Chapter 10

South African, Church of Norway and Church of Sweden pushing for just peace in Israel and Palestine by naming Israel's policies apartheid: World Council of Churches' 2025 decision

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1. Introduction

Parallel to the strong involvement of the South African government in upholding international law, South African churches have allied with other churches in promoting a just peace in response to the human-made catastrophes in the Middle East. Numerous international law provisions are violated by all the parties - and Israel's inadequate efforts to prevent and prosecute violent settlers is also a violation of international law and Jewish ethics (Cramer, 2025; ToI Staff, 2025a). Table 1's figures over deaths speak for themselves. The number of injured persons and displaced persons are higher. Hundreds of persons in Syria, Iran and Yemen are also killed.

Following the 7 October 2023 terror that involved several militant Palestinian actors, an escalation of the Israel–Hezbollah conflict began on

8 October 2023. It formally ended with a ceasefire on 27 November 2024, with ongoing attacks in 2025.[1]

The Israeli–Hamas ceasefire lasted from 19 January to 18 March 2025; and on 16 May 2025, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) started a huge ground offensive, termed Gideon's Chariots, in Gaza. Moreover, the closure or restrictions of humanitarian aid - going on for years and escalating since March 2025 - has resulted in hundreds of starvation deaths, in blatant violation of IV Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949.

When reading Table 1, it is important to note that the use of 7 October 2023 as the starting point for these figures does *not* imply that the conflict began on that day; rather, it marks a significant escalation.

Table 1: Figures on number of dead and taken hostage, as of 20 January 2025

Gaza (civilians & Hamas and other militant groups) (Al -Jazeera, 2025; (others report higher figures)	Israeli security forces (Gaza + Lebanon + West Bank) (Fabian, 2025; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UN OCHA], 2025)	Lebanese (civilians & militants) + Israeli (civilians & security forces) (Ali, 2025; Daoud, 2025 has daily updates; ToI Staff, 2025b; Reuters, 2024)	West Bank (Palestinians + Israeli civilians/ settlers) (UN OCHA, 2025)	7 Oct 2023 terror: Killed + taken hostage + Israelis killed in Israel since attack (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2024)
62 614 + indirect deaths	968 + 87 + 23	More than 4100 + 127 (Nov-24)	999 + 12	1 195 + 251 + 17

The three main armed actors have, in various ways and at different times, expressed their objectives. Hezbollah has not revised its 2009 anti-Israeli manifesto (reprinted in Alagha, 2011). Hamas (2017:20) revised its original charter, accepting a Palestinian state "along the lines of the 4th

1 For violations of the ceasefire agreement, see Daoud (2025), with daily updates.

of June 1967…" – although much of its other rhetoric contradicts this formulation. Israel's current government has expressed four objectives: to eliminate, destroy or defeat Hamas; to release all hostages captured on 7 October 2023; to ensure that Gaza is no longer a threat to Israel; and to secure the safe return of all residents to the northern border area (Lis, 2024, quoting Prime Minister Netanyahu). To this can be added another objective: territorial expansion (Washington Post, 2024; UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [UN OHCHR], 2024), which has happened gradually. In 2024 and 2025, a large majority in the Israeli Knesset said no to the establishment of a Palestinian state and supported full annexation of the West Bank, respectively (Knesset, 2024; Sokol, 2025).

Against the backdrop of these catastrophes, this chapter analyses how churches and church-related organisations (CROs) have called for new perceptions of the ongoing tragedy in Israel and Palestine by using the term 'apartheid'. Such terminology may also prompt stronger measures by the international community. The chapter places particular emphasis on the process leading up to the 2022 World Council of Churches (WCC) General Assembly, which adopted the statement *Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East* (WCC General Assembly, 2022), and the subsequent decision by the WCC Central Committee (2025) to actually apply the term. The article also presents the resolution by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) World Council (YMCA, 2022a; 2022b), titled *Just Peace for All – A World Free from Occupation*, which employed more explicit language. The chapter applies the conceptual framework of *vocatio, ad-vocatio,* and *pro-vocatio* (Nordstokke, 2021:237; WCC & Action by Churches Together [ACT] Alliance, 2022:8, 15).

The method used is a review of relevant church and CRO decisions over the last 15 years. In addition to the conceptual framework, I apply Lukes' theory of power (1974) and Mott's outline of core Christian ethics (2011) in the analysis.

Before outlining the conceptual framework - which Nordstokke refers to as a 'claim' - an overview of the Palestinian Christian context is provided, as this context is essential for understanding the efforts of the international ecumenical movement. As a tool for analysing the 2022 resolutions, it is

also necessary to review various sources' positions on the use of the term 'apartheid' in relation to Israeli policies. The main discussion identifies the particular context of Christian actors engaging in advocacy to influence the State of Israel, asking whether such advocacy is provocative or effective.

