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Remarks by Congresswoman Betty McCollum
U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights National Conference 2018
St. Paul, MN
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Good evening, friends! It is wonderful to be with you tonight! Thank you for this very warm welcome and this very special award.

Brad, thank you for your very kind introduction. I want everyone here to know that Brad Parker and Defense for Children International – Palestine has been a tireless advocate, key advisor, and great partner. Thank you, Brad.

Tonight, is very special for me. There are so many amazing, committed people in this room who have dedicated time, energy, and resources, along with your hearts and souls to fighting for Palestinian rights. For me to be recognized for my work – our work – is humbling and I am deeply appreciative – thank you!

This conference is hosted by the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights and collectively you are the champions who come from every corner of our country. But, I need to extend a special thank you and my deep appreciation to the Campaign's DC based team – Yousef, Josh, and Leah – for your support, collaboration, and advocacy. It is because of your efforts and all of our great partners that we are establishing a narrative in Congress that promotes Palestinian rights.

I am honored to be here tonight, but I am also honored you are all here – in my home town of St. Paul! Welcome to Minnesota! I live just up the hill, about a 20-minute walk from here. So, thank you for hosting this amazing conference in my neighborhood!

Let me also say one more thing about Minnesota. I am able to receive this award not just because of my work, but because of my constituents here in Minnesota's 4th District who send me to Congress. They expect me to fight for progressive values, human rights, and policies that respect and elevate our shared human dignity. I am representative, a reflection of the people who elect me.

So, my work to promote peace, attack poverty, defend the rights of children, and stand in solidarity with the oppressed, including the Palestinian people, is because I have the support of my wonderful constituents.

Last November, I introduced a bill in Congress called the *“Promoting Human Rights by Ending Israeli Military Detention of Palestinian Children Act”* – H.R. 4391.

It is not a complicated bill. It says that U.S. aid to Israel shall be prohibited from being used to arrest, detain, abuse, torture, or otherwise violated humanitarian law and the human rights of Palestinian children.

We know that thousands and thousands of Palestinian youth have been victimized by Israel’s system of juvenile military detention over the years. We know that UNICEF, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Israel’s B’Tselem, DCI/Palestine, and the U.S. State Department have all documented Israel’s brutal treatment of Palestinian children.

Now, as an American and as a mother, I don’t think it’s a particularly controversial or a statement of moral courage to condemn a government that systematically arrest and abuses children. And, as a Member of Congress, I don’t believe it should be a statement of political courage to say the U.S. government should not spend \$1 of our taxpayer funds supporting a brutal military detention system that abuses children.

Even in Congress this would seem to be common sense. Yet, this is the not the case when it comes to protecting Palestinian children, and the government abusing the children is Israel.

With H.R. 4391 moving forward, we are making a clear, unwavering, and definitive statement: we do not support U.S. tax dollars funding Israel’s cruel, brutal, and dehumanizing system of juvenile military detention of Palestinian children.

So, let me say a big thank you to all of my congressional co-sponsors, our partners in the faith community, our NGO champions, and everyone in this room representing advocates and citizens all across this country.

This bill is a statement of unity, never before seen in Congress, that unites us in our common belief in human rights. It is a statement of our shared values of freedom, equality, and justice for the Palestinian people.

You all need to know, among the Members of Congress co-sponsoring H.R. 4391 there is a profound commitment to Palestinian rights. I admire their willingness to stand with me, because it is not easy. We are confronted by a right-wing pro-Israel lobby that supports Israel’s brutality. And, groups like Christians United for Israel that work to promote settlement expansion and delegitimize Palestinians to justify their religious extremism.

But there is a truth we are fighting for: the Palestinian people deserve freedom, justice, and equality – just like people anywhere in the world. They deserve to be citizens of an independent Palestinian state, and they deserve to live without fear – in their own homeland.

