

Paper 13

The Gaza Crisis

Mission Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Sarah Lane Cawte, Convenor of Mission Committee slanecawte@gmail.com Philip Brooks philip.brooks@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 37</p> <p>1. General Assembly denounces the illegal and deadly Hamas attacks on Israeli citizens which took place on 7 October 2023, including the holding of hostages, in contravention of international humanitarian law.</p> <p>Resolution 38</p> <p>2. General Assembly denounces the deadly attacks on Palestinian civilians in Gaza by the Israeli Defence Force, and its devastating destruction of civilian infrastructure along with essential services, in contravention of international humanitarian law.</p> <p>Resolution 39</p> <p>3. General Assembly calls for an immediate, permanent ceasefire between Hamas and the Israeli Defence Force, and for the immediate de-escalation of hostilities regionally.</p> <p>Resolution 40</p> <p>4. General Assembly calls on the UK Government both to cease arms sales to Israel, and to monitor existing embargoes on arms sales to nations that might be supporting Hamas militarily, in fulfilment of the UK's obligations under the international Arms Trade Treaty.</p> <p>Resolution 41</p> <p>5. General Assembly denounces all acts of antisemitism in the UK, expresses deep concern over its unacceptable rise in our communities, and wishes to extend a hand of solidarity to our highly valued Jewish neighbours.</p> <p>Resolution 42</p> <p>6. General Assembly denounces all acts of Islamophobia in the UK, expresses deep concern over its</p>

	<p>unacceptable rise in our communities, and wishes to extend a hand of solidarity to our highly valued Muslim neighbours.</p> <p>Resolution 43</p> <p>7. Given the unacceptable rise in religious hate crime, General Assembly encourages every local church and Synod to reach out in friendship and welcome to their local faith communities using interfaith dialogue and/or other resources available to them for this purpose.</p> <p>Resolution 44</p> <p>8. In order to encourage learning and deeper awareness, without taking a view itself on these terms, General Assembly instructs Mission Committee in collaboration with the Education and Learning Committee and Youth Assembly, to consider how best to resource the URC with a better understanding of the theologies and history that help to shape and feed the crisis in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory as these relate to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Christian Zionism and Supersessionism ii. The Balfour Declaration iii. Antisemitism and Islamophobia iv. Peace, Violence, Security, and related, relevant topics <p>so that Synods, local churches, and members can grow in their awareness of these issues and respond in loving prayer, gracious advocacy, and Jesus-shaped solidarity.</p> <p>Resolution 45</p> <p>9. In the light of the continuing and worsening breaches of international law by the Israeli government in relation to the occupied Palestinian territory, General Assembly requests that URC Synod Trusts and the URC Trusts and Pensions Funds avoid knowingly investing in Israeli registered companies until such time as Israel once again abides by international law.</p>
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Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	The Gaza Crisis: Mission Committee’s report to General Assembly 2024 for reflection, discussion and further learning, with the aim of aiding a just, lasting and equitable peace in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory.
Main points	Call for a ceasefire in the Gaza conflict, respect for international law, improving understanding and peace-building in local communities.

Previous relevant documents	Resolution 37 General Assembly Record 2016 Paper I2 General Assembly 2021.
Consultation has taken place with...	Representatives of Children and Youth, Education and Learning, URC Resource Centres for Learning, URC Interfaith Enabling Group, Commitment for Life, URC North Western Synod, Churches Charities and Local Authorities (CCLA) Investment Management, The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), The Methodist Church of Great Britain, The Church of Scotland, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), ecumenical partners in Palestine, URC General Secretariat, URC Sabeel-Kairos, the Council for Christians and Jews (CCJ), URC ministers and members with relevant expertise such as participants of the 2019 URC educational visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (IOPT).

Summary of impact

Financial	There may be a future call on the budgets of Mission Committee and Education and Learning for the proposed training, but no planned additional expenditure in current budgets for 2024 and 2025.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	The resolutions and report express commitments and views which many of our ecumenical partners share.

The Gaza Crisis: Mission Committee’s report to General Assembly 2024

1. Overview

Mission Committee offers this report as an encouragement to the United Reformed Church (URC) both for reflection and further exploration of what are contested, controversial matters concerning the current conflict in a land that has been described as ‘competitively loved’.¹ The report should not be viewed as a positional document for or of the URC. Rather, it should rightly be viewed as a reflection of the differing views within the denomination, an analysis of work undertaken by URC members and leaders, and recommendations for next steps.

