

The World Council of Churches vs. the Jewish state, once again



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JERUSALEM (RNS) The World Council of Churches, a collective of “347 churches, denominations and church fellowships in more than 110 countries and territories,” and the state of Israel are at loggerheads again.

The WCC attacked Israel for its March 6 vote in the Israeli parliament (Knesset) that would deny entry visas to activists who call for the boycott of the Jewish state. Olav Fykse Tveit, secretary-general of the WCC, told numerous media outlets that the new law would “make it impossible for him or senior people in his organization to visit member churches or sacred sites in what Christianity regards as the Holy Land.”

Building on the WCC denunciation, The Economist claimed that the new visa law is the “catalyst” in undermining relations between the Jewish state and Christianity. According to Tveit, “this legislation represents a form of isolationism that cannot be in Israel’s best interests as a member of the international community.”

Ironically, the church body deserves much of the credit for inspiring the entry ban through its campaigns to isolate and demonize Israel internationally.

For years, the WCC has played a leading role in this harsh political warfare. The organization’s top officials participated in the virulently anti-Semitic NGO Forum of the 2001 U.N. Durban Conference, at which Israel was labeled as an apartheid state.

WCC leaders were instrumental in removing a paragraph in the NGO final declaration that condemned the “prevalence of antizionism and attempts to delegitimize the State of Israel through wildly inaccurate charges of genocide, war crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and apartheid, as a virulent contemporary form of anti-Semitism.”

More recently, the Geneva-based WCC is a central promoter of the notorious Kairos Palestine document, which characterizes terrorist acts of “armed resistance” as “Palestinian legal resistance,” denies the Jewish historical connection to Israel in theological terms, calls to mobilize churches worldwide in the call for BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) of Israel and compares Israel with the South African apartheid regime.

Likewise, a WCC document from May 2013 implies that Israel’s very existence is illegitimate, accusing it of 65 years “of continuing dispossession of Palestinian people — Christian and Muslim alike — from their land by Israeli occupation.” In other words, it is Jewish sovereignty embodied in the Israeli state, which became independent in 1948, that bothers these officials, and not specific policies or borders.

The WCC is also responsible for establishing several highly biased and politicized frameworks, including the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.

PIEF was founded “to catalyze and coordinate new and existing church advocacy for peace, aimed at ending the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories in accordance with UN resolutions.” A 2014 report referred to murderers and other terrorists simply as “political prisoners,” as if their crime was to protest and picket a government office, for example.

EAPPI, considered to be WCC’s “flagship” project, organizes “tours” to the West Bank in order for participants to “witness life under occupation, engage with local Palestinians and Israelis pursuing a just peace, to change the international community’s involvement in the conflict, urging them to act against injustice in the region.” Upon returning to their home countries, many EAPPI activists, who entered Israel as tourists, actively promote anti-Israel campaigns, including BDS and other forms of demonization that single out Israel.

It is precisely this type of exploitation of Israel’s open visa policy for tourists to which a majority of the Knesset (from different parties, including centrists) is responding, and also perhaps overreacting.

The new law restricting visas for BDS promoters should be understood and analyzed in this context. It is a political decision — a significant portion of the Israeli public demands a response to the demonization and political warfare campaigns. And the WCC’s hands are far from clean.

WCC officials claim that the organization “is not a member of any alliance that is generally promoting a boycott or a member of the so-called ‘BDS-movement’” and that “the WCC has never called for an economic boycott on the state of Israel.” However, as

noted above, through a variety of campaigns, programs and partnerships, it is a key player mobilizing demonization of Israel in churches worldwide.

Instead of launching more attacks, the leaders of the WCC and its member churches would do well to re-examine their history and seek reconciliation with the Jewish nation-state. Until then, WCC officials should not be surprised that years of attacks targeting Israel have borne bitter fruit.

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