2. The Palestinian Christian Protestant context

As this chapter analyses efforts by Protestant churches, the Christian context in Palestine will focus on the Protestant denominations, acknowledging that their membership is considerably smaller than that of the Catholic ('Latin'), Orthodox, and Greek Catholic ('Melkite') churches (Haugen, 2015:111, 120, n. 7). Two Protestant churches are recognised amongst the so-called Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem: the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem (2024a), with 27 congregations in five countries and 7,000 members; and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) (ELCJHL, 2024), with six congregations - one of them in Amman - and approximately 3,000 members[2] (Lutheran World Federation [LWF], 2018). The Lutheran presence is further supported by the LWF's property and activities at the top of the Mount of Olives, including the Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) and the Church of the Ascension (LWF, s.a.).

Widening the perspective, smaller Protestant churches in the West Bank are members of the Council of Local Evangelical Churches in the Holy Land, which was recognised by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 2019. Individuals from these churches have, since 1979, been involved in the founding of Bethlehem Bible College, which has given rise to two affiliated institutions: Nazareth Evangelical College and the Gaza Study Centre. World Vision has been an important financial contributor, including to the Christ at the Checkpoint (CATC) conferences, held biennially since 2010; the Secretary-General of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has spoken at several CATC conferences, and the Lausanne Movement has also endorsed CATC (Isaac & Su, 2014).

With support from churches and other CROs, the Episcopal Diocese and the ELCJHL are involved in a wide range of diaconal efforts. The Episcopal

2 The current figure is likely lower.

Diocese owns two hospitals - Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza and St Luke's Hospital in Nablus - two clinics (Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, 2024b), and 20 educational institutions (Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, 2024c). The ELCJHL owns four schools and one preschool (ELCJHL, 2024), and vocational schools in Jerusalem are owned by the LWF. Another vocational school, in Gaza, is owned by the ecumenical organisation Near East Council of Churches Committee for Refugee Work, established in 1952 to serve Palestinian refugees.

From these descriptions, three crucial insights can be drawn. First, Palestinian churches play a societal role and wield influence that far exceeds what their limited membership might suggest.

Second, their relationship with churches and CROs around the world are strong and long-standing. Even denominations without sister churches in Israel or Palestine operate wide-ranging programmes - for example, the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland. Presbyterian churches have been present in Syria and Lebanon since the mid-19th century, alongside the (initially) joint Lutheran / Anglican presence further south. For many CROs - such as Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), which is owned by most Protestant churches in Norway - their partnership with Palestinian churches represent their longest-standing relationships, some dating back to the early 1950s.

Third, the ELCJHL and the Episcopal Diocese have their head offices in East Jerusalem. East Jerusalem is considered by the vast majority of countries to be under Israeli occupation, most recently affirmed by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (ICJ, 2024). However, as Israel exercises jurisdiction over (greater) East Jerusalem, all permits are issued by Israel's Religious Communities Department (RCD). It is important to maintain a proper relationship with the Israeli authorities, particularly the RCD. This relationship with Israeli authorities is especially significant for churches and CROs operating from Jerusalem, more so than for those based in West Bank cities.

Three CROs are particularly important in this study. First, YMCA East Jerusalem (s.a.) was established in Jericho in 1949. In addition to its main office, YMCA East Jerusalem operates in ten towns across the West Bank. It is relevant that YMCA Jerusalem was established in 1878, and what is

now named Jerusalem International YMCA, located in West Jerusalem, is *not* affiliated with the Global YMCA. Second, Sabeel (based in Jerusalem and Nazareth) is listed as a partner of the Church of Sweden (CoS) (CoS, 2024). Third, Kairos Palestine (based in Bethlehem) was, along with Sabeel, previously identified as an 'important partner' by the Church of Norway (CoN) Council on Ecumenical and International Relations (2021:7). In its 2024–2026 strategy, the term 'closer cooperation' is applied for Sabeel and Kairos Palestine (CoN Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, 2024:5).

Palestine and Israel are addressed in a unique way through the WCC Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), which operates under the local patronage of the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches. The governments of Norway and Sweden have been major funders of the EAPPI, with Sweden ending its funding from 2025, and churches in these countries have recruited a significant share of its participants. This stands in contrast to Germany, which has been reported as stating that "the German government… does not directly or indirectly fund the World Council of Churches" (ToI Staff, 2015, quoting Channel 2).

