

Paper 12

Israel Palestine Report

Mission Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Sarah Lane Cawte: slanecawte@gmail.com Philip Brooks: philip.brooks@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 26 1. General Assembly instructs the Mission Committee to raise awareness about Holy Land pilgrimage amongst synods, local churches, ecumenical partners and individuals, underlining the importance of taking time to engage with Christian Palestinian communities and members of the local Christian churches in Israel and Palestine. Resolution 27 2. General Assembly affirms that Israel is a country which is recognised within the international community of States, with all the rights and responsibilities attendant on that status. Resolution 28 3. General Assembly affirms the United Nations commitment to a State of Palestine which is recognised within the international community of States, with all the rights and responsibilities attendant on that status. Resolution 29 4. General Assembly condemns all acts of violence in the region of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Resolution 30 5. General Assembly expresses its deep concern over the worsening situation for the Palestinian people since Resolution 37 was passed in 2016, as evidenced by the subsequent work undertaken by the URC in response to that resolution. All Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, forced house demolitions and the acquisition of

land by coercion, are breaches of international law. General Assembly, therefore, urges the Israeli Government to abide by international law and reverse its de facto annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories.

Resolution 31

6. General Assembly requests local churches and members to contact their constituency MPs to express concerns about the actions of the Israeli Government with respect to settlement expansion and house demolitions, and to ask what the UK is doing in response.

Resolution 32

7. General Assembly recognises the ethical principles-based approach of the URC Trusts and Pension Funds to investing and commends them in this long-established commitment, so that they can continue to avoid investing in any international company which facilitates the following activities in the occupied Palestinian territories:
- construction, production and services for the illegal settlements
 - the economic exploitation of labour and the captive Palestinian market
 - the illegal extraction and procurement of natural resources
 - population control through private security and surveillance where it contravenes international law
 - provision of specialised equipment for the forced demolition of Palestinian homes and structures
 - building and servicing of the separation wall / barrier and its checkpoints on Palestinian land
 - and any other breaches of international law.

Resolution 33

8. General Assembly affirms the ethical values of URC Synod Trusts and in this principled commitment requests them to ensure that they do not invest in any international company which facilitates the following activities in the occupied Palestinian territories:
- construction, production and services for the illegal settlements
 - the economic exploitation of labour and the captive Palestinian market
 - the illegal extraction and procurement of natural resources

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • population control through private security and surveillance where it contravenes international law • provision of specialised equipment for the forced demolition of Palestinian homes and structures • building and servicing of the separation wall / barrier and its checkpoints on Palestinian land • and any other breaches of international law as researched and listed by respected agencies such as the United Nations, the Who Profits Research Center (Israel), Investigate (The American Friends Service Committee). <p>Resolution 34</p> <p>9. General Assembly requests local churches and members to be aware of EU guidelines on the labelling of products produced in Israeli settlements, and to consider not purchasing these from UK retailers.</p> <p>Resolution 35</p> <p>10. General Assembly encourages local churches and members to actively play a part in supporting the Palestinian economy through the purchasing of Palestinian products available in the UK. These include but are not restricted to: Palestinian olive oil and food products, embroidery and olive wood carvings, cards, books, clothes and health / beauty products.</p>
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Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To stand in solidarity with Christian Palestinian communities and members of the local Christian churches in Israel and Palestine.
Main points	Engagement with partners about pilgrimage; lobbying local MPs about the injustices of the occupation in Palestine; providing an ethical framework to avoid investments in companies which profit from the Palestinian occupation; encouraging URC members to support Palestinian enterprises.
Previous relevant documents	Resolution 37, General Assembly 2016. Mission Committee reports on Israel and Palestine to the 2018 and 2020 General Assemblies.
Consultation has taken place with...	Central URC Trust and Pension Trust officers; Clerk to General Assembly; Synod Moderators and Treasurers; CCLA Charity Fund; Sabeel-Kairos; ecumenical partners.

Summary of impact

Financial	The actions and work proposed are covered by existing budgets.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	The resolutions express commitments and policy positions which many of our ecumenical partners share.

