

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Religious leaders ask Congress to condition Israel military aid on human rights compliance

PC(USA)'s Parsons, others see 'troubling, consistent pattern of disregard' by Israel government for U.S. policies

October 5, 2012

Presbyterian News Service

JERRY L. VAN MARTER

LOUISVILLE

Fifteen religious leaders representing many major faith groups in the country, have written a letter to Congress seeking to make U.S. military aid to Israel contingent upon its government's "compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies."

Signers of the letter include Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons.

The signers say they "have worked for decades to support both Israelis and Palestinians in their desire to live in peace and well-being" and "have witnessed the pain and suffering of Israelis as a result of Palestinian actions and of Palestinians as a result of Israeli actions."

Though they recognize that both Israelis and Palestinians bear responsibility for the prolonged violence in the region, "unconditional U.S. military assistance to Israel has contributed to deteriorating conditions in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories which threaten to lead the region further away from the realization of a just peace. Furthermore, such aid sustains the conflict and undermines the long-term security interests of both Israelis and Palestinians."

The signers urge an immediate investigation into possible violations by Israel of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act, which respectively prohibit assistance to any country which engages in a consistent pattern of human rights violations and limit the use of U.S. weapons to "internal security" or "legitimate self-defense."

They urge Congress to hold hearings to examine Israel's compliance, and request regular reporting on compliance and the withholding of military aid for non-compliance.

The signers see a troubling and consistent pattern of disregard by the government of Israel for U.S. policies that support a just and lasting peace, particularly unbridled settlement construction in the West Bank. This year has also seen a dramatic rise in settler attacks against Palestinians with seeming impunity, they say.

"Continued U.S. military assistance to Israel offered without conditions or accountability," the signers conclude, "will only serve to sustain the status quo and Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian territories."

The full text of the letter, dated Oct. 5:

Dear Member of Congress,

We write to you as Christian leaders representing U.S. churches and religious organizations committed to seeking a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians. Our organizations have been deeply involved in this pursuit for decades, inspired by the call and promise of Jesus Christ who said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

In response to our Christian call to be peacemakers, we have worked for decades to support both Israelis and Palestinians in their desire to live in peace and well-being. We have worked alongside our Palestinian Christian sisters and brothers to help build a peaceful and resilient Palestinian civil society by supporting hospitals, schools, clinics, and social service agencies. These ministries include cooperative efforts with Israelis and Palestinians as well as with Jews, Muslims, and other neighbors here in the United States. Through our presence in the region,

and regular visits to our partners there, we see first-hand the impacts of the conflict on both Palestinians and Israelis and hear from them directly about the reality of their lives.

Through this direct experience we have witnessed the pain and suffering of Israelis as a result of Palestinian actions and of Palestinians as a result of Israeli actions. In addition to the horror and loss of life from rocket attacks from Gaza and past suicide bombings, we have witnessed the broad impact that a sense of insecurity and fear has had on Israeli society.

We have also witnessed widespread Israeli human rights violations committed against Palestinians, including killing of civilians, home demolitions and forced displacement, and restrictions on Palestinian movement, among others. We recognize that each party—Israeli and Palestinian—bears responsibilities for its actions and we therefore continue to stand against all violence regardless of its source. Our stand against violence is complemented by our commitment to the rights of all Israelis, as well as all Palestinians, to live in peace and security.

It is this experience and these commitments that lead us to write to you today to express our grave concern about the deteriorating conditions in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories which threaten to lead the region further away from the realization of a just peace.

Unfortunately, unconditional U.S. military assistance to Israel has contributed to this deterioration, sustaining the conflict and undermining the long-term security interests of both Israelis and Palestinians. This is made clear in the most recent 2011 State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices covering Israel and the Occupied Territories, which details widespread Israeli human rights violations committed against Palestinian civilians, many of which involve the misuse of U.S.-supplied weapons.

(Weapons in this instance include “crowd control” items such as tear gas. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012 (P.L. 112-74) which is included in the US Foreign Military Financing regulations stipulates that “not later than 90 days after enactment of this act and 6 months thereafter, the Secretary of State shall submit a report to the Committees on Appropriations detailing any crowd control items, including tear gas, made available with appropriated funds or through export licenses to foreign security forces that the Secretary of State has credible information have repeatedly used excessive force to repress peaceful, lawful, and organized dissent.”)

