

IRD says mainline is picking on Israel: Mainline groups challenge methodology of study

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A conservative gadfly group has released a report asserting that mainline U.S. Protestant organizations criticize Israel for human rights practices more than they criticize any other foreign country. In response, mainline groups contested the methodology and conclusions of the report, issued by the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

The IRD report said it examined official statements by mainline groups and found that 37 percent of all criticisms of human rights violations were directed against Israel, 32 percent against the U.S. and the remaining 31 percent against 20 other nations.

“Israel is certainly responsible for some human rights abuses, as are all nations,” said IRD President Diane Knippers in a statement. “But an extreme focus on Israel, while ignoring major human rights violators, seriously distorts the churches’ message on universal human rights.”

The IRD report released September 27 cited criticisms found in resolutions, press releases and articles from 2000 to 2003 by the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, along with the U.S. National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches—all ongoing targets of IRD critique.

The report said that the church groups did not criticize at all what IRD categorized as the “worst of the worst” human rights abusers, such as China, Libya, Saudi Arabia and North Korea.

Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, said the report erroneously assumed that all that the NCC says about human rights gets reported in

news releases and resolutions, ignoring, among other things, its 1963 human rights policy, which was reaffirmed in 1995.

“The most unfortunate part of the IRD’s report is its apparent attempt to hurt Jewish-Christian relations by quite blatantly planting seeds of suspicion that the mainline churches are anti-Semitic,” said Edgar. “The IRD wrongly and dangerously equates any criticism of the government of Israel and its policies with anti-Semitism.”

A United Methodist spokesman dismissed the credibility of the IRD report, describing it as part of the group’s policy of criticism. “It’s totally predictable that they’d put this out just before the presidential election,” said Jim Winkler of the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society. Similarly, Maureen Shea, director of government relations for the Episcopal Church, said the report “uses flawed methodology” and is “a biased study whose only point appears to be to sow division.” *-Religion News Service*