Mission Committee wishes to make it abundantly clear that in the making of any observation or in the taking of any position on Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (IOPT), we start on the basis that this is neither our land(s) nor our conflict.² We are observers who wish, insofar as this is within our gift, to bring about peace and justice for Israelis and for Palestinians. We can and must frame our calls for justice within a spirit of humility and empathy, recognising that our

¹ Please refer to the resource document from CTBI, *Torn in Two* in <https://ctbi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Torn-In-Two-Responding-to-Conflict-in-IsraelPalestine-FINAL.pdf>

² This should not be read as inferring that the UK had no historical role in creating the conditions for the current conflict, as even a cursory understanding of the Balfour Declaration makes abundantly clear. For an accessible film/discussion on this topic see <https://balfourproject.org/film-of-britain-in-palestine-1917-1948/>

knowledge and expertise will always be limited and partial. We are grateful for the work undertaken by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) to remind us of this framing.³

At its core, this report is a call for a deepening understanding, a further educating, and a careful listening to as wide a variety of voices as possible. No document can or should attempt to be definitive or exhaustive. There must be room for further consultation, and this is envisaged through the resultant resolutions. A guiding principle for the discussion is the centrality of international law as equally applicable to all. Combined with the URC's Jesus-centred tenet that every person is made in God's image and so is God's deeply beloved, Mission Committee offers the report to General Assembly.

1.1 The conflict

On 7 October 2023, about 3,000 armed Hamas militants broke through the heavily fortified Gazan security perimeter and attacked and murdered 766 Israeli civilians and 373 military personnel. In all, 1,139 Israelis and foreign internationals were killed in the fighting, while 253 Israelis and foreign nationals were taken hostage⁴ in contravention of international humanitarian law such as the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.⁵

The brutal and inhumane Hamas attacks have had a profound effect on Israeli civil life. Israel is a small country made up of cohesive communities. Most people in the country are in some way connected to those who were killed or taken hostage. For some, the attacks triggered the memory of the Holocaust, a devastating shared reality for many people living in Israel. Up to 300,000 residents have been evacuated from the north and south of the country.⁶ They are being supported by volunteers from every corner of society. The United Reformed Church joined millions in unequivocally rejecting the violence, destruction and despair wrought by Hamas on 7 October 2023.

In the wake of the Hamas attacks, the Israeli Defence Force immediately tightened its existing blockade on Gaza. It then conducted one of the most comprehensively destructive bombing campaigns in modern history.⁷ On 27 October 2023, the Israeli forces laid siege to Gaza City. On 2 November, Israel moved its forces on to Khan Yunis to the south.

Serious questions have been raised over what many people see as the alarmingly disproportionate military response by the Israeli government. Queries regarding the legality of the Israeli invasion have given rise to several UN Security Council debates calling for a ceasefire. On 25 March 2024 the UN Security Council finally

³ <https://ctbi.org.uk/torn-in-two-responding-to-israel-palestine-conflict/>

⁴ There are many sometimes conflicting sources for this information. Figures used here will change as the war progresses – see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel-Hamas_war

⁵ The International Committee of the Red Cross offers a very useful summary of how international humanitarian law attempts to manage military violence <https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law>

⁶ For those wishing to offer support for displaced Israelis, you could donate to, for example, <https://www.israaid.org/donate/>. Support families of the Israeli hostages <https://giveback.co.il/project/75048>

⁷ Various sources, but see <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/middle-east/2023/12/06/israels-gaza-attack-one-of-historys-heaviest-conventional-bombing-campaigns/>

passed a resolution⁸ calling for an immediate ceasefire and unconditional return of the hostages, with the UK voting in favour and the US abstaining. This followed the Israeli government announcement of its intention to invade the southern city of Rafah in Gaza, currently home to 1.5 million Gazans, most of whom have already been internally displaced multiple times.

In January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) heard verbal submissions⁹ from South Africa in its case against Israel for the crime of genocide. In an interim ruling, the Court found that the Palestinian people's right to be protected from genocide was 'plausibly' at risk. The ICJ issued a series of provisional measures, including an order for Israel to stop killing Palestinians 'with immediate effect'. The case highlights the risk of complicity in acts of genocide for governments including the UK and US that continue to provide material support for Israel's military campaign. On 28 March 2024, the ICJ issued additional measures¹⁰ in response to famine warnings, ordering Israel to take all necessary and effective measures to ensure without delay the unhindered provision at scale of basic services and humanitarian aid. In early March, the UN's special envoy on human rights in Palestine, Francesca Albanese, issued a report called *Anatomy of a Genocide*¹¹ in which she stated she believed there were reasonable grounds to believe that Israel may be committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. On 16 May 2024, the ICJ held additional hearings¹² of a case brought by South Africa seeking an emergency halt to the assault on Rafah. In response, Israel's Deputy Attorney General for International Law Gilad Noam accused South Africa of having ulterior motives and of offering a military advantage to Hamas. Tamar Kaplan Tourgeman, principal deputy legal adviser of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, denied that Israel had shut down the Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings in southern Gaza. Israel was simply defending itself from Hamas, and South Africa was distorting statements by Israeli leaders to show genocidal intent that simply was not there.¹³