This claim is incorrect. In fact, Germany has allocated "substantial grants" to the WCC (WCC Finance Committee, 2022:4). The same source also inaccurately claims that the WCC "backs BDS" (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions – a campaign targeting Israel and Israeli institutions). This is not true. What is accurate is that the WCC Central Committee (2005; 2014; 2025; see also WCC Programmes, 2005) has called for economic measures targeting products from Israeli settlements and companies operating in those settlements, which, under international law, are considered occupied territory. The 2025 decision also included "targeted sanctions, … and arms embargoes…" against Israel. In European Union (EU) terminology, divesting from and avoiding trade with actors contributing to the occupation is referred to as differentiation (Haugen, 2024).

This example illustrates that any action taken concerning Palestine and Israel is at risk of being misinterpreted, especially by those who view with suspicion any effort to hold Israel accountable for its policies.

3. The essence of vocatio, ad-vocatio, and pro-vocatio

The 2022 study document *Called to Transformation. Ecumenical Diakonia* (WCC & ACT Alliance, 2022:15, italics in original), reads:

> To reflect on diakonia is therefore an invitation to give new expression to the vocation to be part of God's mission to the world, and to understand this call (vocatio) as advocacy (ad-vocatio) and if necessary provocation (pro-vocatio); the first affirming the situation and the wellbeing of the other as fundamental for how discipleship is performed, the other acknowledging that this way of doing diakonia will provoke resistance and contradiction, however always convinced that it will be transformative…

These are considered "new expressions". Moreover, there is an acknowledgment that both *ad-vocatio* and *pro-vocatio* will provoke resistance and contradiction.

Given that the Orthodox member churches of the WCC hold to the concept of symphonia as part of their ecclesiology - implying mutual legitimisation between the autocephalous (self-administered, national) Orthodox churches and state authorities - this explicit emphasis on a vocal role for the churches is surprising.

It is too early to assess whether any church has fully adopted this conceptual framework. The term 'prophetic diakonia' does, however, have a longer history (LWF, 2002), and the fact that the LWF was an early proponent of the term is noteworthy. Historically, Lutheran churches legitimised and supported state authorities in various kingdoms and principalities across Northern Europe following the Reformation. They lacked genuine independence and often functioned as instruments of public policy - though some priests showed courageous resistance.

Today, the situation is quite different for the Lutheran majority churches, such as the CoN, CoS, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland (ELCF). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD), however, deviates from the others in that it lacks a national church council or synod and does not have the same tradition of church leaders speaking publicly on issues perceived as political.

4. Views on the term 'apartheid' as applied to Israeli policies

It is common to hear that the term 'apartheid' is inappropriate when applied to Israel, because of significant differences between the South African apartheid regime (1948–1994) and South West Africa (now Namibia, 1948–1990). These differences include constitutional structures, ideological support, and demographic realities - in South Africa, for instance, a white minority dominated a black majority. On the other hand, there are at least two similarities between Israel's present policies and South Africa pre-1994: the religious justification for the policies and the spatial expression of the occupation, with surveillance and movement restrictions.

Moreover, the term 'apartheid' has outlived the South African regime. It is now defined in international law, including as a crime against humanity under Article 7(2)(h) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), adopted in 1998 - four years after the fall of apartheid. Therefore, applying the term 'apartheid' is not about drawing comparisons with South Africa, but about referring to relevant international legal frameworks: the ICC Statute, the Apartheid Convention, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

Four perspectives on the use of the term 'apartheid' will now be introduced. It is notable that the term is not mentioned in the (controversial) list of examples accompanying the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. Nonetheless, an increasing number of public and private actors have adopted the definition and its example list. Example 7 reads (IHRA, 2016): "Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor". Characterising a state as "a racist endeavor" moves in the same conceptual direction as the term 'apartheid'.

The first view is expressed by Naim Ateek, Episcopal priest and founder of Sabeel in the early 1990s. He referred to an Israeli form of apartheid, drawing on the Hebrew terms *hafrada* (separation) and *nishool* (dispossession), in reflection on the title of a 2008 conference in Boston, USA (Ateek, 2008). He cited an interview with Israeli Senior Advisor Alon and Jimmy Carter's book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, although he did

not reference the statement by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who said: "Israel risks apartheid-like struggle if two-state solution fails" (McCarthy, 2007, quoting Olmert, Israeli PM 2006–2009). Since 2010, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak (1999–2001) has also used the term 'apartheid' on at least two occasions when discussing Israel's future.

The second view is expressed by the *Cry for Hope* (Kairos Palestine, 2020:3):

> As followers of Jesus, our response to ideologies of exclusivity and apartheid is to uphold a vision of inclusivity and equality for all peoples of the land and to persistently struggle to bring this about. … we stand against the theology of Empire, a global order of domination manifesting in racial, economic, cultural, and ecological oppression that threatens humanity and all of creation.

