

# Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

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In 2006, the Council reported on the issue of investment in Palestine and Israel. One of its deliverances then related to the sale of produce from illegal settlements in the West Bank:

*Call on the European Institutions to ensure the clear labelling of products which come from the illegal settlements in the West Bank, so that consumers can make an informed decision on whether or not to purchase them.*

### **Brief background on settlements**

Presently there are more than 100 Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT) alone and dozens of additional 'illegal outposts' – settlements not yet officially recognized by the Israeli government. These house approximately 530,000 Jewish Israeli residents: 280,000 in the West Bank (excluding Jerusalem), 260,000 in settlements built in East Jerusalem which was unilaterally annexed by Israel and 20,000 in the Golan Heights. Israel 'disengaged' or relocated from settlements in Gaza in 2005. The UN still considers this as occupied territory.

On-going settlement expansion includes housing as well as infrastructure such as road and water systems for the exclusive use of Israeli settlers on lands confiscated from Palestinians or from declared 'state lands'.

The route of the separation barrier being constructed by Israel, much of which is inside the OPT and was thus considered illegal by the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion, incorporates many of these settlements within its route. The roads and settlements have thus become a separate Israeli system imposed on top of Palestinian communities, whose movement and access to land are restricted and controlled by a system of fences, walls, gates, roadblocks, checkpoints and permits.

The Council's view is that the longer the settlements remain in place and the bigger they get, the harder it will appear for them to be removed as part of a negotiated settlement and therefore the harder it will be to reach a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Without peace there can be no security for either Israelis or Palestinians.

In 2008 the World Bank agreed that addressing the inherent problems within the Palestinian economy 'will entail increasing the economic space available for Palestinian urban and rural development in the West Bank, including addressing the increasingly entrenched and expanding impact of Israeli settlement activity...'

The settlements are illegal under international law, as is Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem. The Fourth Geneva Convention stipulates that an occupying power cannot move citizens into an occupied area. In addition, any permanent changes made in occupied land for such settlers are in violation of The Hague Regulations. All governments, except Israel, agree with this view.

The current round of high profile US sponsored peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis are fragile and vulnerable to many outside interventions. The Council supports any peace negotiations that strive to achieve a viable solution for both

Israelis and Palestinians. As part of this solution, the international community has rightly identified the need for the occupation of Palestinian territories to end. Legislating against settlement produce is, therefore, an important signal of intent that the law will be upheld and impunity will not be tolerated.

In December 2009 DEFRA produced an advisory to labelling that, in the interest of consumer choice, retailers should label West Bank products distinctly as either from an Israeli settlement or from a Palestinian farmer. However, despite this move being a welcome first step, it does not remove the growing belief that any economic links with settlements simply perpetuates the illegal situation created by them.

More importantly, labelling on its own does not address the root of the problem. Even if all settlement goods are labelled correctly and consumers in the UK can make an informed choice, it will not ensure Palestinian farmers access to their land. The settlements will continue to be subsidised by the Israeli government and exploit occupied land at the expense of the Palestinian population as long as the goods are accepted on external markets.

### **Other church developments**

In 2009, the World Council of Churches Central Committee called on the Israeli government to freeze and begin to dismantle settlements in occupied Palestinian territories. It also encouraged a commitment to non-violence and peace negotiations, and reiterated the need for an international boycott of products and services from settlements.

The Methodist Conference (2010) noted this call and the support given for such a boycott by Palestinian Christian leaders in the Kairos Palestine document, Palestinian civil society and a growing number of Jewish organisations both inside Israel and worldwide. It called on Methodists to support and engage with the boycott of Israeli goods from illegal settlements.

The Society of Friends believes that since the UK government maintains the position that settlements are illegal and an obstacle to peace, then it should not allow trade with them at all. A ban on trade with Israeli settlements is not a ban on trade with Israel. This position and subsequent suggested actions became public in 2009.

Christian Aid together with Aprove partners in Brussels lobbies on third state responsibility, which questions EU complicity with Israeli human rights violations as a result of accepting settlement produce into European markets. The Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR) is engaged with retailers to encourage them to source products from elsewhere.

Israel's policy of constructing illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory since 1967 is a major cause of poverty and a significant obstacle to peace. The Council believes that settlements will continue to expand and develop unless actions are taken to back the rhetoric of the international community that routinely condemns them as illegal. It therefore supports a ban on settlement produce in UK markets.

## **The Gaza Strip**

Since the 2006 Report, the situation in the Gaza Strip has deteriorated markedly. In November 2010, a report by a coalition of international NGOs including Christian Aid and many other church agencies, entitled *Dashed Hopes: Continuation of the Gaza Blockade*, drew attention to the critical humanitarian situation there. It describes an economy paralysed, homes and schools denied and a population locked in, 80% dependent on international aid. The Council intends to report on Gaza at greater length in 2012, but commends the situation there for prayer and humanitarian action.

## **World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel**

The council commends the World Council of Churches initiative *World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel* and encourages congregations and presbyteries to observe the week using resources produced by the WCC.

Accepted Deliverances:

- Recognizing the complexities of the Middle East situation, with regret instruct the Church and Society Council to work with ecumenical and civil society partners to continue to lobby for the introduction of labelling of products in the UK which clearly identify whether they are from an illegal Israeli settlement.
- Commend the World Council of Churches initiative *World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel* and encourage congregations and presbyteries to observe the week using resources produced by the WCC.
- Instruct the Church and Society Council to report on the situation in Gaza to the 2012 Assembly.

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