

Introduction for Leaders

Commitment for Life's work in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT)

Talking about Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory can be challenging as it is very complex and people have conflicting views. At its most basic, it is about disputed ownership of the land. The United Reformed Church is committed to speaking out about peace and justice for all the people who live in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Jesus' call for true justice for all demands that we side with the oppressed, no matter their religion or nationality. Our task is not to speak for them, though; it is to listen and reflect their voices and cries as best we can. Both Israelis and Palestinians have suffered oppression and persecution through history, but it is important to acknowledge that the current conflict in IOPT is not equal and balanced. The Israeli authorities have a far superior military system and control many aspects of the lives of Palestinians. Palestinian communities are overwhelmingly affected by Israeli government laws and military action considered by many to be unjust. The actions of Palestinian militants or the more powerful Israeli State do not necessarily reflect the views of many Israelis or Palestinians, who just want to go about their lives peacefully.

We refer to Israel as a state. Palestine is working towards becoming a state. The URC aligns with Christian Aid in referring to Palestine as a territory (in the singular). The West Bank lies to the east of Jerusalem and includes Bethlehem. You need to go through an Israeli military checkpoint to get in and out. Gaza is on the Mediterranean coast. The two parts of Palestine are blocked off from one another. The West Bank is broken up into sections by the separation barrier and Israeli settlements, making it difficult to travel for everyone except the Israeli military. There are hundreds of Israeli settlements of varying size being built on Palestinian lands, and an estimated 700,000 Israeli civilians living in them. These have a separate road system connecting them to Israel, which are not available for Palestinians to use, even though they are built on Palestinian land. These settlements and roads are illegal under international law.

The URC as a denomination does not support the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement directed at Israel, although the structure of the URC is such that individual members or local congregations may choose to do so. International partners of the URC such as the WCRC (the World

Communion of Reformed Churches) call on us to declare the situation to be Apartheid (racial segregation); the URC has not done so. Any claim that the URC position on IOPT is in any way antisemitic is strongly rejected, as it is founded on the principles of international law and human rights. The URC condemns both antisemitism and Islamophobia and is committed to striving to become an anti-racist Church.

In July 2021, a report and ten resolutions were brought to the major decision-making body of the United Reformed Church – its General Assembly. This is a summary of what General Assembly agreed:

- It affirms Israel as recognised within the international community of States, with rights and responsibilities. The United Nations is committed to supporting the establishment of a State of Palestine, with the same rights and responsibilities. **All** acts of violence are condemned by General Assembly.
- There is concern about the worsening situation for the Palestinian people. The Israeli government is urged to abide by international law.
- The URC encourages local churches and individuals to contact their MPs to ask what the UK is doing in response to this situation. It asks people to consider not purchasing products produced in the illegal Israeli settlements, and to actively support the purchase of Palestinian products.

Remember: not all Palestinians are Muslim, not all Israelis are Jewish, not all Arabs are Palestinian and not all Jewish people identify with the State of Israel. 'Jewish' and 'Muslim' describes religious groups; these are groups which are often subject to prejudice or hatred. 'Palestinian' or 'Israeli' are national identities. Do not assume people are responsible for or support the decisions and actions of their leaders.

It is not possible in this short booklet to tackle all the issues of this complex situation and the limitations of space mean it runs the risk of only skimming the surface. This booklet is intended for younger generations of the Church; to introduce the basic issues affecting children and young people in the region, engendering empathy and a desire to investigate and learn. Please use the links to more detailed and extensive sources of information to take this topic further.



Historical background for Leaders

History - pre-reading

The land comprising Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT) holds a special place for Christians, Jews and Muslims, and is often referred to as 'the Holy Land'. The Holy Land has always had a diverse population: Arab peoples have lived in the land for centuries, including farmers, craftspeople, and Bedouins (Arabic-speaking nomadic or travelling people), and there have continuously been Jewish and Christian communities in the land. Today, Israel is a state recognised by the United Nations. Palestine is not currently internationally recognised as an official state, but it has asked to be recognised as one. The Palestinian Territory comprises two main areas: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

In the nineteenth century, there was the growth of a nationalist movement called Zionism. Zionists wanted a Jewish state to be created in what was then Ottoman-controlled Palestine, which corresponded to the biblical Holy Land. This was largely a response to a long history of persecution and antisemitism, particularly in Europe. The horrors of the Holocaust meant that Zionism gained traction in the aftermath of World War Two, and the proposed state of Israel was seen as a haven for a persecuted people.

In 1947, the United Nations agreed a plan that would partition (separate) historic Palestine into two states: one Jewish state, and one Arab state. It was agreed that Jerusalem would have special international status and be administrated by the UN, since it is an important city for each of the Abrahamic religions. Palestine had become part of the British Empire in World War One, and the plan required the British to withdraw from the region when the partition took place. The Palestinians and other Arab states did not agree to the partition plan as they argued that it violated their right to self-determination and restricted their access to the land they lived in.

The partition went ahead in 1948. There was a war and many Palestinians were forced out of their homes and became refugees. Some fled to areas in the West Bank and Gaza that were more densely populated by Arab communities, and others fled to surrounding Arab countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. Palestinians call this time the *Nakba*, or catastrophe.

In 1967, there was a flare up in the tensions between Israel and the surrounding Arab states. During the 'Six Day War' of that year, Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This meant that Israeli troops entered Palestine and took control of the area. From 1967 onwards, Israeli settlements started being built on Palestinian land and Jewish people were offered the opportunity to live in them. Settlements like this, where an occupying country permanently moves its own citizens into an occupied territory, are illegal under international law.

In the early 2000s, Israel began building a separation barrier between itself and the West Bank. It said it was to protect Israel from people in Palestine who were trying to hurt Israelis. The barrier did not follow the internationally recognised border, however, and it often cut Palestinian families off from their land, villages, families and schools. The separation barrier still exists today. In Gaza, the borders are controlled by Israel so it is very hard for people to get in or out of the region. The quality of life is very poor. There is often violence between Gaza and Israel, with both arguing that they have the right to defend themselves.

Tensions and violence in IOPT are ongoing and the URC is committed to helping build peace in the region.

