

“The Quest for a Just Peace: U.S. Military Aid and Human Rights in Israel-Palestine”
FedEx Global Education Center
UNC Chapel Hill
April 14, 2013

First, let me express my deep appreciation to the Abrahamic Initiative on the Middle East, Students for Justice in Palestine, and the Salaam Shalom Committee of the Church of Reconciliation for their deep commitment to a just peace in the Israel Palestine conflict that has led to their hosting this event this afternoon. If only we had more interfaith initiatives with this kind of discussion, instead of avoiding our differences regarding justice and peace. Most interfaith dialogues avoid the elephant in the room. They focus only on theology and fellowship and avoid the political reality of this day. The result is that these dialogues are really not honest conversations at all. Today is an honest interfaith conversation, and I applaud the hosts for their courage to hold such an event.

I am confident that as we hold high our common monotheistic faith--as Jews, Muslims, and Christians- and as we stand together against the injustices and human suffering of the people of Israel and Palestine that we can find a common ground to work together. This common ground will not be solely my position or that of Eric Myers or that of Josh Ruebner or that of Yousef Munayyer, but will be woven together from threads of all of our viewpoints. I am convinced that we can find common ground on which to stand and unite to advocate for and demand a just peace.

You have just heard a presentation arguing for unconditional and continuing U.S. military aid to Israel; and after I speak, you will hear an argument for the unilateral cessation of U.S. military aid. I speak this afternoon from a middle ground--that is providing conditions on U.S. military aid to Israel. This position that I present is also that of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), although, I am in no way speaking officially for our Presbyterian denomination this afternoon. I speak though as one that has been significantly involved in the development of our social witness policy during the last five years.

On October 5, 2012, fifteen leaders of Christian churches and organizations—including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Stated Clerk, the Reverend Gradye Parsons—joined together to sign and send a letter in which they called on Congress to condition U.S. military aid to Israel upon Israel’s “compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies.” These leaders--representing Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Orthodox, Quaker and other major Christian groups--agree that unconditional U.S. military assistance to Israel has contributed to “sustaining the conflict and undermining the long-term security interests of both Israelis and Palestinians.”

In this letter, the following request is made (see the yellow highlighted text on your handout):

...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.” 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.

Why is conditioning U.S. military aid to Israel important? Let me suggest several reasons.

First, to not investigate would be to hold Israel to a lower standard than we hold other nations of the world.

Examples of Israel's specific, systematic violation of human rights related to U.S. military aid are highlighted in blue on pages 3 and 4 of the handout. They include among other things: the killing of unarmed civilians, suppression of legitimate political expression, home demolitions and forced displacement, use of prohibited weaponry in densely populated civilian areas, and the restriction of Palestinian movement.

President Obama in his speech in Jerusalem on March 21, boldly addressed some of Israel's violations of human rights and international law, and the response of his university student audience was overwhelmingly affirming. Listen to what he says:

It is not fair that a Palestinian child cannot grow up in a state of their own -- (cheers, applause) -- living their entire lives with the presence of a foreign army that controls the movements, not just of those young people but their parents, their grandparents, every single day. (Applause.) It's not just when settler violence against Palestinians goes unpunished. (Applause.) It's not right to prevent Palestinians from farming their lands or restricting a student's ability to move around the West Bank -- (applause) -- or displace Palestinian families from their homes. Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. (Cheers, applause.) Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a free people in their own land.¹

It is critical for Israel to comply with laws that regulate the use of U.S. supplied weapons, since Israel is the single largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid since World War II. Notably, the United States has initiated investigations of violations of these laws by other countries and in many incidents has withheld military aid until compliance with the cessation of human rights violations. And, many of these are considered close allies of the U.S. Among these are:

Turkey was investigated in 1974 and military aid was withheld from 1974-1978, and most recently at the adoption of the Leahy Amendment in 1999.

Indonesia was investigated in 1975 and aid withheld for one year

Pakistan: In October 2010, the Obama Administration suspended U.S. military aid to approximately half a dozen Pakistani army units that were believed to have committed human rights abuses.

Bahrain – In February 2012, both the House and Senate approved resolutions to prevent the U.S. government from proceeding with the administration's proposed weapons sale based on human rights violations.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/22/world/middleeast/transcript-of-obamas-speech-in-israel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0&pagewanted=print

But to this list, we could also add Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Argentina, Zimbabwe, and the Philippines. And, Israel is among these. On three occasions from 1953-1973, economic aid to Israel was conditioned and withheld. Subsequently, on four different occasions between 1978 and 1982, the Secretary of State notified Congress that Israel “may” have violated the provisions of the Arms Export Control Act. Since 2001, several requests have been made by members of Congress to investigate violations with regard to Israel, but to no avail.

I would like to suggest that it is now, based on the evidence at hand, the time to investigate whether violations are currently occurring. To not investigate would be to hold Israel to a lower standard than we hold other nations of the world.

Second, Israel needs to know that the U.S. is not only supportive of its right to exist, but that the U.S. is seeking to provide for its security in the midst of the hostile environment of the Middle East. Unilaterally ending U.S. military aid would clearly be damaging toward this end. However, so is our unconditional support. Our unconditional support enables Israel to continue in its self-destructive ways and in its oppression of the Palestinian people. This is not good for Israel’s long-term security in the Middle East.

