

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Items: 14-01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 08, and 09.

GA Committee Assignment: 14- Middle East Peacemaking Issues

Summary of the business and what it wants the Assembly to do:

Item 14-08, the Report of the Middle East Study Committee, calls on the U.S. government to “repent of its sinful behavior vis-à-vis the Middle East, including its ongoing war in Iraq, its selectively undermining or supporting the democratic process in such places as Iran and the Palestinian National Authority, its continuing support of nondemocratic regimes for the sake of oil or leverage over oil, its involvement with security services and contractors who engage in torture, surveillance, and other human rights violations.”

The report singles out the Israeli presence in Palestinian territories as “the major issue for a just peace” in the Middle East. The report criticizes a long list of Israeli policies and demands changes: “the end of the Israeli occupation,” “an immediate freeze” on Israeli settlements in the West Bank, “the relocation by Israel of the Separation Barrier,” lifting restrictions on commerce with Gaza, and so forth. It urges the United States to consider “the possible withholding of military aid as a means of bringing Israel to compliance” with these demands.

The only request made of the Palestinian political authorities is that they “set aside their differences, to pursue an ideology of non-violence.” There are no threats of withholding U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority or to any other named Arab government.

The report assures readers that only “a relatively small minority [of Palestinians] has resorted to violence as a means of resisting the occupation.” It blames this violence on Israel: “If there were no occupation, there would be no Palestinian resistance.” Regarding the Islamist Hamas movement, the report asserts, “Hamas is a militant organization; however, over 90 percent of Hamas’ resources are spent on social services to the Palestinian refugees.”

The report would convey the Assembly’s endorsement of a Palestinian political manifesto called “Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth.” This manifesto rejects the identity of Israel as a Jewish state and seems to favor a single state that would soon have a Palestinian majority. “The injustice against the Palestinian people which is the Israeli occupation, is an evil that must be resisted,” according to “Kairos Palestine.” It prefers non-violent measures such as an international “system of economic sanctions and boycott to be applied against Israel.” At the same time, “Kairos Palestine” seems to justify violence as a form of “resistance.” It refers to Palestinian “terrorism” in sneer quotes, as if to doubt the existence of the phenomenon.

Item 14-04 asks the Assembly to “recognize that Israel’s law, policies, and practices constitute apartheid against the Palestinian people.”

Item 14-05 would commend the “Kairos Palestine” manifesto “as an advocacy tool.”

Item 14-09 charges Israel with being in violation of various U.S. and international laws and suggests that it should be denied U.S. aid as a consequence.

Items 14-01 and 02 would instruct the Presbyterian Foundation and Board of Pensions to “begin the process of divestment from Caterpillar, Inc.” because that corporation sells construction equipment used by the Israeli army in maintaining its presence on the West Bank.

Item 14-03 is an agency recommendation to “strongly denounce Caterpillar’s continued profit-making from non-peaceful uses of a number of its products.”

Item 14-06 would have the Assembly promise to “defer from taking actions or making statements that align the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) with unilateral support for any of the specific parties involved in the [Mideast] struggle.”

An Advisory on Business to the 219th General Assembly (2010)

From the Joint Renewal GA Team

Background:

In recent decades General Assemblies have repeatedly condemned Israeli policies. This pro-Palestinian trend culminated in 2004 when the Assembly mandated a process of “phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel.” That mandate was replaced in 2006 with a broader instruction that PCUSA funds should “be invested only in peaceful pursuits.”

The 2008 Assembly pledged that “we will not over-identify with the realities of the Israelis or the Palestinians” and warned against “taking broad stands that simplify a very complex situation into a caricature of reality, where one side clearly is at fault and the other side is clearly the victim.”

Analysis of the business and how it would affect the Church:

All items except 14-06 are too one-sided to be helpful. They direct criticism, demands, and pressure almost exclusively against Israel. They have little to say about hundreds of millions of Middle Eastern citizens who are oppressed by governments other than Israel.

The Middle East Study Committee report uses inflammatory language. It quotes with approval an activist who calls Israel “a spoiled child” and “a Nazi state.” It labels the Israeli presence in the West Bank as “evil” and “a sin against God and other human beings.” It speaks of the Israeli separation barrier as “the ghastly wall that is such a reminder of the Soviet unjust endeavor to exclude.” The Jewish state is compared to apartheid South Africa. American Jews are accused of “a masterful manipulation of the United States political process” on behalf of Israel. No such fierce imprecations are directed against any other actors in the Middle East.

The report and the other items (except 14-06) are so consumed with blaming Israel that they seem blind to the larger regional situation. They fail to observe that Israel is a democracy surrounded by dictatorships and monarchies. They do not remark the growing influence of radical Islamist movements, often backed by Iran, that see no place for Jews or Christians in the realm of Islam. They barely mention that a number of these movements and governments are sworn to Israel’s destruction, and that they have attempted to fulfill that vow in the past.

Denouncing or divesting from Caterpillar, as proposed in items 14-01, 02, and 08, seems like an empty gesture. Is a manufacturer of bulldozers really to be held responsible for every construction project involving those bulldozers?

Endorsing the radical “Kairos Palestine” manifesto, as proposed in items 14-05 and 08, would undercut the assertion that the PCUSA favors a two-state solution achieved through non-violent diplomacy. The manifesto looks toward a one-state solution and excuses violence.

Cutting off U.S. aid to Israel, as proposed in 14-08 and 09, would hardly bring stability. On the contrary, it would leave Israel isolated and desperate as its only reliable friend deserted it.

If the church is to play the role of peacemaker in the Middle East, it must acknowledge and value the legitimate concerns of all parties. It cannot afford to be obsessed with the failings of one side while it is blind to the faults of the other.

These kinds of unbalanced proposals would not bring peace nearer in the Middle East. They would simply sideline the PCUSA as a propagandist for one side only. Moreover, they would divide the denomination over differing judgments of Middle Eastern politics. Item 14-06 is a more excellent way—an expression of fairness amidst a complicated conflict.

Action by GA that will help the Church:

Adopt Item 14-06. Answer all other items with that action.