God, which implies living in the land according to God’s ways, and promoting justice and peace, and being a blessing to all people – an ongoing responsibility.¹

Today, the modern state of Israel that was formed in 1948 is a secular state which relies on enormous military might to occupy and control both the Palestinian land and population. Both among the Jewish people and among Christians, there are different perspectives on the extent to which the Biblical “Israel” is represented by the modern state of Israel.

Some Christians in North America interpret God’s promises in the Old Testament to mean that God wants the modern, secular state of Israel to forcibly remove several million Palestinian people so that the land of Palestine and Israel will be exclusively for Jewish people. That is certainly not the understanding of Christians in other parts of the world, especially in the Middle East. Christian Palestinians believe God wants all people to live securely and in peace, both Jews and non-Jews. They feel that pushing people off their land, or building walls to separate people on the basis of ethnicity or religion is not consistent with God’s vision of peace for the region. There are also many Jews who would agree with that.

Why did the delegates consider this resolution?

Church leaders in Palestine have repeatedly drawn our attention to the suffering they experience in the current reality of Israel’s military occupation. They are asking churches around the world to recognize the presence and perspectives of Palestinian believers, and their call for human rights and dignity. We have heard their voices in person. Their voices are also heard in the document *Kairos Palestine – A moment of truth.*²



Palestinian homes like this one are bulldozed to make room for Israeli-Jewish settlements. Residents are forced to move in with families or friends elsewhere in the occupied territories.

1 See *Chosen*, Walter Bruggemann, www.commonword.ca/go/812

2 <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document>

Why was this decision made now?

As a church body and through various organizations, Mennonites have been actively working in Palestine and Israel for 7 decades. In more recent times, two other reports and resolutions seeking peace in the region have been brought to the delegate body for consideration. But after decades of work and very little progress, and especially following the 2009 Kairos Palestine statement from Palestinian Christians, delegates discerned it time to consider additional action. In the past, Mennonite Church Canada has passed other resolutions seeking peace in the public square (2008). It advocated the release of Nelson Mandela with the aim of dismantling apartheid in South Africa (1986). It has encouraged congregations and members to work for peace and justice by closely examining their investment portfolios, written letters of advocacy regarding sanctions related to numerous countries and governments (1997-2009), and recommended resources for study and discernment regarding the conflict in the Holy Land (2011).

What does the decision seek?

The resolution begins with a summary of our historic involvement in Palestine, a review of our Christian commitment to peace and a summary of the realities of Palestine and Israel today. The concluding section, “be it resolved,” asks the church to do the following: 1) To let the gospel of Jesus Christ guide and grace our responses; 2) To commit to ongoing prayer, learning and discerning about this matter; 3) To affirm efforts of Israelis and Palestinians who are committed to non-violent ways of overcoming the injustice in their region; 4) To work in partnership with Palestinian and Jewish communities; 5) To refrain from investing or supporting companies that profit from Israeli settlements located on occupied Palestinian lands (the West Bank and East Jerusalem), or business that supports the Israeli Defence Forces; 6) and to encourage the Canadian government to support measures that put pressure on Israeli (including economic sanctions) to end the occupation of Palestinian territories.³

I have heard that this resolution supports the BDS movement against Israel. What is BDS?

BDS stands for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions. It is a global movement to increase economic and political pressure on Israel to end its occupation and colonization of Palestinian land. It calls for full equality for Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, and affirms the right of return of Palestinian refugees displaced since 1948, when the state of Israel was formed. Mennonite Church Canada’s resolution calls for specific kinds of actions: avoid investing/supporting companies that do business with Israeli settlements, Israel Defence Forces, or who profit from the occupation of Palestinian territories; encourage the government of Canada to support measures that put pressure on Israel (including through economic sanctions) to end the occupation and work for a just peace, in accordance with international law. Different readers will perceive this resolution differently, but the aim of the resolution is to work on all 6 points affirmed by delegates.



Palestinians who work in Israel wait in lines at military checkpoints everyday in order to get to their workplaces and return home. They can be delayed for hours at a time in each direction, and sometimes fail to get through at all.



In some conflicted area, Palestinians live on the ground level while settlers live above. Screens protect pedestrians from rocks and other objects hurled from above.

3 <http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/sites/home.mennonitechurch.ca/files/2016AssemblyResolutionsSummary.pdf>

Is BDS is an effective action toward peace?

There are many arguments for and against BDS. Critics of any and all economic sanctions generally do not recognize the power imbalance that currently exists between Israelis and Palestinians. External, global pressures have been shown to be effective in the past. Similar actions, when embraced by many people and countries, helped dismantle Apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s. Boycotts were also an effective, nonviolent means of bringing about civil rights in the United States.