The world watched in dread as the destruction and death toll mounted. The statistics are sobering, though figures quoted ought to be prefaced with caveats regarding accuracy, given the sheer challenge with respect to obtaining accurate figures in the chaos of conflict. At the time of writing, then:

- The vast majority of the more than two million Palestinians in Gaza have been internally displaced
- More than 35,000 people killed
- More than 15,000 children killed
- More than 79,000 injured
- More than 17,000 children unaccompanied, orphaned, or separated from family
- More than 6,000 women killed

⁸ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68658415>

⁹ These can be obtained here <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231229-pre-01-00-en.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/icj-orders-additional-provisional-measures-in-south-africa-v.-israel#:~:text=Noting%20the%20worsening%20conditions%20of,basic%20services%20and%20humanitarian%20aid>

¹¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147976>

¹² See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1149846>

¹³ This case is being heard at the time of writing and these quotes should be taken as only a small indicator of the wider dispute over the competing claims and interpretations over the IDF assault on Rafah. Quotes here are taken from only one source due to report deadlines (May 17th) so please do bear that in mind – see <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/5/17/icj-live-israel-to-respond-to-south-africa-appeal-for-rafah-attack-halt>

- Many more than 10,000 people missing or trapped under building rubble
- More than 100 journalists killed
- More than 360,000 buildings damaged or destroyed
- 392 educational facilities have been damaged or destroyed
- 267 churches and mosques have been damaged or destroyed
- 15 out of 35 hospitals are partially functional
- 83% of ground water wells damaged
- 11 bakeries destroyed.¹⁴

The Israeli government continued to lay siege to Gaza in what appeared to be defiance of the rulings of the ICJ which called on them to implement provisional measures designed to prevent the crime of genocide. Food, medicine and lifesaving equipment were being held at borders. Fewer than 100 trucks of aid were being let through per day when many more than 500 trucks were required pre-7 October. Troops shot to kill starving people,¹⁵ desperate to reach the convoys that did manage to get through. Hunger, famine, and disease were set to take more lives than the bombs, with 2.2 million people at ‘imminent risk of famine’.¹⁶ The UK along with the US and other countries and regions withdrew funding from UNWRA¹⁷ while continuing the sale of weapons to Israel.¹⁸ The situation was described by Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, on 4 March 2023 as the following:

‘It is impossible to adequately describe the suffering in Gaza. Doctors (are) amputating limbs of children without anaesthetic. More than 100 people killed a few days ago while desperately seeking food. Babies, just a few months old, dying of malnutrition and dehydration.’¹⁹

The potentially deliberate targeting of vehicles carrying World Central Kitchen (WCK) workers was described by founder José Andrés²⁰ as ‘not a mistake’, but ‘systematically, car by car’. The Israeli government has said that the strike was a ‘grave mistake’ and has apologised, promising an independent investigation. While this targeting of Western aid workers is by no means an isolated event, and though the Western media’s tendency to treat Western deaths as more newsworthy than Palestinian deaths is arguably racist,²¹ this WCK incident seems to point to a possible Israeli Defence Force (IDF) policy seeking to prevent aid

¹⁴ It is difficult as mentioned in the body of the text to give precise figures. Utilities and services in Gaza have been decimated. It may take years for accurate figures to be available, meaning that all of these may have to be revised up or down. Find updates at - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>

¹⁵ The UN condemned the so-called ‘flour massacre’ and urged Israel to end its campaign of starvation - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/un-experts-condemn-flour-massacre-urge-israel-end-campaign-starvation-gaza>

¹⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/21/1232605200/humanitarian-aid-gaza-israel>

¹⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/01/1145987>

¹⁸ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-us-quietly-approved-more-than-100-arms-sales-to-israel-since-october-7/>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/UNRWA/status/1764755516599808086>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68727828>

²¹ “Racism” or “internalised prejudice” is cited as one of the primary reasons for skewed reporting on the WCK deaths in the article - <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2024/04/world-central-kitchen-workers-killed-israel-gaza-idf-jose-andres.html>. For a deep dive into western media bias over reporting, see <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CfMM-Report-Final-MEDIA-BIAS-GAZA-2023-24-ePDF.pdf>

flowing freely into Gaza.²² There is also the fear that Israel's military actions in Gaza, along with calls from some in Netanyahu's cabinet for greater military action in the north of the country, may spark a much wider regional conflict.²³

2. Response of the URC's close ecumenical partners

We are very grateful for the work undertaken by the URC's close ecumenical partners with a presence in Jerusalem. The Church of Scotland continues to offer a peace-building presence in the region, and has produced an excellent Jewish Christian Glossary.²⁴ We share in the Methodist Church of Great Britain's sense of deep alarm over the deliberate targeting by the IDF of hospitals in Gaza. Their President of Conference offered this reflection: 'Time will tell whether what we witness in Gaza today is an ethnic cleansing of the present population. The Methodists have urged the UK government to 'demand an immediate halt to the shelling for the preservation of innocent life and require that Israel abide by the provisional ruling of the International Court of Justice.'²⁵