The linking of the State of Israel with Empire was not new to *Cry for Hope*, but the wording was more explicit than previously seen. The term 'apartheid' does not appear in Kairos Palestine (2009), which used the term 'racism' only once (Kairos Palestine, 2009:section 6.3).

The third view comes from the Jerusalem Declaration on anti-Semitism (JDA) (Abicht et al., 2021). It was authored by scholars in the fields of antisemitism, Holocaust, and Jewish studies, who found the IHRA working definition - particularly its list of examples - too expansive. I am aware that the term 'Semite' encompasses Jews and Arabs; however, the term 'antisemitism' is applied for hostile or "negative attitudes towards and actions against Jews or what is perceived as Jewish…" (Moe, 2023:17). Section 13 of the JDA (Abicht et al., 2021:section 13, extract) states:

> It is not antisemitic to point out systematic racial discrimination. In general, the same norms of debate that apply to other states and to other conflicts over national self-determination apply in the case of Israel and Palestine. Thus, even if contentious, it is not antisemitic, in and of itself, to compare Israel with other historical cases, including settler-colonialism or apartheid.

The JDA emphasises the context when considering a specific expression:

> Context can include the intention behind an utterance, or a pattern of speech over time, or even the identity of the speaker, especially when the subject is Israel or Zionism (Abicht et al., 2021, preambular para 6).

The fourth view is expressed by a Commission operating under the mandate from the CoN, which submitted its report in 2024. I served as a member of this Commission and was actively involved in formulating its wording (CoN Commission, 2024:131; own translation):

> Even those who find it appropriate to use the concept [apartheid] on Israeli policies, acknowledge the danger that the term can be misused in general anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish rhetoric. Although several of the Commission members are strong opponents of applying the term 'apartheid' to Israeli policies, the members of the Commission agree that it must be the context and the justification that determines whether the possible use of the term can be said to be anti-Semitic or not (see the JDA).

Hence, the Commission takes a similar position to that of the 350 scholars behind the JDA (one Commission member is a JDA signatory), implying that a specific and nuanced description of Israeli policies - concluding that these policies amount to apartheid - is not antisemitic. The term 'apartheid' remains controversial, as the following examples will demonstrate.

5. The process leading up to the WCC resolution

Already in 2009, a study sponsored by South Africa's Ministry of Foreign Affairs concluded that Israel's policies constituted apartheid (al-Haq, 2009; Du Plessis et al., 2009). In 2019, the Synod of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa (ACSA) adopted a resolution stating that the situation in Israel and Palestine is "in some respects… worse than apartheid" (ACSA, 2019:para 2e). Two years later, a CoS Synod decision titled *International Law in Israel and Palestine* was adopted by 127 votes to 103 (CoS, 2021a:49–51, 29–31), following the rejection of the original proposal (CoS, 2021b; the vote was 15–13, with one bishop abstaining). The final resolution referenced the UN Apartheid Convention and the ICC Statutes, and specified that the CoS should "bring the issue" (*lyfta frågan*) to the WCC and LWF. All bishops voted against the resolution and received a letter of complaint from ELCJHL's Bishop Azar (2022).

More churches, such as the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA), adopted two resolutions in 2022: one was unanimous, using the term

'apartheid-like', while the other was more explicit (PCUSA, 2022) - the vote was 266–116. Other church assemblies voted down resolutions applying the term 'apartheid' to Israel's policies, most notably the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the USA (ECUSA), which occurred twice (ECUSA, 2018; 2022).

In June 2022, two months before the start of the WCC General Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, the General Secretary-elect, Jerry Pillay (Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa), was criticised for an article in which he concluded that comparing Israel and Palestine with apartheid South Africa was "justifiable" (Pillay, 2016). He was accused of promoting "ideological extremism" (Jenkins, 2022, quoting David Michaels from B'nai B'rith International).

On the first day of the WCC General Assembly, the acting WCC General Secretary addressed the Assembly, stating that the proposed resolution from the ACSA - which had earlier received the support of three other South/Southern African churches, as well as the CoN and the CoS - was met with considerable scepticism by church leaders in Palestine (Sauca, 2022),[3] whom he had visited in July (WCC News, 2022; WCC, 2023:14). Quoting these leaders, he expressed their alleged deep concern for what would happen "if the WCC calls Israel an apartheid state" (Sauca, 2022:1:11:19-1:11:22).

At the opening of the WCC General Assembly, the number of churches expressing support for the ACSA draft resolution had increased from 5 to 16 (Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network, 2022:1, n. 2), most of them Presbyterian, with one from the Orthodox tradition: the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch.

