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Churches take aim at Israel

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Once they were allies in the campaign to divest from companies doing business in apartheid-era South Africa.

But yesterday, Jewish leaders assailed proposals to divest from companies doing business with Israel as one-sided and ill-timed, and urged the United Church of Christ to get off the bandwagon of Protestant denominations considering economic sanctions - or risk a growing rift between Protestants and Jews.

"It's fantasy land to pretend that only Israelis are involved in violence," said David Elcott, interfaith director of the New York-based American Jewish Committee, who spoke yesterday at the United Church of Christ's national conference in Atlanta. "It's naive, it's simplistic and it's historically inaccurate."

A year after the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to selectively divest from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, every major mainline Protestant denomination has entertained divestment proposals.

This weekend, the issue was taken up by the 1.4 million-member United Church of Christ, which includes 75 congregations in the metropolitan area and controls a \$3-billion national investment portfolio. Church delegates are expected to debate and vote on three divestment resolutions today or tomorrow.

The debate has created tensions not just between Jews and mainline Protestants, traditional allies on social justice issues, but also between pro-Israel Protestant evangelicals and their mainline brethren. A group called Stand for Israel, for instance, co-chaired by conservative Christian activist Gary Bauer, delivered copies of an online petition with more than 7,000 signatures protesting divestment to UCC leaders and also placed full-page ads in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "Painting democratic Israel as the world's worst human rights abuser" is an absurdity, Bauer said in a statement.

Advocates of divestment, however, say their longtime advocacy of a two-state solution has proved ineffective. Citing the campaign against South Africa in the 1970s and '80s, they contend it is time to exert similar pressure on Israel, albeit indirectly, through companies like Caterpillar Inc. of



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Illinois, which produces bulldozers that have been used to raze Palestinian homes. "This latest effort reflects our sincere effort to seek peace and justice for all peoples in the Middle East," said the Rev. Alan McLarty of the United Church of Christ's Penn West conference. His group put forth a resolution seeking selective divestment from companies connected with the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the erection of a security fence - one of three divestment proposals under consideration.

For their part, mainstream Jewish groups say such measures hold Israel to an unfair double standard. Among the past obstacles to creation of a Palestinian state, they say, were intransigence by the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Palestinian violence.

"The mainline Jewish community has said we want the Palestinians to have a state," said Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, interfaith affairs director for the Anti-Defamation League. "But we don't hear that a whole lot."

Many business experts, meanwhile, cast doubt on the economic effectiveness of divestment campaigns.

"The campaign against South Africa is often held up as a success story," said Usha C.V. Haley, author of "Multinational Corporations in Political Environments," who studied the impact of shareholder resolutions on more than 300 U.S. companies operating in South Africa in the 1980s.

"But what I found is that stockholders' resolutions did not have any effect," she said. "The only thing that worked were strategies that very directly affected the bottom line of the company, and unfortunately, sanctions and boycotts do not."

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