Introduction

1. Following on from the 2016 General Assembly resolution 37, the United Reformed Church has developed its work around the issues of the Israel / Palestine situation under the remit of the Mission Committee. The work has been extensive, and is recorded in reports to the 2018 and 2020 General Assemblies. One major aspect was the educational visit to Israel and Palestine in September 2019, in which 22 people took part, representing all 13 synods, URC Youth, Global and Intercultural Ministries, *Reform Magazine*, Commitment for Life and Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations. The ten-day visit was led by (then) General Assembly Moderator, Derek Estill. Participants saw at first hand many of the issues in the region. Close links were made with members of indigenous churches. and these have continued even during the extensive lockdowns of 2020 to 2021.

What have we learned?

2. Since 2016, the URC has developed lines of contact with Palestinian Christians, all of whom testify to the deterioration of their living conditions, made worse by the pandemic and the lack of access to vaccinations, particularly when compared with their Israeli occupiers. In July 2020, Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice issued an appeal to churches worldwide in which they called on ecumenical partners to 'take decisive action' and expressing the desperate reality that 'words are not enough'. Entitled 'Cry for hope', (www.cryforhope.org/) the appeal brought together a global network of grassroots ministries, denominational mission committees, and ecumenical organisations representing the indigenous churches.

The growth of illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories

3. The resolutions to General Assembly have a particular focus on the settlements and enforced demolitions in the region. The illegal nature of the settlements is clear in international law. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states: 'The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.' United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 of 2016 states that Israel's settlement activity constitutes a 'flagrant violation' of international law and has 'no legal validity'.
4. The settlements represent a de facto annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories. The United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Human Affairs assimilated a series of factsheets looking at the humanitarian impact over the first

50 years of occupation (1947–2017).¹ The statistics highlighted how from 2009 to 2016, Israeli authorities demolished or seized over 4,800 Palestinian-owned structures in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, compared with an average rate of approval of applications for building permits for Palestinians in the same period of less than 3%. When the report was published, 611,000 Israeli settlers lived in 250 settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Illegal settlements remain on the increase. Only in May 2021, there was considerable unrest in East Jerusalem, as the Israeli authorities attempted to evict Palestinians from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, located just outside the Old City, to give their homes to settlers.

5. Participants from the URC's 2019 educational visit witnessed the restricted access to water and electricity in the occupied territories. More than 70% of Palestinian communities are not connected to the water network. At least a third of Palestinians in East Jerusalem live in unlicensed homes, and face the risk of demolition and displacement.
6. In 2019 we visited Hebron City and saw the devastation and tension at first hand, as well as the disruption caused by the settlers. Nearly a third of the housing units in Hebron have been abandoned by their Palestinian residents.
7. We also saw the way in which settlers disrupt the olive tree farms. Writing in response to a letter written by a URC elder in January 2021, the UK Government's Minister for the Middle East, James Cleverley reported that the UK Government has 'repeatedly raised with the Israeli authorities our concerns about incidents of settler violence (including the destruction of olive trees) and intimidation'.

Theological understanding

8. The Revd Dr Munther Isaac is the minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem and the academic dean of the Bethlehem Bible College. He is an international ecumenical guest at this year's General Assembly. His most recent book, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* was published in June 2020. He has written a paper, which can be seen on the CTBI website, entitled 'Palestinian Christians and the Promised Land'.² Dr Isaac does not question the existence of the State of Israel. He calls for a shared land theology, recognising that the land itself belongs to God (Leviticus 25:23). Christianity's link to the region is summed up by Dr Isaac's reference to the land as 'the fifth Gospel'. He writes, 'The Palestinian Church takes its identity and theology from its natural and unbroken relationship with the biblical land. This is the land where Jesus was born, and where many of the biblical events took place.'

