Why it is difficult for some Christians to criticize Israel's actions in occupied Palestine?

Many Jews and Christians in Israel and the United States strongly support the State of Israel while also being deeply troubled by Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza. With pain and sorrow, friends of Israel bear witness to Israel's oppressive policies and actions in the West Bank. It is very hard for some American Christians to openly criticize Israeli actions. One reason may be fear of disturbing our relationships with some of our Jewish or Christian brothers and sisters. Some Christians find it difficult to publicly criticize the policies of Israel’s government, for fear that even legitimate criticism will be construed as anti-Israel or anti-Semitic. Some Christians believe they must silence their criticism of Israel's policies because of the Western Christian history of the anti-Semitism—culminating with the Holocaust—and the failure of many Christians to speak out at the time. But the lesson to be learned from this history is this: silence only condones a government’s human rights abuses. The question for the future is: Should the past suffering of the Jewish people continue to be used as a reason for Christians to remain silent about the present suffering of Palestinian people who are living under military occupation, encirclement, and blockade by the State of Israel? Jewish theologian Marc Ellis's answer is, “The ultimate sin is silence in the face of injustice.”

One can be both Pro-Israel and Pro-Palestine

Presbyterian critics of Israel’s occupation of Palestine also affirm Israel’s existence as a sovereign nation within secure and internationally recognized borders in accordance with United Nations resolutions, and emphatically condemn violence against civilians by all parties. Criticism of Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank is not a threat to the existence of Israel.

Many Israeli and American Jews oppose settlement colonies on Palestinian land, all of which are illegal under international law. Within the Israeli and US Jewish communities there is a growing, active, and passionate debate about whether Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is in the best interest of Israel. Each side in this debate is pro-Israel, trying to discern how to assure a secure, viable, and sustainable state. Christians must support the pro-Israel positions that advocate for human rights and justice for the Palestinian people and reject the positions that promote the systematic oppression of the Palestinian people. When patriotic Americans spoke out against slavery, racial segregation, or the Vietnam and Iraqi wars, some Americans falsely
accused them of being anti-American. Critics of Israel’s occupation of Palestine are often falsely accused of being anti-Israel, but they are not. They are pro-human rights.

Speaking out for the oppressed is what Presbyterians do

As Presbyterians, we believe the prophetic mission of the church is to speak the Word of God—courageously, honestly, and lovingly—following the example of Jesus. The church is called to stand alongside the oppressed—to help bring about justice for them—leading to peace and reconciliation with their oppressors. Any time voices are raised against government policies that abuse human rights, the forces of the status quo will push back to silence those voices. In response, we must speak even louder and take peaceful non-violent actions to accompany our words. In this way, we follow the Presbyterian tradition of speaking truth and justice to power. Christians spoke out in the 1950’s against racial segregation in the United States, and later on against apartheid in South Africa. Once more, they must raise their voices and speak out against Israel’s violations of Palestinian human rights. Christians must, with confidence, reject any politically-motivated charge that criticism of Israel’s government policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is anti-Israel or anti-Semitic.

Such charges are cynical attempts to silence legitimate criticism of Israel’s human rights abuses in occupied Palestine. This kind of hyperbolic language is untrue, harms civil discourse, and serves to hamper efforts to monitor and prevent Israeli human rights violations.

Setting the stage for a just peace

President Dwight D. Eisenhower said “I think that people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it.” It is often up to the people to push their government or the government of another country towards peace, even if the government is reluctant to do so. Criticizing Israel’s 46-year military occupation of the West Bank and the government’s human rights abuses there is pursued with the hope it will lead to a peaceful reconciliation for the people of Israel and Palestine, similar to that which occurred in South Africa when apartheid was internationally acknowledged. To solve a problem, one has to honestly recognize and acknowledge that the problem exists. Pointing out the human rights abuses suffered by the Palestinians is done in the hope that by doing so, the Israeli government will end the occupation and set the stage for a just peace for all the people in Israel and Palestine.
The Separation Wall

None of the Palestinian West Bank is part of Israel under international law. However, Israel has constructed a separation wall/fence that is not on the West Bank’s 1967 border, but instead meanders deeply into Palestinian territory and puts large swaths of the West Bank on the “Israel side” of the Wall. The PC(USA) position is that the wall should be on the 1967 border consistent with international law.

Israel’s Matrix of Control in the occupied West Bank of Palestine

Israeli laws, policies, and practices systematically take actions to prevent Palestinians from participating in the political, social, economic, and cultural life of their country.

Israel does this by forcibly taking Palestinian land to build Jewish-only settlement colonies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (blue areas/triangles on Map 2). Then Israel builds roads connecting these settlements. Israel designates these roads as “Jewish-only” roads that Palestinians cannot access. Walls or fences are built on the sides of these roads, and Palestinians can cross them only at Israeli checkpoints. The matrix of north-south and east-west roads crisscrossing the Palestinian territory effectively divides the West Bank into dozens of isolated blocks of land where Palestinian residents and workers need Israeli permission to travel from one area to another. This massive infrastructure of Jewish-only settlement colonies, segregated roads, intimidating check-points, and a separation wall are all part of a consciously designed system of oppression against the Palestinian people.

This matrix of control violates the basic human rights of Palestinians in the West Bank through the expropriation of Palestinian land, restrictions on the freedom of movement, residence, and commerce. Additional human rights violations include arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of Palestinians, the restriction or denial of Palestinian rights to work, education, peaceful assembly, and religious practices.

What are the facts on the ground?

Map 1 - Israel’s Separation Wall is being built on annexed Palestinian land, shown in blue.

Map 2 - The Matrix of Control, showing Jewish-only roads and Jewish-only settlements (cities) shown as blue areas/triangles.
**Shrinking Palestine**

Above is a map showing, in green, the area occupied by Palestinians since 1946. The 2014 map shows areas where Israel allows Palestinians to live or travel. The green 2014 area is a far cry from the “two state” solution where both Israel and Palestine are sovereign states with economically viable contiguous land mass. Instead, Palestinians are imprisoned in ghettos within Israel with no independent border with any other country.

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**Direct quotes from PC(USA) General Assembly, 2010 about Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza:**

✦ The Israeli occupation leads to the denial of human rights for Palestinians and violation of international laws.
✦ One of the hopes of the Oslo interim agreement (in 1993) was settlement growth would cease; however, the opposite has occurred, resulting in the current population of 285,000 in the West Bank and 198,700 [Jewish settlers] in East Jerusalem.
✦ The growth of the number of settlements and settlers is perceived by many as an attempt by Israel to prevent the establishment of an economically viable Palestinian State.
✦ The number of housing demolitions is alarming and shocks the human conscience. It is estimated that some 24,145 Palestinian homes have been demolished in the occupied territory since 1967.
✦ Another concern of the occupation are the numerous “Israeli-only” bypass roads that carve up the Palestinian homeland and connect one settlement to another. This has a devastating effect on the ability of normal Palestinians to live out a normal life by visiting family, working farmland, seeking medical treatment, securing employment, and traveling freely in one’s own country.
✦ While few would deny the right of a government to put a barrier on its own property line, three-quarters of the Separation Barrier is inside the West Bank on Palestinian land. This is often perceived by Palestinians as an effort to secure an illegal settlement, claim water resources, and annex Palestinian land. The location of the barrier is a violation of international law and is thus perceived as a means to pre-empt a just peace. (Map 1, page 3)
✦ The overwhelming consensus of all (Middle East Study) committee members was that Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is a sin against God and other fellow human beings.