

Israel, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and "divestment"

By [David Williams](#)

June 17, 2014

Divestment? From Israel? That's the rumbling issue that's raising eyebrows, as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) holds our biannual meeting *di tutti* meetings.

For all the kerfuffle, I don't know that what the Presbyterian Church is considering can even be meaningfully described as "divestment." Sure, there are folks out there advocating for that approach, but that's not what's being done. At no point has any proposal been seriously considered that would sell my oldline denomination's collective holdings in all businesses that operate in Israel. That's just not going to happen.

The question, for Presbyterians, is whether or not we can treat businesses that operate in Israel in the same way we treat businesses that operate in the United States. For example, the PC (U.S.A.) does not invest in U.S. businesses that build or design weapons. We also do not, as a matter of principle, invest in the very profitable businesses that own or manage privatized prisons: We don't hold stock in [Lockheed Martin](#) or the [Corrections Corporation of America](#). Do such businesses serve the security of the United States? Sure, on some level, as icky as it is. Would we be wealthier if we'd laid all of our money into them? Just click the links above, and see how profitable human brokenness can be.

But as a free association of individuals, we are fully entitled to place our capital into endeavors that more clearly articulate our shared values as a community. Those values are fundamentally countercultural in this society, and profitability and maximization of shareholder return are not our only metrics. [Far, far from it.](#)

While that affects the sorts of businesses in which the church invests, having a socially responsible investing strategy could not be sanely understood as "divesting from America." Neither would it be rationally defensible to describe choosing not to invest in such business as a "slippery slope" to "divesting from America."

Similarly, choosing not to invest in businesses—U.S.-based ones, I might add—that serve the purposes of coercive power in the Israel-Palestine conflict does not mean

that we are "divesting from Israel."

If a business is owned and operated in Israel, that's all well and good. It could make funky and practical little sandals, or cosmetics, or gaming software. These are not weapons, or part of an oppressive power structure within a nation state. Those companies, the PC (U.S.A.) can still invest in. They are simply creating products within the economy of a democratic ally of the United States. If an American business works in Israel? Also not an issue, so long as it doesn't do the same things there that would lead us to not invest in here in the U.S.

There are some on the left who call for more expansive punitive sanctions against the whole nation of Israel, the complete withdrawal of resources from any business that works with that state. As a denomination, the PC (U.S.A.) has never seriously considered being part of the boycott-divest-sanctions (BDS) movement.

More significantly, broad calls for blanket divestment make no sense in this context. If an entire system is fundamentally and unworkably corrupt and oppressive, sure. It's why people who care about the good do not invest in Iran or North Korea.

But Israel, troubled and imperfect though it is, is not in the same category as such states. There is a viable parliamentary democracy in Israel. Speech there is free, and the press is not muzzled or beaten into silence. There is active and unsuppressed debate, including the voices of Israelis who are deeply troubled by the way a right-wing led Israel is treating the Palestinian people.

It would not be in the interests of peace—or justice—for the Presbyterian Church to disengage from Israel. If we have anything to contribute to the cause of peace, it is in respectful and honest conversations with our Jewish friends and colleagues. There, we can share the pain we hear from our Palestinian brothers and sisters in faith, who yearn for peace even under the harsh conditions in which they live.

If we slam that door closed, using the power of our Mammon to build a wall between us, then that role would be compromised. Which is why that is not even close to being on the table. Nor should it be, so long as Israel remains a state worthy of its sacred name.

The more radical BDS folks want to say that what we're doing is divestment, because it would represent a win. Those reactionaries who want folks who care about Israel to be afraid? They want to say this would be divestment. That fear of an

isolated Israel conveniently obscures hard realities that they don't want seen or discussed. But the reality of what's being proposed remains.

It's three American businesses, and if they were doing in the United States what they are doing in Israel—facilitating a peculiar mix of war and the incarceration of an entire people—we'd sell our stock in them.

All we're trying to be is consistent.

Originally posted at [Beloved Spear](#)