Pilgrimage

9. The 2019 educational visit spent part of its time in Bethlehem, staying in a Palestinian hotel, in support of the Palestinian economy and to meet with the local people. Our tour operators informed us that only around 1% of pilgrimages take

¹ www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OCHAFACTSHEET-211217.pdf

² <https://ctbi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Palestinian-Christians-and-the-Land-2017-England.pdf>

the time to engage with Palestinian communities or even with the leaders and members of the local Christian churches and centres in Israel and Palestine. Given the volume of Christian pilgrimages each year to the region, we believe there is scope to promote further the good work embodied in a film about pilgrimage, part funded by the URC, called *Walking the tightrope*. This is now accessible online.³

Ecumenical partners

10. The resolutions which are offered to General Assembly represent very similar positions taken by Quakers in Britain, The Presbyterian Church USA, The United Church of Christ (USA) and The United Methodist Church (USA). The Central Finance Board of The Methodist Church in Britain has been asked to move from a policy of engagement with the type of companies defined in the URC General Assembly resolutions to one of not investing in them at all.

Remaining committed to condemning antisemitism

11. The United Reformed Church remains committed to condemning all acts of antisemitism. As a denomination we have a proud history of speaking out against injustice, wherever it occurs. The resolutions proposed are not antisemitic. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism makes it clear that ‘criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic’.⁴ In March 2021, the Jerusalem Declaration on antisemitism was published by a group of scholars of Jewish, Holocaust, Israel, Palestine, and Middle East Studies. The Jerusalem Declaration expands on the IHRA definition, making it clear that it is **not** antisemitic to support ‘the Palestinian demand for justice and the full grant of their political, national, civil, and human rights, as encapsulated in international law’. In terms of investment policy, the Jerusalem Declaration states that ‘boycott, divestment, and sanctions are commonplace, non-violent forms of political protest against states. In the Israeli case they are not, in and of themselves, antisemitic’.⁵

Investment guidance

12. In preparing the resolutions, the Mission Committee consulted with Central URC Trust and Pension Trust officers. We were heartened to learn that current ethical guidelines already mean that the URC is not invested in any of the areas outlined. However, Trust officers agreed the importance of underlining the ongoing commitment in the resolutions offered. Similarly, many synod treasurers responded to say that Synod Trusts are also not invested in these types of companies. Several Trusts have their investments with the Charity Fund CCLA, who have confirmed to us that their ethical fund works to the United Nations guiding principles for businesses on human rights, which covers the bulk of the areas highlighted in the resolutions. CCLA are set to consult further with church investors, and so the close definition provided by the resolutions will help us to push the case for enhanced screening procedures. The research enabling investment screening of companies involved in the Palestinian occupation is

³ www.fodip.org.uk/walkingthetightrope

⁴ www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism

⁵ jerusalemdeclaration.org/

increasingly sophisticated and accessible. For those synods who have concerns about screening, it is important to note that the resolutions come in the form of a request and an understanding that further support might be needed. We envisage this as a process whereby we work towards the commitment, expressed by all the synods and embodied in the resolutions, in speaking out against the injustices experienced by the Palestinian people under occupation.

Summary

13. Resolution 37 from the 2016 General Assembly calls for ‘synods, local churches and individuals to respond with informed prayer, grace and solidarity’. As the situation has worsened for the Palestinian people since 2016, and against the backdrop of additional deprivation caused by Covid-19, the call to stand more resolutely in solidarity with Christian Palestinian communities and members of the local Christian churches in Israel and Palestine is more compelling than ever. The resolutions for the 2021 General Assembly respond to their direct call for such solidarity. They build on the work which flowed from the 2016 resolution, as well as the fact that Palestine is a long-standing Commitment for Life partner. The resolutions commit us to practical ways in which we can genuinely be prophetic as a denomination.

In this context, and equipped by much reflection and prayer, the Mission Committee offers its resolutions to the 2021 General Assembly.

Resolution references

1. For Resolution 3: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1397.
2. For Resolution 9: European Commission, Interpretative Notice eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/20151111_interpretative_notice_indication_of_origin_en.pdf
3. For Resolution 10, please see: Fine foods from Palestine - Zaytoun; Fair Trade Palestinian Crafts - Hadeel - Fair Trade Palestinian Crafts. (Resolution 10) zaytoun.uk/