In addition, the hosts from the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) made several efforts to avoid the use of the term 'apartheid' in the plenary session. A young Palestinian delegate, invited to speak at the session titled *Showing God's Merciful Love for a Broken World with Special Attention to the*

3 There was no specific reference to the proposed resolution, but it is obvious from the context of the speech that this was the subject of their concern, as conveyed by the WCC Acting General Secretary. For two quotes, see Sauca, 2022:1:11:10-1:11:17 ["decisions … threaten their very existence in the Holy Land"]; & 1:13:12-1:13:21 ["decisions … endanger their very existence"] [sound absent 1:04:58-1:11:04].

Middle East, refused to comply with the censorship and was consequently not allowed to speak.

6. The outcome

The Public Issues Committee (PIC), convened during the WCC General Assembly, received a new draft statement from the WCC Secretariat addressing the situation across the Middle East. The PIC further developed this draft, ultimately formulating the statement titled *Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East*, which was adopted by consensus in the Plenary. One full paragraph of the statement reads as follows (WCC General Assembly, 2022:2):

> Recently, numerous international, Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations and legal bodies have published studies and reports describing the policies and actions of Israel as amounting to 'apartheid' under international law. Within this Assembly, some churches and delegates strongly support the utilization of this term as accurately describing the reality of the people in Palestine/Israel and the position under international law, while others find it inappropriate, unhelpful and painful. We are not of one mind on this matter. We must continue to struggle with this issue, while we continue working together on this journey of justice and peace. We pray that the WCC continues to provide a safe space for its member churches for conversation and collaboration in pursuing truth, and working for a just peace among all people of the region.

The wording of this section of the WCC statement was well received by the Kairos Palestine Conference (2022:3). Notably, there is no reference to the CoS (2021a) or PCUSA's (2022) decisions - the latter being the most detailed. It is understandable that three human rights organisations - HRW, Amnesty International (AI), and B'Tselem - are implicitly referenced, as each has analysed Israeli policies through the lens of international law.

Subsequently, the ICJ (2024:224–229) found that Israel is in violation of Article 3 of the ICERD, which prohibits segregation and apartheid. The WCC participated in the first Global Anti-Apartheid Conference for Palestine (2024; WCC News, 2024).

To facilitate a "safe space … conversation … and working for a just peace", a Working Group on Palestine and Israel (WGIP) was established by the WCC Executive Committee in 2024. In its initial report, the WGIP advised that the term 'apartheid' is "appropriate and prophetic to the situation…" (WCC WGIP, 2024:2; see also WCC General Secretary, 2024:23–57). The group initially comprised 21 members, including the Archbishop of the ACSA, two German EKD bishops, and five Palestinians (WCC Executive Committee, 2024). Then, the WCC Central Committee (2025) - in a unanimous decision - specified: "Naming the Reality of Apartheid: We recognize and denounce the system of apartheid imposed by Israel on the Palestinian people, in violation of international law and moral conscience."

Remembering the controversies particularly after the CoS (2021) decision and the 2022 use of the label 'extremism' (Jenkins, 2022), this clear wording is remarkable.

7. YMCA

The YMCA (2022:3) calls

> on YMCA movements to implement policy advocacy to mobilize support for peaceful and just resolutions of all situations of occupation, including the situation of Apartheid and occupation in the Holy Land.

By including all occupations - explicitly referencing Ukraine, Cyprus, and Western Sahara (YMCA, 2022a:2) - this resolution presents significant implementation challenges. It was proposed by the YMCAs and YWCAs of the three Scandinavian states, along with the YMCA of Sri Lanka. YMCA South Africa served as the 'primary seconder', representing 13 'supporting organisations (YMCA, 2022b:9–36). The resolution passed with a vote of 66-8-35 (YMCA, 2022b:10–43).

The stated objective is the "peaceful and just resolution of … Apartheid and occupation in the Holy Land" (YMCA, 2022a:3). By applying the term "Holy Land", the resolution refers to the entire area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. However, the resolution is vague in two respects. First, it does not define what is meant by "occupation", though it is reasonable to assume - based on international consensus - that this includes Gaza, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Second,

it does not specify where "apartheid" is said to exist. However, the use of the conjunction "and" suggests that apartheid is present at least in the areas under occupation - and possibly beyond.

In this context, it is relevant to consider that forms of separation also exist within Israel proper. First, the Israel Land Authority accommodates the policies of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) (HRW, 2020). Second, Israel contains many so-called "unrecognised villages", primarily affecting Bedouin communities. Third, Israel allows the operation of "admissions committees", authorised to reject non-Jewish applicants in small towns with fewer than 700 households. This affects so-called "Israeli Arabs" and Bedouins; the relevant law has been revised to broaden its scope (Summers, 2023).