The Revd Munther Isaac, Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem and Academic Dean of the Bethlehem Bible College, has been a powerful voice crying out in the wilderness of the Holy Land. He contributed to the 2021 General Assembly, and partners with Yourchurch online each Advent. Dr Isaac is well acquainted with the needs of Palestinian Christians, and what support they would wish to see from the global church. He has asked partner churches to undertake several actions, including a call for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire²⁶ and pushing for a just solution to end the Palestinian crisis. He also asks that churches promote the learning materials offered by Sabeel-Kairos *Cry for Hope*,²⁷ and various Palestinian liberation theologies.²⁸ The Methodists have endorsed the resource, and we encourage URC members to engage with the document.

We commend the work of our close ecumenical partners as they urge the UK government to honour its obligations under the international Arms Trade Treaty. We share in ecumenical partners' deep concern²⁹ over the sale of UK weapons to Israel. These actions may make the UK Government complicit in the deaths of thousands of Palestinians.³⁰ These weapons include the production of drone components manufactured by Elbit Systems³¹ used in the bombing campaign in Gaza. We urge this General Assembly to join in solidarity with the Methodist

²² <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/war-gaza-killing-aid-workers-israel-plan-destroy-gaza>

²³ See this article on the growing concern over a sharp escalation in the scale of the conflict with Hezbollah <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/11/closer-israel-gets-destroying-hamas-more-likely-war-zbollah-becomes>

²⁴ https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/108745/ocr23-01_a-jewish-christian-glossary_a4_v4.pdf

²⁵ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/news/a-statement-from-the-president-and-vice-president-on-the-situation-in-gaza/>

²⁶ The URC has consistently supported ecumenical partners in the call for an unconditional, immediate ceasefire, as noted in the text.

²⁷ For a deep dive into the issues, see also <https://cryforhope.org>

²⁸ <https://www.sabeel-kairos.org.uk/category/taking-action/>

²⁹ See [Christian organisations: "grave concerns" over UK arms for Israel – Christian Aid | Mediacentre](#)

³⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/elbit-systems-israel-arms-uk-government-contract-ministry-of-defence-7-october/>

³¹ <https://www.elbitsystems-uk.com/media-events/recent-news/elbit-systems-uk-remain-at-the-forefront-of-british-armed-forces-training>

Church in its call for an arms embargo³² in the region. We worry that UK weapons may also end up in Hamas military hands. Our contention is that weapons do nothing to solve the deep political and social divisions in the region. On the contrary, they exacerbate these difficulties. Commitment for Life's partner *Global Justice Now* has a campaign to end UK arms sales to Israel, and Commitment for Life supporters are invited prayerfully to consider supporting this action³³.

Importantly, many Israeli administrations and commentators³⁴ have considered the 1967 borders as unworkable using security, socio-political, legal and, at times, biblical arguments. But the Israeli settlements built in the occupied Palestinian territory are deemed illegal precisely because they contravene the 1967 borders.

The borders are based on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 242 that emphasises the 'inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war'. It also calls for the 'withdrawal of Israeli forces from territories occupied during the June 1967 War'. Israel has consistently argued that resolution 242 does not mandate it to withdraw from the territories it has occupied since 1967. Most legal experts, however, suggest that Israel's reading is inconsistent with the provisions of international law that prohibit states from acquiring territory by force. For this reason, the United Reformed Church should be clear that its 2021 General Assembly Resolution (28) calling for a Palestinian state must be along the internationally recognised 1967 borders. This is important to counter the proliferation of illegal Israeli settlements and reverse Israel's policies of *de facto* annexation of the Palestinian territory.³⁵ Anything less would mean that in any so called 'two-state' scenario, one very powerful state would be in control both militarily and economically of a series of weak, disconnected South African style Bantustans.³⁶

3. Impact in the UK

The UK has not remained unaffected by the Gaza Conflict. The Community Security Trust, a UK organisation dedicated to tracking and recording the utterly contemptible scourge of antisemitism, has reported an alarming spike in antisemitic hate crime. Mission Committee recommends that URC members make every effort to familiarise themselves with how antisemitism operates insidiously and often unconsciously in the wider community to impact negatively

³² See page 19, 2010, in [Microsoft Word - Methodist Conference and Council Reports and Resolutions on Israel-Palestine 2002-2013 \(d1yuutt686hf0.cloudfront.net\)](https://d1yuutt686hf0.cloudfront.net/): "calls for a full arms embargo against all sides in the conflict."

