

## **Investment versus Boycott: Important Facts to Consider**

*The following article is from [Presbyterians for Middle East Peace](#). Unbound welcomes this voice on positive investment as a means for widening and deepening the conversation around the appropriate measures to bring about peace and justice in Israel and Palestine. Unbound also welcomes further discussion of investment and other forms of engagement.*

This past summer in Pittsburgh, the 220<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian General Assembly (GA) affirmed and reinforced the decades-long Presbyterian commitment to peacemaking in the Middle East. Despite an intense and well-funded lobbying campaign by pro-divestment groups from both within and outside the PC(USA), the GA rejected a recurring proposal to divest from companies doing business with Israel, which this year targeted three companies: Caterpillar Tractor, Hewlett Packard, and Motorola Solutions. Sadly, divestment advocates within our denomination, affiliated with the global Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) movement, seem unwilling to accept the fact that our church has time after time chosen a different path toward advancing peace.

Instead of divestment, the GA called for positive investment in peace. GA commissioners wisely chose to stay the course embraced by the PC(USA) consistently for decades: to engage in dialogue and cooperation with all people of good will, to act as peacemakers and not parties to the conflict, and to invest in peaceful endeavors of both an economic and social character. This coincided with recent actions by the Lutherans, Methodists, and Episcopalians all soundly rejecting divestment and embracing positive investment for peace.

Despite the rejection of divestment, the GA did endorse a targeted boycott of products produced by Israeli companies with operations in West Bank industrial zones. We at Presbyterians for Middle East Peace stand firmly in support of a two-state solution, establishment of a peaceful Palestinian state, and affirmation of the rights and aspirations of both Palestinians and Israelis. At the same time, we do not believe that a boycott is the right way to advance peace and improve the welfare and future of Palestinians.

A claim was made by BDS advocates at the GA that “Palestinian civil society” calls for the boycott of Israeli companies with operations in the West Bank. In 2010 close to 35,000 West Bank Palestinians were employed by these companies, supporting more than 200,000 Palestinians financially ([Ha'aretz December 2010](#)). We would argue that these 35,000 Palestinians and their families are also members of “Palestinian civil society” and should have the same rights as Palestinian BDS advocates, yet their voices were missing in the debate. They are ordinary people working hard to make a decent living, support their families, and provide a future for their children. They come to work each day and work side-by-side with Israeli Jews, helping puncture the myth of Jews and Arabs being natural enemies unable to coexist in peace.

In a landmark agreement, the Histadrut (Israeli Trade Union Council) and the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) signed an agreement in August 2008 to base future relations on negotiation, dialogue, and joint initiatives to advance “fraternity and co-existence” ([Israeli and Palestinian trade unions cooperate](#)). An example of this cooperation was evident in October 2007 when the Histadrut successfully petitioned Israel’s High Court of Justice for Israeli labour law to be

applied in the occupied territories, something that was previously denied. Nine judges ruled that Palestinians working for Israeli employers in West Bank settlements should be given the same work benefits provided by Israeli law. The ruling set an important precedent that benefits thousands of Palestinians working for Israelis and Israeli companies throughout the West Bank. Palestinians who work for Israeli companies earn twice as much on average as those who work in areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority. For many, the difference in wages is even higher ([Your Middle East, 2012](#)).

SodaStream is an example of an Israeli company targeted by the BDS movement. Sodastream has operations in the Maaleh Adumim settlement block adjacent to Jerusalem, which is widely expected by both Palestinians and Israelis to be part of Israel proper once final borders (with fair and sensible land swaps) between Israel and Palestine are established. Sodastream's settlement operations are an example of successful coexistence with its 160 West Bank employees and Israeli Jews, Christians, Russians, Ethiopians, and Bedouin. The company celebrates the holidays of all and fosters cultural exchange. When BDS activists pressured a Swiss company to sever ties with SodaStream, the company reestablished its business ties after doing its own investigation of SodaStream policies.

According to a study conducted by Israeli researcher Issa Smeirat as part of his M.A Degree, over 16,000 Palestinians from the West Bank have established businesses and firms inside Israel and its settlements. This includes establishing several factories and companies, many of which have numerous branches ([Ha'aretz, Nov. 22, 2011](#)).

A good case in point is the Atarot industrial zone adjacent to Jerusalem. Before 2001, over 200 companies were located in the zone. About 40 of them were Arab-owned, and two-thirds of the 4,000 employees were East Jerusalem or Palestinian Arabs. Today, even the Palestinian Authority does not describe the Atarot industrial park as an "illegal settlement" because Palestinians have over \$500 million of investments in the area, including the print headquarters for the Palestinian newspaper *Al-Quds*, according to Abdul Hafiz Nofal, the undersecretary of the PA's Ministry of National Economy ([Israel National News, October 27, 2010](#)).

If you are asked to support this misguided boycott effort, we urge you to consider carefully *all* the facts. Unlike divestment, which requires only GA approval for implementation, the "settlement boycott" needs grassroots support from "Presbyterians in the pews" in order to have any impact at all. Fortunately, an early read across the denomination suggests minimal and insignificant support at the congregational level for such a boycott. In fact, we note that several of the leaders of the movement for a boycott at the GA seem to be showing little enthusiasm for promoting the boycott to their own congregations. Investing in peace works, boycotts don't.

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***Presbyterians for Middle East Peace*** is an "organization dedicated to working with all people of good will to end the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. We are clergy, elders, deacons and members of the Presbyterian community." *Presbyterians for Middle East Peace* is led by a steering committee consisting of the following Presbyterians: Rev. Dr. Bill Harter, Rev. Dr. John Wimberly, Elder Gary J. Green, James Roberts, and Elder George Douglas. You can find their website [here](#).