The YMCA (2022) adds the phrase "to mobilize support" after the term "advocacy", to gain support for the "just resolutions of all situations of occupation."

How will this advocacy be received by the occupying power(s) and the international community? The reality is that the complexity of Israel's occupation - including Gaza, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem - and relationships to neighbouring states require numerous negotiation track.

8. Discussion: The role of advocacy: Provocative or effective?

This section explores what the global church and the world's largest youth movement, the YMCA, might do in response to Israel's overall policies. It begins with a theoretical framework, identifies some of the challenges posed by a hardened debate climate, and concludes with specific reflections on what might foster change. Provocative messages or actions can instil change if they lead to greater awareness of a particular issue and increase the willingness to act and influence relevant decision-makers.

However, if the messages and actions are perceived as too provocative, they risk being seen as part of a 'sectarian' agenda. This may narrow their overall appeal and hinder the building of a strong and broad social movement capable of promoting change. Numerical strength is always more important for those who seek to promote change than for those who seek to resist it. Those resisting change tend to occupy positions of power. They may even

be able to shape the perceptions of those in subordinate positions, rendering them relatively complacent with the prevailing social order. This dynamic is explained by Steve Lukes (1974) through two additional forms of power: hidden power (agenda-setting - determining which topics are discussed and which are not) and invisible power (shaping internalised attitudes). These operate alongside the more widely recognised form of power: visible power, or the ability to influence others to do something that they would not otherwise do.

While not directly inspired by Lukes, Christian *social* ethics is primarily concerned with promoting change (Mott, 2011:104–107; WCC & ACT Alliance, 2022). My own position is that inclusive social development arises from broad-based movements that press for change in ways that encourage those in decision-making roles to gradually accommodate these demands - first partially, then more fully. If the powerful resist such demands and respond with harsh or violent measures, this leads to reduced inclusion, diminished innovation, increased stagnation, and, in the worst cases, spirals of violence (Haugen, 2016; 2018).

The context described above applies to relatively well-defined polities, where those making demands share citizenship with those who either accommodate or resist those demands. In such settings, there exists a single, defined *demos* - a people who can legitimately make claims on those holding political power within the entity in which they reside.

When the context differs - as in our case, where Christian global actors seek to press demands upon a state widely recognised as the world's only Jewish state - the situation becomes embedded in a web of complex relationships.

A non-exhaustive list of the particularities in this relationship offers further insight into the "provocative or effective" discussion:

i. The history of Christian anti-Judaism (targeting the religion) and antisemitism (targeting Jews as a people) has led many Jews to be suspicious of anything associated with Christianity;

ii. Israeli authorities see themselves as having to rely on their own military capabilities for self-defence and are generally disinclined to be told "what to do" by external actors;

iii. Israel and its supporters are increasingly framing criticism of Israeli policies as a form of antisemitism (IHRA, 2016), sometimes by reinforcing and encouraging the notion of strong, intrinsic ties between "all Jews" globally and the State of Israel; and

iv. Israel's primary international supporter is the USA, where the Evangelical Right has gained significant political influence over foreign policy.

Israel's other international relationships also form part of this broader context. Some are relatively stable across changing governments - with Hungary and the Czech Republic becoming more staunch pro-Israel supporters than Germany - while others have been strengthened under the leadership of conservative governments, including Argentina during the Milei era, Brazil during the Bolsonaro era, and India during the Modi era.[4]

At the same time, several distinctive features characterise Israel's relationship with the global community:

i. In its 1948 Declaration of Independence, Israel refers to the United Nations (UN) nine times, signalling that UN bodies and norms are, in principle, highly relevant for Israel;

ii. Israel has ratified all the core international human rights and humanitarian law treaties (though not the 1907 Hague Regulations; see Israeli Supreme Court (1978:6) regarding their customary international law status);

iii. Israel seeks recognition as a Western and democratic state, and its membership in regional intergovernmental organisations supports this image;

iv. Israel has a culture of expressing dissent, fostering a vivid public debate - though this is sometimes tempered by self-censorship.

However, each of these four characteristics can be nuanced, presenting a more complex picture: (a) Israel disregards UN decisions (only Security Council resolutions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter are binding;

4 Argentina, Hungary and the Czech Republic were amongst the 14 states that voted against the UN General Assembly (2024) resolution specifying how to implement ICJ (2024); Brazil voted in favour, and India abstained, together with 42 other states (UN News, 2024).

most UN declarations are not); (b) Israel denies access to several UN special procedures established by the UN Human Rights Council; (c) Israel systematically discriminates even amongst its own citizens; for example, there are no voting stations in so-called 'unrecognised villages'; (d) laws such as the anti-BDS legislation have significantly constrained the climate for freedom of expression, particularly for academic staff and BDS advocates (Haugen, 2024; Stern, 2019).