³³ <https://act.globaljustice.org.uk/support-campaign-end-uk-arms-sales-israel-0>

³⁴ See <https://jcpa.org/article/israels-1967-borders-arent-defensible/>

³⁵ See Resolution 30 of the 2021 General Assembly Book of Reports <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/book-of-reports-2021.pdf>

³⁶ Bantustans were disparate geographical areas set up by the National Party in apartheid South Africa. Covering about 13% of the overall land, each Bantustan had a parliament, a coat of arms, and the forced offer of citizenship. This gave the appearance of self-rule for each tribal majority, but in effect legalised the uprooting of people living in designated White areas, the bulldozing homes, and the forced relocation of entire communities into these Bantustans. See Allister Sparks' comments following a trip to the occupied territory <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140124-visualizing-palestine-in-a-two-state-solution-a-state-of-palestine-or-a-palestinian-bantustan/>

Jewish communities. The URC must become allies in the task of confronting, resisting, and ending these awful acts.³⁷

The Council for Christians and Jews (CCJ) hosted a webinar on the worrying trend of growing antisemitism in the UK. Many Jews in the UK speak about their growing unease. Many have a close and deeply meaningful personal bond with Israel. A significant number possess dual citizenship and/or have family and friends who live in Israel. It is completely understandable that many of our Jewish partners speak about how an attack on Israel directly affects their sense of security and wellbeing.

During the past seven months, the UK has seen the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of civilians marching peacefully almost weekly calling for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Some politicians and religious leaders have characterised them as ‘hate marches’, causing community tensions to heighten further. In addition, senior political figures who have spoken out against the atrocities being committed in Gaza have found themselves subjected to increased threats and abuse both online and in-person.³⁸

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) makes it clear that criticism of the State of Israel is not *per se* antisemitic.³⁹ Indeed, some of the most vocal critics of current Israel policy, particularly under its current, ‘extreme right wing’⁴⁰ administration, are Jewish. They love Israel and earnestly wish to see the country they love thrive, and unequivocally so does the URC.

There are nevertheless important considerations to be given to criticisms of Israel, given that antisemitism is so deeply rooted in western societies, shaped by generations of supersessionist or replacement theologies⁴¹ that rely heavily on antisemitic categories. To focus criticism solely on Israel while ignoring conflicts, occupations and acts of genocide in other parts of the world would be deeply problematic.

In addition, uncritically conflating Jews in the UK with Israel, or holding Jews anywhere in the world responsible for the actions of the secular Israeli state, is deeply antisemitic. Jews in the UK must not be held responsible for the actions of the Israeli government. It is vital that Christians make every effort not to underestimate the effects of actively malicious antisemitism enacted over millennia that has led to the deep sense of anxiety and fear that most Jews

³⁷ The Community Security Trust is dedicated to tracking and recording the utterly contemptible scourge of antisemitism in the UK. Please make every effort to make these incidents known in your churches for the sake of confronting, resisting, and ending these awful acts <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog?tags%5B21%5D=1>

³⁸ <https://twitter.com/zarahsultana/status/1769845582422520078>

³⁹ See <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>

⁴⁰ This assertion is reasonably widely accepted. See for e.g. Jonathan Guyer’s article in Vox - <https://www.vox.com/world/2023/1/20/23561464/israel-new-right-wing-government-extreme-protests-netanyahu-biden-ben-gvir>

⁴¹ See for example Young, David 2023: *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A brief consideration of ‘Replacement theology.’* On Kindle. See also “Replacement Theology” discussed in the CCJ-CTBI resource on antisemitism “Connected Communities” <https://ctbi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Connected-Communities.pdf>, and also in the Church of England’s document “God’s Unfailing Word” <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/godsunfailingwordweb.pdf>

experience daily.⁴² Arguably, no other society or culture knows what it is like to be shaped – psychologically, religiously and culturally – by a Holocaust preceded by 3,000 years of persecution, with much of that persecution propagated and championed by Christians. Christians are very often influenced by reflexive, unexamined theologies of Christian Zionism⁴³ that are leveraged to justify support for the policies and actions committed by the State of Israel in contravention of international law.⁴⁴ To this end, we ask this General Assembly to support the resolution in this report which seeks to improve educational resources in the denomination.

As the denomination makes a careful response to the Gaza crisis, it is important to avoid replicating the conflict in the Middle East in the UK. We should be cognisant of the fear of being labelled antisemitic for making a principled critique on humanitarian grounds of the Israeli Government, but at the same time recognising that it is not antisemitic to criticise the Israeli government if or when it flouts international law.

4. Response of the United Reformed Church

The United Reformed Church in partnership with our UK ecumenical partners has taken a multi-faceted approach to its response to the crisis:

- 4.1 On 15 December 2023, when the number of Palestinians killed stood at 15,000, the URC joined with Christian Aid, 67 humanitarian agencies and global church leaders to urge the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.⁴⁵ The call said:

‘We write as religious leaders to say enough is enough. We cannot remain silent as generations of families in Gaza are wiped out in an instant.

