

PCUSA says comments in Hezbollah meeting were 'reprehensible'

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Reeling from stinging criticism by Jewish leaders, officials of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) said that comments made by members of a church delegation meeting last month with Hezbollah leaders were “reprehensible” and the controversial visit was “misguided at best.”

The top PCUSA executives said they did not authorize the October 17 visit to a Southern Lebanon refugee camp controlled by Hezbollah, listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department.

During the visit, Ronald Stone, a retired professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, told Hezbollah officials that “relations and conversations with Islamic leaders are a lot easier than dealings and dialogue with Jewish leaders.”

Leaders of the Union for Reform Judaism and the Anti-Defamation League called the visit “appalling” and “outrageous,” especially after the Presbyterians’ vote last summer to study financial divestment in companies operating in Israel.

In a letter to Jewish leaders dated October 21, the Presbyterian officials said: “As a church, and as individuals, we know at the core of our souls that terrorism, especially terrorism against civilians, is one clear source of the lack of peace in the Middle East.” The letter was from Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick, Moderator Rick Ufford-Chase and General Assembly Council Director John Detterick.

“We in no way condone the terrorism of groups such as Hezbollah, or of individuals or other actors in the region,” they said. “Terrorism in all its forms is morally abhorrent and completely inexcusable in our eyes.”

The visit, by members of the church’s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, received special funding to allow the panel to conduct its first-ever meeting in the Middle East to assess the situation on the ground. In an initial response October 20 to Jewish criticism, the three leaders would say only that the visit and members’ statements “do not reflect the official position” of their church on the Middle East.

The letter released the next day by the PCUSA was a “welcomed response,” said Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. He said he was pleased to see the Presbyterians finally dissociate themselves from a terrorist group.

“Are there still plenty of tensions and issues? Of course,” said Pelavin. “Was this an ugly and stupid chapter? Yes. Did the letter address our concerns? Yes.” *-Religion News Service*