

False witness: A misguided study guide

by [Christopher M. Leighton](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue



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In response to the injustices faced by Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, many Christians in the United States—including many within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—have become proponents of what is known as BDS: boycott/divest/sanctions. While the aim of the movement was initially to put economic and political pressure on Israel to end its occupation of the West Bank, the BDS movement is expanding its attack to challenge the foundational claims of a Jewish state.

Broad versions of BDS target all of Israel, while a narrower version targets only companies that conduct business in the West Bank. The latter movement has garnered support not only from Christians and Muslims but from segments of the Jewish community in North America and Israel. Organizations such as Shalom Achshav and Americans for Peace Now have endorsed the boycotting of goods manufactured in areas east of the 1967 Green Line which are claimed for the future Palestinian state. They have embraced this tactic not only as a means to end the

occupation and advance a two-state solution but also to help Israelis realize the ideals in the 1948 Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel: “To foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.”

BDS activists insist that any collaboration with Israeli firms operating inside the West Bank gives legitimacy to the occupation. One target of the boycott has been SodaStream, which makes home carbonation products for the international market. One of its plants is located in the Ma’ale Adumim settlement and is the largest private employer of Palestinians in the West Bank.

Others argue that companies like SodaStream are helping to form the infrastructure of the future Palestinian state and that all states should be open to foreign investment. They point out that SodaStream offers its Palestinian workers the same salaries, benefits, and conditions as their Israeli counterparts. SodaStream’s CEO, Daniel Birnbaum, claims that his enterprise creates something besides profits: “If [Palestinian and Israeli workers] learn to know each other, to respect each other, to live side by side, which is something that’s going on here but not going on elsewhere, then you have a fundamental ingredient for peace.” If a boycott were to succeed in shutting down the SodaStream plant, roughly 500 Palestinian workers would lose their jobs.

The BDS initiatives focused on the West Bank are the subject of a legitimate debate. But recently the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has developed a congregational study guide titled *Zionism Unsettled* which presses the PCUSA to embrace a strain of BDS that delegitimizes the existence of a Jewish state. The guide maligns the state of Israel and the Jewish yearning for a homeland, a yearning that characterizes every other nation. In doing so the guide abandons the mandate of the PCUSA’s 218th General Assembly “to avoid taking broad stands that simplify a very complex situation into a caricature of reality where one side is clearly at fault and the other side is clearly a victim.”

The claims of PCUSA representatives that the study guide speaks “to” the church rather than “for” it are belied by the facts that the guide was created by a group formed under the direction of the church and that it is advertised on the PCUSA website. The content of the guide does a disservice to the church and damages its

ability to play a role in bringing about peace.

The IPMN is right to recognize the Palestinians' history of displacement and abuse. The Palestinian narrative is rooted in the 1947 United Nations resolution that established the state of Israel and in the ensuing 1948 war (which Palestinians call the Nakba, or the Catastrophe) which led to the expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians. The Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank following the Six-Day War in 1967 and the subsequent Israeli military incursions into Lebanon and Gaza (following the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza) undermined conditions for political conciliation. The ongoing expansion of Israeli settlements, the brutality of Israeli military tactics, and the intransigence of governments—both Israeli and Palestinian—unwilling to make concessions necessary for establishing a Palestinian state have all deepened the desperation of the Palestinian populace and solidified their grievances.

Yet to blame Israel alone for Palestinian suffering, as the guide does—and to recommend a broad BDS initiative targeting all of Israel—is at best historically shortsighted. Those who listen to the Palestinian narrative must also consider the experience of the nearly 800,000 Jews who were expelled from or fled Arab countries after 1948; they have their stories of disaster and betrayal. Nor should we forget the Arab massacres of Jews in Damascus, Hebron, and elsewhere well before the establishment of Israel. Those who claim that the founding of Israel in 1948 or the extension of Israeli borders in 1967 created the problem ignore the long history of the Middle East's own versions of Jew hatred.

Every suicide bomber celebrated by Palestinian schoolchildren, every copy of the Hamas Charter that calls for the end to the "Zionist entity," and every missile launched by Islamic Jihad or Hamas or Hezbollah into Israel and targeting civilians makes peace even less of a possibility.

The refusal of Palestinians not only in Gaza but also in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to recognize Israel as a Jewish homeland while at the same time insisting that the same area be recognized as the homeland of the Palestinian people exacerbates the problem. The Palestinians' ongoing insistence on the "right of return" to homes and lands inhabited before 1948 is a dream—one that will not be accomplished and should not be. Only in the case of the Palestinians does the UN grant refugee status not only to the people who left or were forced from their land but to their children and their children's children. By this definition of *refugee*, any group, generations later, would be able to claim land. (Transferred to the American

context, this practice would mean that the Cherokee should be given Tennessee; the Seminole, Florida; and the Sioux, all of the Great Plains.) Such a move would not only be contrary to international practice, it would wipe out the Jewish identity of Israel.

Financially compensating Palestinians who lost homes and land in 1948 as an alternative to return is a viable option. The Presbyterians might therefore consider investing in what will be the state of Palestine rather than supporting a lost and inappropriate cause.

The study guide couples its biased history with a biased theology that denies Jews their own self-definition even as it recapitulates old anti-Jewish tropes. Reaching a new low, *Zionism Unsettled* denies any legitimacy to the state of Israel whatsoever.