‘World leaders cannot sit by while Palestinian civilians in Gaza experience such catastrophic destruction and trauma... The relentless and unrestrained bombing campaign with horrific indiscriminate effects and the ground invasion by Israel must end... We weep with broken hearts as we hear of hospitals, mosques, churches, and schools damaged and destroyed by this war. In Gaza, there is no safe place. There is no refuge. There is no escape.’

The church’s call went unheeded. The death toll worsened significantly, with between 100 and 200 Palestinians killed every day since.⁴⁶ The death toll more than doubled since that first call for a ceasefire on 15 December, with the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF)⁴⁷ reporting that Gaza has ‘witnessed the fastest decline in a population’s nutrition status ever recorded’.

⁴² Ibid. See the Community Security Trust website.

⁴³ In 2004 the Presbyterian Church (USA) declared its ‘active opposition’ to those theologies that can be categorised as ‘Christian Zionism’. Revd Peter Colwell (CTBI) has written a very helpful, unpublished paper on Christian Zionism, which can be obtained from the Mission Team in Church House or contacting Peter directly.

⁴⁴ See for example <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34057252-the-case-for-zionism>

⁴⁵ <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/news/middle-east-crisis-appeal/ceasefire-now-call-for-peace>

⁴⁶ View the latest figures here <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>

⁴⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/childrens-lives-threatened-rising-malnutrition-gaza-strip>

What that means, the report states, is that ‘children are starving at the fastest rate that the world has ever known’.

- 4.2 The URC moderator signed an urgent letter from churches⁴⁸ to the House of Lords, urging the House to oppose the *Economic Activity of Public Bodies Bill*,⁴⁹ a controversial piece of legislation that has drawn criticism from many human rights organisations in the UK. Amnesty International⁵⁰ warns that the bill would undercut human rights, fudge the distinction between products made in the illegal settlements in occupied Palestine and those from Israel, and undermine the drive by devolved governments to embed human rights in their procurement procedures. It should be noted that Baroness Deech, prior to any engagement with faith representatives on the issue before her criticism, characterised as ‘antisemitic’⁵² those churches and organisations that signed this letter.
- 4.3 URC Congregations were asked to consider not lighting their second Advent Candle⁵³ in solidarity with Christians in Palestine. There was a heart-warming response from URC congregations to this request from our church partners in Palestine through Commitment for Life.
- 4.4 The URC and the Methodist Church sent a joint letter lobbying the Minister for Faith, asking them to ensure that Christians are afforded safe passage to go on pilgrimage to Bethlehem. This is a uniquely relevant and adroit way for Christians to speak into the conflict, particularly as this issue is directly affected by the activities of illegal settlers⁵⁴ in the West Bank.
- 4.5 The URC Moderator⁵⁵ signed a declaration by the Methodist president and vice president on the situation in Gaza:

‘The International Court of Justice has called on Israel to ensure that its forces do not commit any of the acts covered by the Genocide Convention. Yet attacks on Gaza have continued with inadequate regard to the protection of civilians. For those crowded into Rafah there is nowhere left to go. It is disturbing to hear that some in the Israeli government are discussing the possibility of creating new Israeli settlements across the Gaza Strip. Time will tell whether what we witness in Gaza today is an ethnic cleansing of the present population.

‘Meanwhile, for those sheltering without food and water the situation is critical. To meet the basic human needs of such a large population there is no alternative to an immediate ceasefire. We urge our government to demand an immediate halt

⁴⁸ <https://jpit.uk/the-governments-re-writing-of-history>

⁴⁹ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3475>

⁵⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/amnesty-international-briefing-economic-activity-public-bodies-bill-commons-second-0>

⁵² [https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2024-02-20/debates/1906FBFC-C909-4322-8F64-AFCD6C706E31/EconomicActivityOfPublicBodies\(OverseasMatters\)Bill](https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2024-02-20/debates/1906FBFC-C909-4322-8F64-AFCD6C706E31/EconomicActivityOfPublicBodies(OverseasMatters)Bill)

⁵³ <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Second-Candle-liturgy.pdf>

⁵⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/un-human-rights-chief-deplores-new-moves-expand-israeli-settlements-occupied>

⁵⁵ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/news/a-statement-from-the-president-and-vice-president-on-the-situation-in-gaza/>

to the shelling for the preservation of innocent life and require that Israel abide by the provisional ruling of the International Court of Justice.⁵⁶

- 4.6 Commitment for Life (CFL) and the online URC congregation 'Yourchurch' invited Christian Aid to update the URC on the current condition of our partners in Gaza and the West Bank. A video link is available on request (CFL). The CFL Spring Mailing on IOPT contains updates on the work of URC partners in Gaza, with news of the director of partner organisation, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, Raji Sourani, being pulled out of the rubble of his bombed home, who then went on to give evidence at the ICJ in support of South Africa's call for interim measures against Israel.
- 4.7 Commitment for Life (CFL) has set up a Gaza Appeal⁵⁷ so that local congregations and members can contribute. More than £50,000 over and above normal contributions was donated by Commitment for Life to our Christian Aid partners PARC on the West Bank and to CFTA in Gaza.

