

Open Letter

Protest of the Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network

EKD distances itself from international law and pressures WCC to suppress Palestinian voice

September 12, 2022

The WCC assembly in Karlsruhe has just ended. A strong conflict there concerned the suppression of the voice of the Palestinians. The Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network in Germany, through this Open Letter, protests against the actions of the Protestant Church In Germany/EKD, which played an inglorious role in this suppression. We offer, below, a detailed report of the Palestine/Israel related events at the Assembly.

That the State of Israel – its laws, policies and practices – is now an apartheid system under international law has been thoroughly researched and made public by all serious human rights organizations in Israel ([B'Tselem](#)), Palestine ([Al-Haq](#)), USA ([Human Rights Watch](#)) and [Amnesty International](#). They were confirmed by the UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Michael Lynch.¹

When the issue of Israeli apartheid was increasingly discussed in public and in the worldwide ecumenical community in 2021, the EKD began to pressure the WCC General Secretary not to allow apartheid and BDS to come before the assembly under any circumstances. Otherwise, it was implied, grants and visas from Germany could be in jeopardy. At the time, a Scandinavian church representative said, "The Germans have taken the WCC hostage." Also, in preparation for the Assembly, the EKD circulated a text strictly refusing to speak of apartheid in the case of Israel because, allegedly, it is not a racial problem.²

At the Assembly itself, one measure followed another. General Secretary Ioan Sauca implemented the pressure by devoting about 10 minutes of the 25 minutes of his Assembly report to the issue of Palestine-Israel. His strategy was as follows. He mentioned that there was a draft resolution from the South African churches that applied the term *apartheid* to Israel. But one should be very careful with that, he advised, for during his last trip with a WCC delegation to the Holy Land church leaders had warned against such language. In other words, the General Secretary, charged to present in his report the last nine years of the WCC's work and evaluate it with an eye to the future, used a large part of his time to censor a resolution from 17 member churches³ which the delegates were not yet aware because, according to the rules, a resolution must first be submitted to the Public Issue Committee (PIC), so only its members know the text. He also pitted church leaders against their church members without acknowledging the pressure the Israeli government is putting on church leaders in the Holy Land to behave diplomatically so as not to endanger their congregations.

Following his report, the South African delegation decided to come forward at the hoped-for debate and make its draft resolution known to the plenary. The Palestinian delegation decided that a church leader would then also come forward to say just this one sentence, "Mr. Sauca, you were not authorized to speak on our behalf." No time had been originally allotted to discuss the General Secretary's report, but after protest a very limited opportunity for a few one-minute statements was conceded. The allotted time did not amount to debate and denied groups that had been referenced the right of reply to correct untruths.

1 <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-20>

2 *Informationen zur Vollversammlung des ÖRK in Karlsruhe.*

3 Der Antrag, eingereicht vom anglikanischen Erzbischof von Cape Town Makgoba, wurde unterstützt von folgenden 16 Kirchen: United Church of Christ/USA, Disciples of Christ/USA, Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, Moravian Church in South Africa, The Ev. Lutheran Church in Canada, Presbyterian Church USA, Presbyterian Church of Colombia, Presbyterian Church of Cuba, The United Church of Canada, The Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Disciples of Christ Argentina, The Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, The Presbyterian-Reformed Church of Cuba, The Presbyterian Church of Brasil, Church of Norway, Church of Sweden.

Then followed the "German Welcoming Ceremony." In addition to support for Ukraine, President Steinmeier focused his speech on the fight against anti-Semitism. Later, delegates from the Global South and others commented, "So we have experienced again what colonialism means: We do not exist, they know everything."

