

After flotilla incident, churches call for new Israeli policy on Gaza: Gaza called "a virtual prison"

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue

The National Council of Churches, its key mainline members and other church organizations are calling for Israel to alter its policies on the Gaza Strip after an Israeli action against an international flotilla on the high seas resulted in nine deaths, many wounded and damaged diplomatic relations.

The New York-based NCC "has strongly supported Israel's right to exist with peace and security, but this attack on an aid convoy contributes to neither," said General Secretary Michael Kinnamon of the May 31 confrontation in the Mediterranean. "In fact, it undermines Israel's standing in the community of nations."

Kinnamon said he backed a June 2 statement by Churches for Middle East Peace, a coalition of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches and agencies, that said, "The incident highlights the need for the U.S. to work for new, constructive Israeli policies toward Gaza that end the blockade and provide for the humanitarian need of those living there without diminishing Israel's own security."

Israeli and U.S. Jewish leaders defended the Israeli action vigorously, noting among other things the long fight against Hamas leaders in Gaza and Israel's attempt to get the flotilla's organizers to deliver their cargo to an Israeli port for transfer to Gaza.

But Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who is also president of the Lutheran World Federation, said in a June 1 statement that "this incident raises a number of questions related to the just use of force." On behalf of the ELCA and LWF, the bishop called for "a full, international and independent investigation into this matter."

Gradye Parsons, the top executive of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), said the attempt to aid Palestinians in Gaza grew from "acute" conditions that began with "a

severe blockade of Gaza by Israel in response to the free election of Hamas representatives in 2006 and the military incursions . . . in late 2008 and early 2009.” He added, “We grieve the killing and injuring of participants in the humanitarian effort, as well as the injuring of members of the Israeli military forces that occurred when the Israeli forces stormed one of the ships and those on board resisted.”

Katharine Jefferts Schori, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, said in a separate statement: “There are far better ways to protect Israel’s security and promote moderate political leadership in Gaza than a blockade that intensifies human suffering and perpetuates regional insecurity.”

Stronger words came from United Methodist, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ officials. Jim Winkler, chief executive of the United Methodists’ social action agency, said that the U.S. has been “complicit in this flawed policy,” referring to what he called Israel’s aim “to subjugate the Palestinian people.” In a joint letter, UCC and Disciple global mission executives termed Gaza a “virtual prison” due to the embargos imposed by Israel.