My goal with H.R. 4391 is to offer an alternative perspective and force policymakers to think about the \$3.8 billion in U.S. aid to Israel and how that aid helps to enable, facilitate, and enforce the military occupation of Palestinian lands and the repression of the Palestinian people.

Yes, the Israeli people deserve security. But, imprisoning, abusing, and traumatizing another generation of Palestinian children in the name of security is a lie. We need to call it what it is: Israel's military detention system is a weapon of occupation that terrorizes Palestinian children and their families into submission. And, I do not want my tax dollars or yours to support it!

As Americans living in the era of Donald Trump it is easy to fall into the trap of hopelessness and despair. Yet, the Palestinian people face hopelessness, despair, along with 50-years of military occupation and they continue to have the courage to persevere. And, for the Israelis – Jews and Palestinians – who reject racist policies, occupation, and the extremist Likud-Netanyahu government, I also commend their courage and perseverance.

A few weeks ago, in the coffee shop of this hotel, just downstairs, I met with an amazing woman who is struggling for freedom, for justice, and for her country's democratic future. Her name is Aida Tuma-Suleiman and she is a citizen of Israel. She is also a Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset.

Aida is fighting Israel's recently passed Nation-State Law which codifies a "separate and unequal." This is a standard of racism America rejects and outlawed more than 50 years ago. As Aida has written and told me, "Rather than working equally for the benefit of all citizens, irrespective of race, religion, ethnicity, or national affiliation, Israel will now promote the development of exclusive Jewish communities."

Friends, the world has a name for the form of government that is codified in the Nation-State Law – it is called "apartheid." And, in this case, Israel is rejecting core democratic values and replacing them with bigotry, racism, and segregation.

Aida inspired me with her courage and determination. She, along with many Israelis, are battling their own extremist government that is delegitimizing and dehumanizing her very existence.

It is in this context that I think about the future, not just for Palestine or for Israel, but the future of our own country – the United States. We are now living in a nation in which the policies of the President of the United States and his administration are explicitly bigoted, dangerous, and demeaning to all Americans.

Think about a few of the destructive, dangerous policies advanced by this President: A Muslim ban; a separation wall with Mexico; immigrant family separation and child detention; rejecting refugees; the only nation in the world to withdraw from the Paris

Climate agreement; reneging on the Iran nuclear deal; cutting taxes for the wealthiest Americans while sabotaging healthcare for the neediest Americans.

Is it any wonder that Benjamin Netanyahu knows he has a “green light” to advance “apartheid” inside Israel and endlessly expand settlements? Or, for Israeli security forces to massacre of scores of unarmed protesters in Gaza with complete impunity?

Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu are partners intent on destroying any future for the Palestinian people. There is no “peace process.” The U.S. is not an “honest broker.” There is no illusion of this White House even caring about Palestinians.

The White House point person on the Middle East is Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner. The U.S. ambassador to Israel is David Friedman – a bankruptcy lawyer by trade and a right-wing extremist by choice. Over the years, both Kushner and Friedman have invested financially in supporting and sustaining West Bank settlements, settlements that violate international law.

So, the top two American officials leading U.S. government policy on Israel-Palestine are not diplomats, but appear to be more like settlers, right-wing settlers who actively seek to expand Israel’s control over Palestinian land, livelihoods, and future.

It is appalling.

It is also the reason we are witnessing the Trump administration and Republicans in Congress making every effort to extinguish any hope or possibility of an independent Palestinian state.

A few days ago, in his press conference President Trump articulated his vision to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, calling a peace agreement “a real estate deal.” Trump said, “if the Israelis and the Palestinians want one-state – that’s OK with me. If they want two, states that’s OK with me. I am happy if they are happy.” These are the profound words of the “so-called” leader of the free world.

Of course, Mr. Trump then went on to explain that China’s great respect for him was because of his “very large brain.”

Policy actions by this White House have explicitly targeted Palestinians and their interests in an effort to reward the Netanyahu government. It is very clear that the unilateral relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, the termination of U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority and UNWRA, and the eviction of the PA’s office in Washington are intended to delegitimize Palestinians as having status, rights, or even identity in their own homeland.