Why single out the state of Israel for this action?

We have Christian partners in Israel & Palestine, who are calling for this action. In addition, Israel claims to be a democracy, so it makes sense to hold fellow democracies to standards of human rights that we would not necessarily expect of autocratic governments like Saudi Arabia or North Korea.

Are you denying the Jewish people a right to exist in an Israeli homeland, or the existence of an Israeli state?

As Mennonites, we have felt much empathy for the Israeli people as they sought a safe homeland after a history of displacement, persecution and, in the Holocaust genocide. This resolution affirms the validity of Israel's existence. By opposing the occupation of its captured territories (from 1967), it simply advocates for the Israeli government to uphold standards of justice supported in international law and the Hebrew Scriptures. Especially with regard to Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, the resolution is consistent with the government of Canada's own policy on Israel and Palestine, the Fourth Geneva Convention, and United Nations resolutions that forbid occupying powers to settle lands with their own citizens. The resolution is not targeting Jewish people, but the policies of a secular Israeli government.

But some Palestinians continue violent attacks on Israel. Are you endorsing the continued violence of Palestinians against Israelis?

Absolutely not. We condemn violence on all sides. The actions called for in this resolution are ways for us to act non-violently where Palestinian Christians are powerless to act. Christian Palestinian Churches have been seeking justice through nonviolent means for many years. Most Palestinians abhor violence, and the Palestinian Authority has also condemned violent actions that are reported in the media. This resolution is clear in its rejection of extremism and violence.

How has the Jewish community reacted to news of this Resolution?

Many Jewish and Israeli groups including Rabbis for Human Rights, Israeli Coalition against Home Demolitions and Independent Jewish Voices Canada support actions similar to those in Mennonite Church Canada's resolution. Some Jewish and Israeli groups have condemned the action. The Jewish/Israeli community is not united on this matter.



Olive groves of some Palistinian farmers have been divided by settlements and denied access to harvest the produce. In some cases, productive land and crops have been bulldozed to make room for settlements.



Gravesites of Israelis and Jews on Palestinian territories harken back a time when life together may have been more peaceable.



Educators at Bethlehem Bible College are some of the Christian Palestinian leaders Mennonites have worked with over the years.

My neighbour is Jewish, a friend, and supports Israel's government policies on Palestine. She knows I am Mennonite. What will I say if I am confronted by her?

Start with listening, love, gentleness, humility – and hospitality. Affirm your admiration and respect for Jewish Scriptures and traditions. Acknowledge the tragedy of genocide and racism toward Jews in history. Affirm common values of justice and peace for all peoples, both Israeli and Arab/Palestinians. Focus on rights to safety and self-determination. Read over the resolution together and identify things you can both agree on. Ask how they see peace and justice being achieved in the region. The principles outlined in the excellent document *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love*, provide biblically based guidelines on how to navigate and mediate disagreement:

<http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/43/10496>

A close relative and fellow church member boldly supports Israel's government policies on Palestine. I don't agree, but how do I respond to him?

The closer the relationship, the bigger the challenge engaging those with whom we disagree. Yet the arc of the story in scripture requires us to follow Jesus when believers disagree. Study Mennonite Central Committee's paper on Christian Zionism together

(<http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceDownload/14049>).

Where you still disagree, use the principles found in the excellent document, *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love*, for biblically based guidelines on how to navigate and mediate disagreement:

<http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/43/10496>

How can I act proactively?

Purchase fair trade items for yourself or gifts for others that are made in Palestine. For example products such as herbs, spices, soap, and olive oil and olive wood products are available to purchase online or in fair trade stores like Ten Thousand Villages.

What is the potential for this Resolution to make a difference?

If we let Jesus and history be our guide, we can have hope. Christians and the Church are called to serve the least and also to love enemies.

At the very least, this action is sending a message of encouragement and solidarity to our Christian brothers and sisters who have sought our help. As Mennonites, we have often been thanked for remembering the "least of these." At its very best, non-Christian Palestinians and advocates of current Israeli policy will recognize what is possible when love in action interrupts and even replaces the cycle of fear, violence, and revenge. The voice and conscience of the Church had a significant role in ending other injustices in history: slavery and civil rights violation in the US; apartheid in South Africa; communism in Eastern Europe. God has given us the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us.



An impenetrable concrete wall divides the West Bank from Israel. Begun in 2000, the barrier is 708 km long and up to 7.6 m high. At points it cuts 18 km deep into the West Bank, isolating about 9.4% of it and leaving an estimated 25,000 Palestinians separated from the bulk of that territory.



"There will always be hope" reads the message of a graffiti artist on the separation wall.