First the authors call into question the authority of the UN “to order or recommend the partition of Palestine” that led to establishment of the state of Israel. They do not, however, address the UN’s competence to recognize a new state of Palestine or any other new state. Treating the globe’s one Jewish state as exceptional is not a sign of fairness but of bigotry. The guide then reverses course and affirms the UN’s juridical power to condemn Israel. Citing a long list of resolutions that Israel has violated, the authors build a case that undermines the right of a Jewish state to exist and renders it a “rogue.”

Worse, the study guide not only impugns the UN partition resolution and delegitimizes the state of Israel, it goes to the obscene extreme of equating Zionism—the Jewish view of the land of Israel as the Jewish national homeland—with racism. The guide asserts: “Racism is the cornerstone of the Zionist project.” The guide does not, however, see any racism in the insistence by the rulers of both Gaza and the West Bank that no Jew should live within the borders of the Palestinian state to be created in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The guide exacerbates its delegitimization of Israel by branding it “an apartheid state.” Although the Presbyterian General Assembly rejected previous overtures that attempted to conflate Israel with the apartheid regime of South Africa, the guide uncritically endorses the accusation by claiming that “the Israeli form of apartheid is becoming increasingly entrenched” and the situation has become “irreversible.” The fact that Arabs, Muslims, and Christians are legally vested with full citizen rights in Israel is ignored. By their definition, the authors also need to brand various Muslim

nations “apartheid” regimes.

Next, the guide insists that Zionism is a “false theology . . . a heretical doctrine that promotes death rather than life.” It characterizes Zionism as a source of “evil” that leads inexorably to “ethnic cleansing” and “cultural genocide.” It claims that “the major American Jewish organizations bear considerable responsibility” for a “pathology” of supporting Zionism that leads to “self-inflicted blindness.”

Finally, the study guide moves into supersessionism, a view that the PCUSA has previously rejected. “With the coming of Christ and the founding of the Church,” the guide says, “in some sense the old covenant has been replaced or superseded by the new covenant in Christ.” In the sense that the old covenant entailed the promise of a specific land to a specific people, the guide makes it clear that the covenant has been superseded. It thus makes the promises to Israel null and void with Christ’s arrival. In response to Jews who cite Bible tradition to show both a theological and a historical connection to the land, the guide evokes replacement theology and denies the historical connection. Then, in a remarkable example of hypocrisy, it cites Christian theology and Palestinian claims to justify its position.

Jews have regarded the land of Israel as their home since Old Testament times. Indeed, Jews have consistently lived in the land from then until now. To this day, practicing Jews pray facing Jerusalem; they declare at the conclusion of every Yom Kippur service and Passover celebration, “next year in Jerusalem”; and they pray daily for “the peace of Jerusalem.”

This connection to Israel is not only a religious view supported by prophecies to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants. For many Jews, the connection to Israel is a historical one. The term *Zionism* originated in the 19th century as an expression of Jewish nationalism: secular Jews promoted the Zionist ideal in their quest for a national homeland where they could find safety from a Europe in which they were facing increasing discrimination and persecution. The Zionist ideal of a homeland, determined not by theology but by history, has informed Jewish identity for more than a century.

By erroneously insisting that Zionism—the Jewish yearning for a national homeland, a yearning that all peoples have—is racist, the study guide bears false witness against Jews. By accusing Israel of being an apartheid state, the guide ignores the facts on the ground, fails to acknowledge the rights possessed by non-Jews in Israel,

and conceals Palestinians' goal of having a state where no Jew can live. By pathologizing the Jewish people and by failing to have any conversation with the representatives of the "major Jewish organizations," the guide's authors break with the church's commitment to peace, to justice, to fairness, and to a two-state solution.

For 26 years I have worked in an organization that brings Christians and Jews into difficult conversations about scriptural and theological issues. We have labored long and hard to confront misunderstandings that are embedded within our traditions. The clergy, educators, and scholars with whom we work wonder why the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is shifting from a limited critique of Israel to a campaign of delegitimization. They want to know why *Zionism Unsettled* omits divergent points of view, promotes historical caricatures, and disseminates heavy-handed indictments.

I am convinced that the change reveals a growing sense of desperation. There is an emerging conviction that a two-state solution is no longer possible. Despair is spurring people to conclude that the time has come to choose sides. Frustration is eclipsing hope. Yet a church that no longer believes in the possibility of reconciliation will betray its gospel proclamation.

Instead of pursuing divestment and boycotts, and certainly instead of denying legitimacy to Jewish self-definition and the state of Israel, the better option would be to focus on communication coupled with creative investment. Presbyterians will better express the gospel of love when they relinquish the vindictive impulse to punish Israel and find opportunities to direct their resources to helping Palestinian stakeholders.

In fostering creative reinvestment, the church would also be standing in solidarity with many Muslims as well as fellow Christians in Palestine. The IPMN, in conjunction with its divestment partners, gives the impression that its support of broad-based BDS reflects the universal interests of Palestinians. Yet there are significant Palestinian voices who have spoken out against boycotting Israel. Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority, has supported a boycott of products in the settlements but has also said: "We don't ask anyone to boycott Israel itself. We have relations with Israel, we have mutual recognition of Israel."

Christians need to resist the messianic zealotry that animates Israeli settlers and Christian Zionists, who dream of Israel annexing the West Bank. At the same time,

they need to fend off anti-Zionist ideologues who have jettisoned the role of peacemakers because they believe that Palestinians cannot win unless Israelis lose. If religious communities are to play a constructive role in the Middle East, they will need to enter into interfaith coalitions and risk unsettling conversations. They will need to invest their time, energy, and resources to create positive facts on the ground. In facing this challenge, Christians, Jews, and Muslims will either find ways to stand together in the midst of their differences or they will fall apart.