

'We cannot profit from the destruction of homes and lives,' Presbyterians say

Church leaders explain decision to divest from 3 US companies they say profit from Israeli occupation, as Jewish leaders condemn vote

BY TIMES OF ISRAEL STAFF, REBECCA SHIMONI STOIL AND AP | June 21, 2014, 12:04 pm |

Leaders of the Presbyterian Church USA explained their decision Friday to divest from three American companies who they said profit from Israel's occupation of the West Bank, with the general assembly's Stated Clerk Rev. Gradye Parsons saying, "We as a church cannot profit from the destruction of homes and lives."

He added that "We continue to invest in many businesses involved in peaceful pursuits in Israel," Reuters reported.

The church's General Assembly voted by a razor-thin margin — 310-303 — to sell stock in Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions, companies which supporters of the resolution said were involved in demolition and surveillance activities against Palestinians in the West Bank. Two years ago, the General Assembly rejected a similar divestment proposal by two votes.

Heath Rada, moderator for the church meeting, said immediately after the vote that "in no way is this a reflection of our lack of love for our Jewish brothers and sisters."

Presbyterians who advocated for divestment have insisted that their action is not part of the broader BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) but both proponents and opponents of BDS are likely to see it as a further boost to the movement which has recently gained some momentum in the US.

"We are already losing control of our message. Divestment will not end the conflict and bring peace. Divestment will bring dissension," said resolution opponent Frank Allen, of the Presbytery of Central Florida.

The top Presbyterian legislative body has been considering divestment for a decade. Representatives of the Presbyterian socially responsible investment arm told the national meeting in Detroit that their efforts to lobby the three companies for change had failed. Carol Hylkema of

the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, a Presbyterian group that advocates for Palestinians and spearheaded the drive for divestment, said their action was modeled on the divestment movement to end apartheid in South Africa. The 2012 assembly had endorsed a boycott of Israeli products made in the Palestinian territories.

“Because we are a historical peacemaking church, what we have done is, we have stood up for nonviolent means of resistance to oppression and we have sent a clear message to a struggling society that we support their efforts to resist in a nonviolent way the oppression being thrust upon them,” said the Rev. Jeffrey DeYoe, of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network.

Jewish groups and leaders were quick to condemn the resolution.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, described the decision as showing a “preference for a policy of isolation rather than one of engagement.” While emphasizing that American Jews “have great friends within the Presbyterian Church,” he also acknowledged that “at a national level,” the vote was “not a surprise.”

Jacobs referenced the Church’s sponsorship and dissemination of “Zionism Unsettled,” a booklet condemned by a number of Jewish groups and complimented by former Klansman David Duke for its use of the term “Jewish supremacism” to describe Zionist thought.

“We will continue to partner with our allies within the church who are committed to a two-state solution, reject the effort of the BDS campaign to delegitimize Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, and work toward a just and fair solution to enable the Palestinians to achieve the state that they deserve. We will continue to advocate forcefully for two states for two peoples,” Jacobs promised.

Jacobs delivered a forceful address against the resolution at the Detroit conference on Thursday, one day before the vote was held. In it, Jacobs invited Presbyterian leaders to come with him to Israel next week, and address their concerns the Palestinians’ condition to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

A vote was also held on Jacobs’ offer, and the proposal to send Church leaders to Israel was defeated.

Rabbi Noam Marans, the AJC director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations described the vote in a statement as “a very sad day for Presbyterian-Jewish relations when church leaders from across the US align with the international BDS movement.”

“This is an affront to all who are committed to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The PCUSA decision is celebrated by those who believe they are one step closer to a Jew-free Middle East,” said Marans.

Marans described the vote as the outcome of a decade-long campaign within the Church.

“BDS advocates within the church have been allowed to demonize Israel through one-sided reports and study guides, such as Zionism Unsettled, the latest and most outrageous church document on the subject,” he complained.

The Israel Action Network (IAN) and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs also quickly responded to the decision, saying in a statement that it expressed “outrage and disappointment.”

IAN Managing Director Geri Palast said that it was “troubling and tragic to see the Presbyterian Church (USA) choose to reject partnership in favor of partisanship, ignoring the entreaties of every major organizational voice in the American Jewish community, including over 1,700 religious leaders from the four movements and all fifty states.”

Jerusalem-based NGO Monitor called the vote a “blow to morality and peacemaking” with Yitzhak Santis, Chief Programs Officer, saying the resolution “shows that most delegates either failed to recognize that BDS seeks to end the existence of Israel or did understand that and supported the resolution nonetheless.”

While many groups quickly condemned the vote, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), which received an award from the Church for its work together with the Israel/Palestine Mission Network and advocated heavily in favor of the resolution issued a statement saying that it “congratulates and celebrates the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s vote to divest \$21 million from Hewlett-Packard, Motorola Solutions, and Caterpillar — three companies whose profits from the ongoing Israeli occupation have been extensively documented.”

The vote, the organization wrote in the statement, “is a strong signal of its commitment to universal human rights.” It went on to describe the decision as a “turning point” and a “major development in the longstanding work to bring the US into alignment with the rest of the world.”