And, the termination of U.S. aid to non-government organizations providing healthcare, education, and humanitarian assistance to needy Palestinians is nothing more than a

policy of blatant cruelty intended to inflict hardship and make vulnerable people suffer.

It is shameful, but it should come as no surprise. President Trump tried to eliminate health coverage for 30 million Americans, why wouldn't he cut healthcare to Palestinians?

So, in Congress, Democrats and Republicans need to understand the cost and consequences of fifty years of military occupation. Israeli Settlements and checkpoints, separation walls and soldiers have made an independent Palestinian state all but impossible.

There is clearly no reason for Palestinians to have any faith or trust in America's current president, but we must not allow them to lose faith in us – the American people. As Americans, especially progressives, we must strive to make freedom, justice, equality, human rights, economic opportunity, and hope the foundation for future U.S. policy for engagement with Israel and Palestine.

There must be accountability. And, Israeli oppression supported by U.S. tax dollars – the status quo – must be rejected. Democracy – a real democracy – does not accept second class citizens, segregated communities, state sponsored discrimination, or military occupation.

If a one-state solution is the inevitable end game of the Trump/Netanyahu axis, and I hope it is not, I pray it is not. But if it is, then the American people must demand a U.S. policy explicitly requiring conditions that include equal rights and full citizenship for all Palestinians.

So the burden for U.S. advocacy to improve the future for Palestine is once again on your shoulders. Your commitment and dedication are essential.

We are in a dark place, but I also see a progressive movement that is awakening and willing to push back against powers that once seemed invincible. Even in Congress, there is a growing group of Democrats who are disturbed and disillusioned by the conduct of Israel's government. This allows for a far more open discussion among policy makers than ever before about holding Israel accountable.

Let me be clear, holding Israel's government accountable for its abuses is not anti-Semitic, it is responsible and just. If I can hold President Trump and the White House accountable, why can't I hold a foreign government accountable for how they abuse an entire population of people under their control?

There is good news: I believe change will be coming to Congress in the New Year. There are strong, progressive women and men coming to Washington who will certainly have their voices heard. I am certain these new voices will bring new energy to our movement.

But, a significant burden is still on us all to expand the coalition of NGOs, faith groups, elected leaders, and citizen activists. Because Palestinian rights are human rights we must make them a litmus test for politicians, faith leaders, and leaders in civil society.

I cannot guarantee our goals and mission of peace, justice, equality, and freedom for Palestinians will succeed. But I know we can't be silent.

The hotel we are in tonight is owned by the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe – a tribal nation located a few hours north of here.

In Congress, I have made working with tribal nations a priority of mine. More than twenty years ago, the women who mentored me on Native American issues, who taught me the profound meaning of sovereignty were the late Marge Anderson, chairwoman of the Mille Lacs Band, and Melanie Benjamin, the current chairwoman of the Mille Lacs Band.

Here in Minnesota this was not our land – it belonged to the Ojibwe people in the north and the Sioux people in the south. European settlers took this land from Native Americans, subjugated them, committed atrocities, and for more than a century the U.S. government imposed state sponsored policies to extinguish their culture.

The intergenerational trauma and suffering from these abuses continue to be real. The healing is slow and painful. But Minnesota's tribal nations are fighting for their rights, their dignity, and their future. They are a vibrant voice in the present and future of our state and nation. And, I am proud to stand with them and work in partnership with them to protect their rights while building a better future for their children, and for generations to come.

This is the same commitment I make tonight to you and to the Palestinian people. It is a long road ahead. There must be peace, reconciliation, and real hope for a better future, before healing can begin.

But, we need the American people – and our government – to stand with the children of Palestine, and their parents, because they deserve to have their rights respected, their voices heard, and their future one of hope, opportunity, and peace.

Thank you for allowing me to join you this evening.

Thank you!

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