Compared with the use of the term 'apartheid' to describe Israeli policies, the promotion of BDS has generated greater public debate and more extensive sanctions. This may be because of the BDS movement's longer history, the involvement of high-profile individuals, and its public communication - some of which I have critiqued (Haugen, 2024). The application of the term 'apartheid' to Israel's policies is more recent and has not (yet) triggered the same level of confrontation as that experienced by BDS promoters and advocates of differentiation.

It must be expected that this will change (Aizenberg, 2023). His critical assessment - primarily of AI and HRW's framing of apartheid as applicable to Israeli policies - appears in the *Fathom Essays*, published by the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM) since 2012. BICOM has successfully bridged academic publishing (Johnson, 2024) with what I term lobbying; the advocacy network *We Believe* in Israel (2024), formed following a 2011 BICOM conference, is one of its offshoots (Reut Institute, 2011:5). Even prior to this, BICOM was described as "Britain's most active pro-Israeli lobbying organisation" (Syal, 2009).

The context of Johnson (2024) warrants closer attention, being Volume 2 of Routledge's *Studies in Contemporary Antisemitism* (SCA) series (Hirsch et al., 2024). In the Preface, one of the series editors writes: "Both Fathom and the London Centre are responses to late 20th-century developments on the left that have contributed to a resurgence of left antisemitism" (Hirsch et al., 2024:xxi).[5]

However, studies on antisemitism have found that those who identify with "the left" are actually less antisemitic than those identifying with "the right"

5 See also page xx (Roman numerals), regarding "nurturing the Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism", published biannually since 2019 in cooperation with De Gruyter.

- in Europe (Isaksen, 2018:32; Bachner & Bevelander, 2021:83 [Sweden]; Moe, 2023:84; Hoffmann & Moe, 2017:99–100 [Norway]) and in the USA (Hersh & Royden, 2023). Comparable surveys are lacking in South Africa, but the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (Miltz, 2024) reports a relatively low level of antisemitic incidents in the past year. Globally, Jews' main fear is increased antisemitism (JNS Staff, 2025).

This rapid expansion of studies on antisemitism - eight volumes in the SCA series published between August 2023 and May 2024 - motivated primarily by a focus on a "resurgence of left antisemitism", is on one hand impressive. On the other, the explicit bias of these publications - centred on 'left antisemitism' - together with the increased, and at times imprecise, use of the IHRA's example list,[6] raises concerns that criticisms of Israeli policies may too readily be labelled 'antisemitism'.

Notwithstanding these developments in the United Kingdom (UK), the USA remains more important to Israel, which receives annual US support amounting to $3.8 billion (Masters & Merrow, 2024). A final crucial factor influencing the potential success of any advocacy campaign to end Israel's occupation is the strength of the Christian Zionist movement, particularly in the USA, which focuses on end-times theology, viewing the State of Israel as a key sign of eschatological fulfilment. In the US context, this movement is arguably the most significant force behind continued support for Israel across changing administrations. A rare exception was President George H.W. Bush, who delayed loan guarantees to Israel until it agreed to halt settlement construction and attend the 1991 Madrid peace conference (Cortellessa, 2018).

Recognising that many Christian Zionists operate within a rather rigid theological framework, two public actors could play a role in reducing the influence of this movement. The first is evangelical voices - most notably the WEA and the Lausanne Movement - who promote a theology of just peace (Haugen, 2022:38-45). While their language and rhetoric may differ from that of the YMCA (2022), a leading Evangelical Palestinian theologian, Munther Isaac, is similarly vocal in his oral presentations, and somewhat

6 See Haugen (2024) on the 'double standard'; see also We Believe in Israel (2024).

softer in his earlier published works (Isaac, 2020; Isaac & Kohl, 2018); being more vocal recently (Isaac, 2025).

The second factor is the declining support for the State of Israel amongst younger US Jews. According to the Pew Research Centre (2021:139), 51% of US Jews aged 18 to 29 report being "not at all" attached to Israel, compared with 32% amongst those aged 65 and older.