Accordingly, we urge an immediate investigation into possible violations by Israel of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act which respectively prohibit assistance to any country which engages in a consistent pattern of human rights violations and limit the use of U.S. weapons to “internal security” or “legitimate self-defense.”

(While this letter focuses on US-Israel relations and the Israel-Palestine conflict, these are laws that we believe should be enforced in all instances regardless of location. All allegations regarding the misuse of US supplied arms should be investigated.)

More broadly, we urge Congress to undertake careful scrutiny to ensure that our aid is not supporting actions by the government of Israel that undermine prospects for peace. We urge Congress to hold hearings to examine Israel’s compliance, and we request regular reporting on compliance and the withholding of military aid for non-compliance.

In addition to specific rights violations, we see a troubling and consistent pattern of disregard by the government of Israel for U.S. policies that support a just and lasting peace. Specifically, repeated demands by the U.S. government that Israel halt all settlement activity have been ignored. Since 1967, every U.S. administration has decried Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories as obstacles to peace. Despite this stance, Israel continues to expand its settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, claiming territory that under international law and U.S. policy should belong to a future Palestinian state. The Oslo peace process, which began in 1993, was publicly promoted as leading Israelis and Palestinians to a just peace based on a two-state solution. Instead, since 1993, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, has more than doubled. Rights violations resulting from Israeli settlement activity include separate and unequal legal systems for Palestinians and settlers, confiscation of Palestinian land and natural resources for the benefit of settlers, and

violence by settlers against Palestinians.

According to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem and the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, there has been a dramatic rise in settler attacks against Palestinians this year. They report that these attacks are often intended to drive Palestinians from areas the settlers wish to take over, and that Israeli authorities have failed to take significant action to stop the violence or hold the perpetrators accountable. We believe that these actions directly undermine peace efforts and threaten, rather than support, Israel's long-term security interests.

We want to be clear that we recognize that Israel faces real security threats and that it has both a right and a duty to protect both the state and its citizens. However, the measures that it uses to protect itself and its citizens, as in the case with any other nation, must conform to international humanitarian and human rights law.

As Christian leaders in the United States, it is our moral responsibility to question the continuation of unconditional U.S. financial assistance to the government of Israel. Realizing a just and lasting peace will require this accountability, as continued U.S. military assistance to Israel -- offered without conditions or accountability -- will only serve to sustain the status quo and Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian territories.

We request, therefore, that Congress hold Israel accountable to these standards by making the disbursement of U.S. military assistance to Israel contingent on the Israeli government's compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies.

As Israel is the single largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid since World War II, it is especially critical for Israel to comply with the specific U.S. laws that regulate the use of U.S.-supplied weapons. We also encourage Congress to support inclusive, comprehensive, and robust regional diplomacy to secure a just and lasting peace that will benefit Israelis, Palestinians, and all the peoples of the region, and the world.

With respect and gratitude, we offer you our prayers.

In addition to Parsons, the letter was signed by Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; United Methodist Council of Bishops President Rosemarie Wenner; Peg Birk, transitional general secretary of the National Council of Churches; Shan Cretin, general secretary of the American Friends Service Committee; J. Ron Byler, executive director of the Mennonite Central Committee U.S.; and Alexander Patico, North American secretary for the Orthodox Peace Fellowship.

Also, Diane Randall, executive secretary of the Friends Committee on Legislation; American Baptist Churches General Secretary A. Roy Medley; United Church of Christ General Minister and President Geoffrey A. Black; the Rev. Sharon Watkins, general minister and president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); the Rev. Julia Brown Karimu, president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Division of Overseas Ministries; the Rev. James A. Moos, executive minister for the United Church of Christ's Wider Church Ministries; Eli S. McCarthy,

justice and peace director for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men; and Kathy McKneely, acting director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

Tags: israel, military aid, settlements, u.s. laws and policies, u.s. religious leaders

Departments: Department of the Stated Clerk, G.A. Moderator

Agency: Presbyterian Mission Agency