



## SPECIAL INTEREST REPORT

*A digest of news items and articles in the area of The Council's Interests*

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### Christian Leaders' Letter on U.S. Aid to Israel Causes Rift in Inter-Faith Dialogue

An October letter by 15 leaders of Christian churches calls for Congress to reconsider U.S. aid to Israel because of accusations of human rights violations. These leaders say their intention was to put the Palestinian plight and stalled peace talks back in the spotlight when all of the attention to Middle East policy seems to be focused on Syria, the Arab Spring and the Iranian nuclear threat.

"We asked Congress to treat Israel like it would any other country," said the Rev. Gradye Parsons, the top official of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "to make sure our military aid is going to a country espousing the values we would as Americans — that it's not being used to continually violate the rights of other people."

The Christian leaders wrote that they had "witnessed widespread Israeli human rights violations against the Palestinians, including killing of civilians, home demolitions and forced displacement, and restrictions on Palestinian movement."

The letter said that Israel had continued expanding settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem despite American calls to stop "claiming territory that under international law and U.S. policy should belong to a future Palestinian state."

The signers, besides the Presbyterians, include leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, the National Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the American Friends Service Committee (a Quaker agency), and the Mennonite Central Committee.

The letter acknowledged that, "Israel faces real security threats." But it called for "an immediate investigation into possible violations by Israel of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act, and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act."

Some Jewish leaders responded by announcing their withdrawal from a regularly scheduled Jewish-Christian dialogue meeting. They called the letter "a step too far" and an indication of "the vicious anti-Zionism that has gone virtually unchecked in several of these denominations."

"Something is deeply broken, badly broken," said Ethan Felson vice president and general counsel of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA). "We're certainly not getting anywhere now."

The Anti-Defamation League was the first group to pull out of the interfaith roundtable. "It is outrageous that mere days after the Iranian president repeated his call for Israel's elimination, these American Protestant leaders would launch a biased attack against the Jewish state by calling on Congress to investigate Israel's use of foreign aid," said the ADL's Abe Foxman.

Writing in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* (Oct. 25, 2012), Rabbi Eric Yoffie, former head of the Union for Reform Judaism, suggests that the church leaders are indifferent to Jewish

concerns and "have hit a 45-year low." Admitting that he shares the Protestant leaders' opposition to West Bank settlements, Yoffie nevertheless declared that the Christian groups "aroused all of the suspicions that exist in the Jewish community about the real intentions of the letter ... Jewish leaders would never agree to a reduction of American aid to Israel ... this is a consensus position of the Jewish community."

How much of a "consensus" exists is open to serious question. Many Jewish voices have been heard in support of the church leaders' letter. Rabbis Alissa Wise and Brant Rosen, leaders of the Jewish Voice for Peace Religious Roundtable, write, "We are profoundly disappointed that some in our community have chosen to literally walk away from the table of dialogue ... Considering the vehemence of such a response, one might assume that the Christian leaders' letter was filled with outrageous and incendiary anti-Israel rhetoric. In fact, the letter is sensitively worded and a faithful call ... It is not the role of ... Jewish organizations to dictate how their Christian partners can live out their conscience or their values ... It is hardly outrageous for American taxpayers to require Israel's compliance with our nation's laws and policies."

This statement, endorsed by many dissenting Jewish spokesmen, including Rabbis Elizabeth Bolton, Lynn Gottlieb, David Mivisair and Joseph Berman, notes that, "The U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act specifically prohibit assistance to any country that engages in a consistent pattern of human rights violations, limiting the use of U.S. weapons to 'internal security' or 'legitimate self-defense.' As the letter notes, the most recent 2011 State Department country report on Human Rights Practices concerning Israel and the Occupied Territories detailed numerous human rights violations committed by the Israeli military against Palestinian civilians many of which involve the misuse of U.S.-supplied weapons. As Israel's primary ally, our country alone is able to create the kind of leverage that might challenge Israel to turn away from policies that impede the cause of a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians — and true security for all who live in the region."

Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign assistance since World War II. To date, the U.S. has provided Israel with \$115 billion. The request for Fiscal Year 2013 includes \$3.1 billion in military aid. •

### Israeli Prime Minister Criticized for Interfering in Election and Pushing U.S. to War

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been sharply criticized for interfering in the 2012 U.S. presidential election and pushing America to war with Iran.

Writing in *Time* (Sept. 12, 2012), columnist Joe Klein described "an unprecedented attempt by a putative American ally to influence a U.S. presidential campaign ... Netanyahu's recent

behavior is outrageous. He is trying to push us into a war that is not in our national interest, a war that would only further destabilize a region that is already teetering near chaos. He is trying to get us to damage our relations with the rest of the world especially the Russians and Chinese, whom we spent great diplomatic effort luring into the Iranian economic sanctions so that he can pursue a strategy that even the Israeli military and intelligence communities find questionable.”

Klein writes that, “When I take my annual road trips, I very rarely hear people mention Iran at all and those who do mention it are Jews concerned for the future of Israel. That is a legitimate concern: I’m worried, too as much by the aggressive Likud delusion of a Greater Israel, which its neighbors will inevitably see as a threat, as I am by Iran’s offensive behavior ... The truth is, Iran is a political issue more than a national security challenge. It has achieved the prominence in the current debate that it has because Bibi Netanyahu and his neoconservative pals have made it an issue, because twisted American zillionaires like Sheldon Adelson have bought politicians to promote it, because Jewish organizations like AIPAC and the ADL and the AJC have conflated Israel’s national security with our own and their perceptions of Israel’s long-term national security are, I believe, grievously flawed.”