In summary, CROs and churches should seek to build broad-based movements. Church leaders must work within their own constituencies and with policymakers in parallel. Regarding policy shifts, the most noteworthy change is the launch - in 2024 - of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, launched by Norway, together with the EU and the Saudi Arabia, coordinated with the Ministerial Arab League/Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Contact Group on Gaza (EEAS Press Team, 2024); in 2025 more states have joined the Global Alliance. Even if the positions amongst these states differ, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs has emphasised that this Alliance seeks to impose a two-state solution, not permitting an Israeli veto on the outcome (Undheim, 2025, quoting Barth Eide).

It is reasonable that the much-changed situation since 2023 explains the unanimous decision by the WCC Central Committee (2025) and the growing support by numerous states for the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution. Any politicians working for a two-state solution will work against two clear majority decision by Knesset (2024) and Sokol (2025). Hence, intra- and inter-church efforts, as well as inter-faith efforts will be shaped by which positions main political parties take on the issue of what is required for a just peace in Palestine and Israel.

9. Conclusion

Reflecting on the decisions by the WCC and the YMCA and awaiting member churches' responses to these decisions, it is relevant to bring in Mott's (2011:117) identification of the church as a counter-community that unmasks realities, proposes alternatives, and contributes to realising those alternatives.

The JDA (Abicht et al., 2021) is a valuable tool for distinguishing between anti-Israeli expressions that may be antisemitic and those that are not. For example, it is not in itself antisemitic to assert that "the IDF targets children" or to apply the term "scholasticide" to the IDF's destruction of schools in Gaza. Such targeting can be understood as a consequence of the Dahiyeh Doctrine, developed during the 2006 war against Lebanon, which states that civilian and densely populated areas are legitimate targets if there is credible information that armed groups are hiding in such areas. In October 2023, IDF instructions on how many civilian deaths that were "acceptable" per attack - so-called "collateral damage" - were given: 15-20; and for attack targeting senior Hamas leaders the figure was 100 (Abraham, 2024). The 2006 IDF Dahiyeh Doctrine and the 2023 IDF instruction on acceptable collateral damage are bound to create enormous human suffering.

While Israel and the IDF clearly deserves harsh criticism, it is antisemitic to link this to "Jews have always gone after children"; this is a typical blood libel.

As seen above, the JDA speaks of "settler-colonialism or apartheid". The strongest anti-Israel position is to *combine* an apartheid narrative - which might serve to delegitimise the whole state of Israel, not only its occupation policies - with a settler-colonial narrative that ignores the historical Jewish presence in and various ties to the land. Such an anti-Israel position might have strong appeal amongst many.

European churches carry a history of anti-Judaism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia, with crusades being one Christian 'response' (Bainton, 1961). These same churches' communication *today* could impact how Muslims and Jews - *objectively* being a part of the national communities in their respective countries - are treated, affecting their sense of *subjective* belonging to the national communities where they live. Negative views of Jews and Muslims not only stem from those characterised by bigotry (HL-senteret, 2024). Hence, even if Jews feel very differently attached to the state of Israel - as seen in the USA (Pew Research Centre, 2021:139) - and Muslims have very different views on the different forms of Arab or Palestinian resistance - European churches bear the responsibility of conveying messages that will not make religious minorities more exposed to exclusion, bullying, harassment, and even violence. For churches on other

continents having different histories with Jews and Muslims, such caution might be less relevant (ACSA, 2023).

The JDA (Abicht et al., 2021:12) specifies that "It is not antisemitic to support arrangements that accord full equality to all inhabitants 'between the river and the sea', whether in two states, a binational state, unitary democratic state, federal state, or in whatever form". Hence, it is not antisemitic to call for or explore a state structure that is more inclusive than the present state of Israel. However, declaring Israel to be an apartheid state is not about identifying such alternatives. Labelling Israel as an apartheid state is a provocation. It will likely convince Israeli hawks that Israel needs to trust its own strength, defeating militarily its real and perceived enemies, with enormous suffering.

To call for an end to "apartheid imposed by Israel on the Palestinian people…" (WCC, 2025), and "peaceful and just resolution of… Apartheid and occupation…" (YMCA, 2022a:3), denouncing "ideologies of exclusivity and apartheid…'"(Kairos Palestine, 2020:3) will also be provocative. This wording is, however, accommodating, implying that the state of Israel *can* abolish apartheid and occupation as has been achieved by other states before; note that the CoN Commission (2024:247) includes a reflection on self-determination for Jews and Palestinians, implying that Zionism can be embedded in and respect international law. International law is the only way for a just solution to the tragedy, and international law must also apply to Palestinian armed actors, holding them to account for their policies and conduct.

This ideal solution will take time, and any effort to pressure Israel by applying the term 'apartheid' to its policies will be an uphill struggle. Regardless of this, inspiration can be found in Christian ethics (Mott, 2011) and Jesus' blessings of the peacemakers.

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