This was followed by the speech of Prof. Barbara Traub, member of the Presidium of the Central Council of Jews. Of course, her main topic was anti-Semitism, but she also went directly to the attack against [Kairos Palestine](#), the Palestinian ecumenical network, and its [Kairos document](#). The moderator did not say a word in defense of the Palestinian brothers and sisters sitting in the room, nor were those under attack given an opportunity to speak. Other Jewish representatives were also given the right to offer greetings during the course of the Assembly: Rabbi David Sandmel of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), and Liliane Apotheker of the International Council of Christians and Jews. Of course, these greetings are completely justified—but not if at the same time Palestinian voices are suppressed. Above all, this selection of speakers ignores the fact that there is a growing number of Jews who are very concerned about the future of Israel, because a state based on the violent oppression of a people in the form of apartheid has no future. This is now the opinion of 40% of young Jewish people in the United States.⁴

The suppression of a Palestinian voice in the literal sense of the word then occurred at the first Thematic Plenary Session, "The Meaning of God's Love in Christ for All Creation—Reconciliation and Unity." The session was divided into two phases: "Creation" and "Showing God's Merciful Love for a Broken World with Special Attention to the Middle East." The choreography of the plenary was such that each of the parts opened with an introductory talk. It was clear that no speaker from the Middle East was to speak at the opening of the second part; instead there was a speaker from Great Britain. The Moderator of the Central Committee, Agnes Aboum, was originally supposed to have asked three youth representatives on the podium for reactions to the topics. But only two youth were present, a Swedish woman and a young man from the Caribbean. What had happened? A Palestinian woman had been scheduled as the third, a delegate from the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). The young people had to submit their texts beforehand. She had simply wanted to address her reality in Palestine in clear, simple words. She was told that this was not the language of the WCC, that she should please change parts of her response. She did, but even that was not enough. The staff presented her with a statement to recite. She refused to do so for reasons of conscience. So they took her down from the podium altogether. In the plenary on the Middle East, no Middle Easterners were allowed to speak.

There were two places where Palestinians were allowed to speak openly about the situation of their people: one, during one of the 23 "Ecumenical Conversations" (Ecumenical Conversation 13, Rev. Ashraf K. Tannous of the Lutheran Church). But only about 30-40 people were present to hear the discussion; a second, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land was allowed to hold a workshop in the "Brunnen"—a program (a kind of agora)—but it was held outside the Assembly area in a hotel. (Three other workshops requested on Palestine had been rejected by the WCC). In this workshop, Bishop Azar gave the floor to his pastor, Dr. Munther Isaac, to describe the situation of Palestinians under Israeli tyranny—underusing the term apartheid. What does this say about the General Secretary's statement on the attitude of church leaders in Palestine? If one did not know it in Germany before: *apartheid* is not a moral comparison with South Africa, but a now clearly-defined term under international law for one of the crimes against humanity.

With regard to the EKD, however, it must be mentioned that, in the "encounter program" for which the EKD was responsible, a workshop hosting two USA churches and the European branch of Global Kairos for Justice was allowed to take place on the fringes of the Assembly in the New Apostolic Church. The topic:

4 Cf. a recent poll. See also the former General Attorney of Israel, Michael Benyair (<https://www.fr.de/meinung/gastbeitraege/zwei-voelker-mit-ungleichen-rechten-91287316.html>) und zwei frühere Botschafter Israels in Südafrika (<https://www.msn.com/de-de/nachrichten/politik/israels-ex-botschafter-e2-80-9ewas-in-pal-c3-a4stina-geschieht-ist-apartheid-e2-80-9c/ar-AA11wjyV?fromMaestro=true>), die den Apartheidcharakter des Systems voll bestätigen.

Ecumenical movement and churches in Europe and the USA for international law and human rights in Palestine/Israel. The word *apartheid* even appeared in the application.

In the meantime, it had become known that a draft resolution had been sent from the WCC itself to the Public Issues Committee/PIC to avoid the word *apartheid*. In response, the South Africans joined with the supporting churches and the Palestinians, to take the WCC draft as a framework, to delete some of its wording, and to insert clear sentences from the South African draft resolution.⁵ In this way, they wanted to avoid the PIC failing to name their central concern when the various submissions were expected to be put together.