Third, unconditional aid to Israel is passively encouraging Israel to continue their violation of International Law and supporting new settlement development in the West Bank. Moreover, it is making each one of us complicit in Israel’s illegal and immoral activity. The Letter of 15 states (see the gray highlighted text):

...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.

Do these accusations not at least warrant an investigation? And if the investigation substantiates the allegations, then in the name of justice, how can the U.S. Congress do otherwise than to suspend U.S. military aid until Israel complies with the application of human rights toward the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip?

Fourth, this firm and nuanced position of conditional aid affirms and stands with both Israelis and the Palestinians, and seeks to be balanced by applying the same moral principles to all sides in the conflict. The Palestinians have not been totally innocent as they have sought to resist and overthrow the Occupation. And the response of the U.S. has been to prohibit aid to the Palestinian Authority at

times. Today, assistance to the Palestinians is arguably the most conditioned, restricted, audited, and monitored U.S. aid program in the world. And, sometimes the U.S. withholds promised aid simply because we did not like a political action (not a human rights violation) that was taken. For instance, last fall, Congress withheld \$295.7 million to punish the PA for upgrading its status at the United Nations. This is clearly conditioning U.S. aid based on a dislike of a non-violent political action. Surely, we must insist on a balanced approach and apply the same standards to both sides of the conflict.

We must firmly stand with both our Jewish and Palestinian brothers and sisters—both are friends. Presbyterians and Jews have worked very faithfully and diligently for half a century to develop a close friendship. That mutual friendship has allowed us to cooperatively address many moral and ethical issues confronting our society. At the same time, we have an even longer friendship with our Palestinian Christian partners in the Middle East. While we will always stand with both of our friends, wanting both to thrive, sometimes it is necessary to support the weaker friend when they are suffering at the hand of the other.

This reminds me of an incident in my junior high school that my friends and I refer to as “the fight.” It occurred at Dalewood Jr. High School in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1969. I was in the ninth grade at the time, and my young friends and I were in sixth-period gym. We had just concluded a close game of softball that warm spring day. The tensions were still high, and the anger had not abated after a close call that concluded the game. As we walked up that long hill toward the gym, two of my best friends, who had been on opposing teams that day, continued to banter back and forth. The argument that had begun at third base followed them each step of the way. Suddenly, to my horror, my two best friends were in a fist-flying, heart-pounding, nose-blood gushing fight. Even to this day, I am sure if you asked my other friends, “Who started it?” you would hear opposing narratives. But in that moment in 1969 that was not the only important question, nor the most important question for me. The most important question in that moment was, “What should I do?”

You see, one of my friends was a normal sized ninth grader—5’6” and 135 pounds. He was an incredible tennis player, but not much in the weight room. But my other friend, well, he was a not only a tall 5’11” eighth grader, but he was already a chisel-chested Hulk who wrestled heavy weight on the wrestling team at 185 pounds. Now while the smaller of my friends did raise the immediate anxiety of my stronger friend, he really posed no existential threat. On the other hand, in that moment I genuinely feared for the health of my weaker friend.

What would you have done? In that moment I was faced with a public, moral decision—maybe my first, but not my last. What should I do?

I wish in that adolescent moment that I had known the words and thoughts of two great ethicists and theologians of our day.

“Not to take sides is to effectively weigh in on the side of the stronger.”
William Sloane Coffin

“Neutrality is positively harmful.”
Miroslav Volf

I pray that Muslims, Jews, and Christians will remember these words as we seek to find a common ground on which to stand to advocate for—yes, and, even demand—a just peace in the land that we call “holy.” While Israel boasts of being a pluralistic and democratic society, its clear violations of international law and disregard of basic human rights in the Occupied Territories clearly demonstrate that it is abusing its overwhelmingly superior strength.

When one stands up for one’s weaker friend, you are not seeking to “vilify” the other, or reduce the stronger to a caricature of evil, or tear down the stronger. When you condition your military aid so that you are no longer enabling your stronger friend to beat down the weaker friend, you are not “exploiting this tactic to tell an anti-Israel story that undermines Israel’s right to exist.” You are not de-legitimizing Israel. No, you are simply saying, “Enough is enough. I can’t support this action.”

Both of those Chattanooga boys were and continued to be my friends, but on that warm spring day, I wish that I had jumped in and helped restrain the arms of my stronger friend. I am not sure what you would have done if you had been there on that hillside in Chattanooga in 1969, but what will you do today? Yes, we have two friends and we must stand with both, but I hope today you will hear the call of our weaker friend who is crying out for our help. As a person of faith, I believe that we are called to stand with all humanity, because all humanity is created in the image of God. And so, I will affirm my love for both sides of this conflict for both are formed of individuals created in the image of God. But, presently, I am most concerned about the viability of my weaker friend, as he struggles to establish himself in the face of the strength of the more powerful.

It is for these reasons that I strongly advocate conditional U.S. military aid to Israel.