Klein concludes: “Think about it. What if David Cameron was pushing us to go to war with Argentina over the Falklands? What if India were interfering with the American presidential campaign in order to promote an attack on Pakistan? When was the last time a foreign leader tried to influence an American political campaign? ... Netanyahu is doing two things that should be intolerable for any patriotic American: he is a foreigner trying to influence our presidential campaign and he is a foreigner trying to shove us into a war of choice in a region where far too many Americans have already tied needlessly.”

*The Jerusalem Report* (Oct. 22, 2012) described Netanyahu’s role as “meddling in America’s internal affairs.” It quoted New Yorker editor David Remnick who said that it was “hard to overestimate the risks that Benjamin Netanyahu poses to the future of his own country.” And former *New York Times* editor Bill Keller who slammed the “crude intervention in our politics.”

In reality, *The Report* argues, Netanyahu’s intervention in the campaign had less to do with Iran than with a fear that a second Obama administration would put pressure upon Israel to resolve the Palestinian question: “... the reason Netanyahu has been sticking his neck out for Romney is not Iran but Palestine. He is deeply concerned that if reelected, Obama will press hard for significant movement on the Palestinian track. Indeed, he said as much in a recent closed meeting with Likud hardliners. And if, in the American context, Netanyahu once acknowledged that he ‘speaks Republican,’ on the Palestinian issue, Romney speaks the language of the Likud. ... Formally, Netanyahu is committed to the two-state solution ... But everything he has done ... shows he doesn’t really believe in it, and his commitment was made only to keep Obama and the rest of the international community at bay.”

*Newsweek* columnist Peter Beinart points out that, “Netanyahu has been brazenly intervening in American politics ... since long before he became obsessed with Iran ... In 1989, as Israel’s deputy foreign minister, Netanyahu pushed Congress so hard to scuttle the nascent dialogue between the U.S. and the PLO that James Baker briefly had him banned from the State Department ... In his memoir, Dennis Ross recalls that after Netanyahu’s first meeting with Bill Clinton as prime minister, Clinton remarked in bewilderment, ‘He thinks he is the superpower and we are here to do what he requires.’ ... It’s one thing to pressure an American

president into backing down on the peace process. It’s another to pressure him into attacking another country ... Americans do not want Iran to go nuclear, but this is a country weary of war. And, increasingly, it is a country weary of Netanyahu as well.” •

## Jewish “Elder Statesman” Calls Israeli Policy of Settlements “Suicidal”

At 82, Henry Siegman, referred to by *The Forward* (Oct. 5, 2012) as a “Jewish elder statesman,” believes that Israel’s policy of building settlements on the West Bank is “suicidal.”

*The Forward* notes that, “Henry Siegman felt pessimism setting in as he thought of the future of Israel and its decades-long conflict with the Palestinians. ‘The two-state solution,’ he recently wrote, ‘is dead.’ For this son of German Jewish refugees who grew up to lead what was then one of American Jewry’s major organizations, it was the final stage of a process he had been going through for years ...”

Siegman, who for many years led the American Jewish Congress, wrote an article in the September issue of *The National Interest*, in which he opined that the two-state solution is “no longer feasible and that Israel’s settlement policy has ushered a one-state reality for Palestinians and Israelis.”

According to *The Forward*, “Siegman said he reached this conclusion after determining that Benjamin Netanyahu’s government will not withdraw from the West Bank and that there is no viable political alternative in Israel ... In his article, Siegman offers a dramatic solution, one that he believes could shift the debate and draw international attention.”

Siegman argues that, “Nothing would expose more convincingly the Israeli disguise of the one state reality now in place than a Palestinian decision to shut down the Palestinian Authority and transform their national struggle for independence and statehood into a struggle for citizenship and equal rights within the Greater Israel to which they have been consigned.”

In an interview with *The Forward*, Siegman said he was suggesting a Palestinian public campaign for equal rights. To Siegman, it is clear that Israel is at fault for reaching the brink of a binational one-state: “If Israel believes that in this part of the world it can permanently deprive millions of Palestinians of their rights, that is absurd. Israel is signing its own death warrant.”

In an earlier interview, Siegman described to *The New York Times* his early childhood, hiding in a cellar in Belgium as his family evaded the advancing Nazi troops finally leaving occupied Europe. He said that it was his childhood experience that helped him understand Palestinian fear. He said that growing up amid Orthodox Zionists, “I also bought into the slogan that Palestine is a land without people for a people without a land.” He was ordained as an Orthodox rabbi and served as a chaplain in the Korean War.

Siegman laments that the organized Jewish community has shifted toward a single focus on Israel, and has engaged in unquestioning support of any Israeli policy. “I’m not alienated from Israel,” he says. “I’m alienated from the people who are now running it into the ground.”

Siegman believes that the discourse within the Jewish community, at least the parts that aren’t influenced by the major organizations, is broadening. He gives J Street and author Peter Beinart some of the credit for making the discussion easier. But his conclusion is not hopeful: “I find greater openness to an honest discussion, and I also find that my pessimism is now more widely shared.” •