October 5, 2012

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[1], which details widespread Israeli human rights violations committed against Palestinian civilians, many of which involve the misuse of U.S.-supplied weapons.

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[2] to "internal security" or "legitimate self-defense."[3] More broadly, we urge Congress to undertake careful scrutiny to ensure that our aid is not supporting actions by the government of Israel

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[1] http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/190656.pdf

[2] 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."

[3] 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.

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.

Examples of specific, systematic human rights violations related to U.S. military support are included as an annex to this letter.

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 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, there has been a dramatic rise in settler attacks against Palestinians this year[4]. 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.

Sincerely,

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[4] http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/07/11/v-print/155813/report-violence-against-palestinians.html For more information see also: http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/lambs-to-the-settlers-slaughter-screaming-and-unheard.premium-1.455937

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Examples of specific, systematic human rights violations related to U.S. military support

- **Killings of civilians** - At least 2,969 Palestinian civilians uninvolved in hostilities were killed by the Israeli military between December 29, 2000 and December 31, 2009. This includes at least 1,128 children under the age of 18.[5] Many of these deaths are connected to weaponry the U.S. underwrites.

- **Suppression of legitimate political expression and protest** – U.S.-supplied tear gas has been used by Israel to systematically suppress political protests and dissent in the occupied Palestinian territories. This has led to the deaths of at least 5 Palestinians and the grave injury of many others, including two U.S. citizens.

- **Home demolitions and forced displacement** – According to the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, approximately 24,813 Palestinian homes in the occupied Palestinian territories have been destroyed since 1967. House demolitions in the West Bank in 2011 forcibly displaced nearly 1,100 Palestinians (over half of them children) from their homes, over 80% more than in 2010, according to the United Nations (UN) Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs[6].

- **Use of prohibited weaponry in densely populated civilian areas** – Israel has used both white phosphorus and flechette shells in Gaza and Lebanon in violation of international humanitarian law. During operation cast lead white phosphorus shells were fired against civilian targets including a UN compound, two hospitals, and private residences causing civilian deaths and injuries. Flechette shells have also been used repeatedly in Gaza since 2001, causing significant civilian deaths and casualties.[7]

- **Restricting Palestinian movement** - Israeli-only roads and more than 500 roadblocks and checkpoints carve up the West Bank, making travel for Palestinians arduously slow or impossible[8]. The Wall constructed by Israel in the West Bank deviates considerably from the 1967 lines, confiscating occupied Palestinian territory and water in the process, and severely restricting Palestinian movement. Since 2007 Israel has also maintained a comprehensive blockade on Gaza, restricting not only the movement of Palestinians into and out of Gaza, but also restricting the import and export of goods. The UN and International Committee of the Red Cross have both concluded that this blockade amounts to collective punishment[9], in contravention of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

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[5] Details available at http://www.weaponstoisrael.org/article.php?id=2940 and through original date from B'Tselem at www.btselem.org/statistics.
[6] http://www.unocha.org/annualreport/2011/pse
[7] http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/israeli-army-used-flechettes-against-gaza-civilians-20090127
[8] http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_MovementandAccess_FactSheet_September_2011.pdf
[9] http://www.ochaopt.org/gazablockade/