DONATE TO THE CFL GAZA



- 4.8 A Yourchurch member, and 2019 participant on the URC educational visit to IOPT, convened a URC Palestine Network that is tasked with contemplating a spectrum of views on how best to respond to the Gaza situation, and to co ordinate that response in dialogue with Mission Committee.
- 4.9 The Interfaith Enabling Group (IEG) has spent a significant amount of time considering the inter faith ramifications of the Gaza predicament. It supports Mission Committee's actions in response to the crisis. The IEG supported a petition calling on Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, to reverse his decision⁵⁸ to withdraw funding from the Inter Faith Network⁵⁹ after promising he would not do so for the 2023/24 financial year. At a critical time for inter faith relations in the UK, the cabinet minister singled out the only Board member

⁵⁶ At the time of submission, the ICC Prosecutor Karim Kahn is suggesting that there are "reasonable grounds to believe that Hamas's Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Diab Ibrahim Al-Masri (Deif) and Ismail Haniyeh 'bear criminal responsibility' for murder, extermination and taking hostages – among numerous other crimes – since the Gaza conflict erupted in the wake of Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel on 7 October. There are also reasonable grounds to believe that Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant, Israeli Minister of Defence, are responsible for other crimes and crimes against humanity 'committed on the territory of the State of Palestine'. For updates see <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1149966>

⁵⁷ <https://donate.giveasyoulive.com/fundraising/commitment-for-life-gaza-appeal>

⁵⁸ Behind a paywall, annoyingly, but see <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/02/24/interfaith-network-closes-links-muslim-council-britain/>

⁵⁹ See <https://youtu.be/MsiKBtdVlas> and this reflection by CTBI's Revd Dr Peter Colwell <https://ctbi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IFN-and-the-Importance-of-i-FWork.pdf>

representing the Muslim Council of Britain, Hassan Joudi, in what some have described as a cynical attempt to leverage the culture wars in support of short term and self-centred party-politics.⁶⁰

- 5.10 The IEG is encouraging all URC congregations and LEPs, where possible, to reach out in friendship to local mosques, synagogues, temples, and gurdwaras. This action should be offered as a sign and symbol of solidarity and welcome. There are excellent resources available⁶¹ for those congregations and Synods that are determined to build peace among their faith neighbours into their mission. The Mission Team commends its own experience of maintaining and deepening inter-faith relations with Jewish friends and colleagues, especially during this time of heightened tensions, when others have sought to distance relationships.
- 5.11 The Mission Team has sought ways to encourage all URC members to be peacemakers in a global context that increasingly seems to devalue or denigrate the critical value of peace. Our General Assembly Moderator has heeded this call by actively deepening ties with the General Secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, Zara Mohammed, whose organisation was unjustly targeted by Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, Michael Gove and which resulted in his decision to withdraw funding from the Inter Faith Network. The URC is deeply concerned about the sharp increase in Islamophobic incidents⁶² reported across the UK, and works in partnership with inter-faith partners in addressing this worrying trend.
- 5.12 A small planning group met to discuss an initiative called '*Voices in Exile*' seeking to bring together the theological voices of the global south in a consultation on the intersections of oppression as they manifest in Palestine. The initiative has the support of some Baptist, Methodist, and URC members, in consultation with the Revd Dr Munther Isaac, Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, who has offered profoundly important insights into how best to structure this consultation.
- 5.13 On Thursday 14 March 2024, Oxfam organised a Gaza ceasefire lobby day of MPs at Parliament, with URC members in attendance. Commitment for Life working with Children and Youth encouraged young adult URC members to support the Christian Aid April 28th *Pilgrimage for Palestine* to stop arming Israel as well as to end UK government complicity in the violence. The URC continues to support the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel

⁶⁰ <https://youtu.be/MsiKBtdVlas>

⁶¹ An internet search will bring up a plethora of resources. See for example:

<https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/dialogue-1>

<https://wilmetteinstitute.org/a-learners-how-to-list-for-engaging-in-interfaith-dialogue/>

https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/108745/ocr23-01_a-jewish-christian-glossary_a4_v4.pdf

<https://www.uri.org/uri-story/20230210-top-10-tips-designing-and-facilitating-interfaith-dialogue-your-community>

<http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2011/9/14/guidelines-for-engaging-in-productive-interfaith-dialogue.html>

<http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2011/9/14/guidelines-for-engaging-in-productive-interfaith-dialogue.html>

⁶² A recent report outlining this growing issue has been published by Tell Mama <https://tellmamauk.org>

(EAPPI). The URC Sabeel-Kairos group⁶³ has offered to share resources with congregations who wish to learn more about the root causes of ongoing conflict. URC members have marched, petitioned, prayed and protested, motivated by a desire to see an equitable and lasting peace proceeding out from the permanent end to violence, hatred, and occupation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory.