But when the first version of the PIC report was introduced, it presented the issue of apartheid as if it had been raised from outside by human rights organizations and now had to be addressed further by the WCC. The EKD, however, apparently wanted to have the word *apartheid* deleted from the document altogether. Bishop Bosse-Huber, the EKD bishop for foreign affairs, came forward with a fierce speech that ended, "We will not speak of Israel as an apartheid state."⁶ It had been earlier stated as a rule that at this stage of considering proposed resolutions any intervention should be limited to one minute to make a concrete proposal for wording. However, the bishop kept talking. After two minutes, delegates began waving the blue card (No) or crossed cards (Stop). After more than three minutes until nearly 4 minutes of her speech, at least half of the delegates waved or shouted, "Moderator, stop her." Delegates who had experienced many plenary assemblies testified to never having seen a bishop receive such a reaction.

Further, two delegates from the petitioning churches came forward and demanded that the text make clear that not only human rights organizations but 17 churches in this assembly had demanded that the Israeli apartheid system be addressed, and that not only the WCC but also the WCC member churches must engage in a process of intensive discussion of this issue ("The WCC and its member churches to study, discuss, and discern the implications of the recent reports on apartheid by BTselem, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, and for its governing bodies to respond in line with the call from Palestinian Christians and Churches for justice for their people.").

The PIC then responded with the following wording of the disputed paragraph and the resulting call (without adapting this call to the proposed wording):

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 11th Assembly particularly calls on: ...The WCC to examine, discuss and discern the implications of the recent reports by B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, and for its governing bodies to respond appropriately. "

This text was ultimately adopted.⁷ It means:

1. The term *apartheid* in international law has been included in the final report on the issue.

5 Beide Texte im Anhang.

6 Cf. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/unity-among-members-of-the-world-council-of-churches-not-in-every-case-presbyterians-on-the-ground-report/>

7 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/seeking-justice-and-peace-for-all-in-the-middle-east>

2. The WCC and member churches are invited to undertake a process to examine the appropriateness of the term *apartheid* and to draw appropriate conclusions for action. To this end, a document has already been prepared and offered by Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice (an international network whose members work with Kairos Palestine in their respective contexts): [A dossier on Israeli Apartheid: A Pressing Call to Churches Around the World](#).⁸

3. Here in Germany, in the process that lies ahead of us, it must be understood, first of all, that with the Holocaust, Germany has incurred more than one guilt. For without the unique crime against humanity of the murder of 6 million Jews, the *Nakba* (the catastrophe for the Palestinian people) would not have happened in this form. Secondly, the oppressive system and the violent military occupation by the State of Israel, which has now lasted 55 years in violation of international law, is only possible because the USA and Europe co-finance it (the USA, among other things, with 3.8 billion US \$ annually for the oppressive military) and support it politically—despite occasional rhetorical protests. The churches must therefore call on the governments to bind all further cooperation with the State of Israel to the observance of international law.

To do this, however, Christians, congregations and regional churches in Germany must convince the EKD that our biblical faith is linked to the observance of law, and that a church that despises international law distances itself not only from the ecumenical community but from its biblical roots. When Hitler deprived Jewish people in Germany of their civil and political rights in 1933 (it was not yet a matter of their extermination), Bonhoeffer wrote an essay concluding that when a state deprives a population group of its rights, it constitutes a *status confessionis* (a case of clear confession) for the church. Why does the EKD not apply this insight to the deprivation of the rights of Palestinians by the State of Israel and respond in the same way as many other churches to the Palestinian cry for hope?⁹

Representatives of churches from the Global South and also from the USA already fear that with the election of the German Bishop Bedford-Strohm as moderator of the Central Committee, the strategy of prevention in regard to the suffering of the Palestinians could be continued. But it is to be hoped that a former professor of social ethics will respect international law.

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8 <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/resources/publication>.

9 See <https://www.cryforhope.org/> and the responses quoted above.