- 5.14 Antisemitism: The Council for Christians and Jews (CCJ) held a webinar for church leaders on antisemitism.⁶⁴ There has been a significant and alarming spike in antisemitic incidents across the UK. History has shown that antisemitism is often a precursor to rising fascism, the shutting down of free debate, attacks on human rights, and attacks on other marginalised groups, such as Muslims, Roma, and LGBTQ+ communities. In our actions regarding Gaza, it is vital to address the deeply rooted and unconscious antisemitism that resides within Christians by virtue of the fact that we are shaped by empire's systems of domination⁶⁵ that have 'othered' Jews, blaming them for Christ's death. We must learn from our Jewish associates and friends and partners how antisemitism informs our thinking, theology and actions, hence the reason why this General Assembly is asked to consider future learning in these areas for the denomination.
- 5.15 In January 2024, URC Youth Assembly passed a resolution encouraging General Assembly to request that Mission Committee investigates and develops further connections and collaborations with just-peace focused organisations and Churches in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (IOPT). URC Youth has satisfied itself that the significant and extensive connections already in place fulfil the intent of the Youth Assembly resolution, and endeavours to continue its engagement on matters relating to IOPT, in collaboration with the wider URC.

6. Proposed URC Ethical Investment Fund

In 2021, the URC General Assembly passed two resolutions (32 & 33)⁶⁶ relating to its investment policies, requesting that URC Trusts not invest in companies that profit from the occupation. The barrier to its implementation has been the ability of some fund investment companies to provide the screening envisaged by the 2021 resolutions. In particular, many of the URC Trusts place funds with the Churches Charities and Local Authorities (CCLA) Investment Management. The good news is that negotiations with CCLA for the provision of a bespoke URC investment instrument are well advanced.

This fund would operate in line with the screening laid out in the 2021 General Assembly resolutions. The fund will be open to ecumenical and other partners who also wish to ensure a level of screening that matches their advocacy on IOPT issues and so enable them to 'walk the talk' with regard to their ethical investments. It is important to note that this proposed new Fund will screen out companies that are listed on the American Friends Service Committee Divest

⁶³ Resolution 37A of the 2016 URC General Assembly recommends to formation of Kairos communities.

⁶⁴ <https://ccj.org.uk/videos/antisemitism-briefing>

⁶⁵ For a penetrating analysis of the collapse in the west's moral authority revealed in this crisis, see French philosopher Frédéric Lordon's essay, 'End of Innocence' <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/end-of-innocence>

⁶⁶ <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/assembly-record-2021.pdf>

List⁶⁷ for ‘involvement in state violence and human rights violations as part of occupations’. It does not, therefore, specifically single out Israel.

An agreed level of investment screening was passed at General Assembly in 2021. However, since then there has been, in addition to the Gaza crisis, a continuation of the breaching of international law on the West Bank,⁶⁸ with violence flaring regularly as illegal Israeli settlers under IDF protection attempt to intimidate and kill Palestinians.

It is appropriate, therefore, to test the mind of Assembly whether an increase in the level of screening on our investments might be warranted. Such has been the deterioration since the 2021 General Assembly resolutions were passed that perhaps the time has come to ask that Central and Synod Investment Funds do not invest money in any Israeli registered company. The proposed URC ethical fund is specifically designed to comply with URC General Assembly resolutions. The hope is that the Israeli government will effect a change in policy in line with international law, in which case General Assembly is free to reconsider and withdraw its request regarding investment policy and Israel.

There is a case to be made that the real impact of any screening process lies not in any financial pressure placed on a particular country. Our investment amounts are relatively small, though there is hope that other funding pots will be added to the URC mix. Also, on occasion it has been suggested that the lack of external investment could act as a stimulus to the economy of the country in question, thus appearing to undermine the original intent of the action. However, the real power of targeted sanctions lies not in the financial repercussions imposed but rather in the action’s focused, non-violent capacity to strip away the moral arguments proffered by a country in contravention of international law.

7. Closing thoughts

The fundamental question with which we wrestle is this: what is the core principle on which we base the United Reformed Church’s response to the Gaza crisis? Whose cry do we place front and centre? Who do we see around us who are hungry and naked? Are we not compelled to put front and centre the cries of those who are most affected by oppression, hunger, hostage-taking, and war?

It is critical too that the URC shows solidarity and care for affected communities in England, Scotland and Wales, many of whom, as succinctly expressed by Justin Cohen,⁶⁹ are ‘full of dread, full of fear, like I’ve never seen before’.

Acknowledging the fears of all communities of faith and in the context of the many issues raised in the report, Mission Committee offers its resolutions to General Assembly.

⁶⁷ See <https://investigate.afsc.org/occupations>

⁶⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1143087>

⁶⁹ Justin Cohen of *Jewish News* quoted in <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-67494802>