

March 10, 2023

Dear President Biden and Members of Congress,

We write to you as leaders of U.S.-based Christian churches, agencies, and organizations committed to seeking a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis. Our institutions 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.” (Matthew 5:9 NRSVUE)

Many of us represent congregations and communities in Israel and Palestine or otherwise have a presence in the region. In response to our Christian call to be peacemakers, we work with Palestinian and Israeli partners who live there as they struggle to realize a just and lasting peace. From our church communions and partners¹, we are hearing unprecedented concern about the deteriorating human rights situation and rise in violence² in both the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel.

U.S. military funding to Israel in part sustains this violence, making the U.S. government complicit in ongoing abuses. As U.S. churches and church-based organizations, we call for change to end this U.S. complicity and ask that the U.S. government hold Israel accountable for its abuses including by cutting military aid.

The new Israeli government came to power on a platform of supremacy, stating that only Israeli Jews have a right to sovereignty in the land located between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea^{3,4}. Netanyahu and his ministers have promised to expand existing settlements, “legalize” outposts built on Palestinian land, and establish new settlements, all while moving to formally annex the West Bank to Israel⁵. Palestinian homes and structures are already being demolished in both Area B and C of the West Bank.

Threats do not stop at the internationally-recognized 1948 armistice line between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, also known as the Green Line. The new government is also moving to undermine the rule of law in Israel and directly threatens the rights of women, LGBTQ communities, and Palestinians who are citizens of Israel who comprise over 20% of the population. Moves have also been made to restrict speech and political expression in Israel. International

¹ Statement of Patriarchs and Heads of Churches on the increasing cycle of violence in the Holy Land (Jan. 29, 2023) <https://www.lpj.org/posts/statement-on-the-increasing-cycle-of-violence-in-the-holy-land.html>.

² Increased anti-Christian activity, including attacks on holy sites, threatens the multi-faith identity of Jerusalem and equality of freedom of worship for Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

³ https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid

⁴ The new Minister of Finance, Bezalel Smotrich, who has been given authority over the Civil Administration in the West Bank, is the co-founder of the nonprofit organization Regavim. Regavim was established for the purpose of promoting settlements, thereby pushing Palestinians off their lands. Smotrich is already moving to force Palestinians from their homes and communities. Israeli National Security Minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who has been convicted of supporting Kach, a group previously designated as a terrorist organization by the US government, as one of his first acts made a provocative visit to the al-Aqsa esplanade, a visit condemned by the UN, Palestinians and Arab countries, the US, and other countries.

⁵ <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-725514>⁶ <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/122535>

organizations which provide assistance to Palestinians fear that their work will be restricted or stopped.

These positions and actions all directly contradict U.S. peacemaking policy towards Israel and Palestine and undermine the frameworks that the US has stated are necessary for long term peace. U.S. action is needed to demand accountability and end abuses.

But as we call attention to these new threats to peace, it is also important to state that the abuses and lack of accountability that are increasing now occur in the context of decades of ignored Palestinian suffering.

For more than a decade, many of our groups have been calling for action to end Israeli violations of Palestinian rights and for conditioning U.S. military funding to Israel. We have noted the lack of accountability for Israeli killings of civilians, ongoing land expropriation, home demolitions, settlement expansion, movement restrictions, and other gross violations of Palestinian rights. The situation for Palestinians has only worsened without any accountability. Despite this reality, in 2016, the US pledged to provide over \$38 billion in foreign military assistance and missile defense programs to Israel during the next decade, an \$8 billion increase over the previous 10-year period.

B'Tselem, the Israeli Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, issued a report in January 2023 concluding that Israeli forces killed more Palestinians in 2022 than any year since 2004. Violence has continued to rise in 2023. As of the sending of this letter, at least 75 Palestinians – including women and children – were killed by Israeli forces in the occupied Palestinian territory. Settler violence also increased significantly, reaching a peak with the settler attack on the Palestinian village of Huwwara during which one Palestinian was killed, more than 350 were injured, and dozens of homes, businesses, and cars were burned.

During the decade between January 2013 and today, according to the UN office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Israel demolished over 7,200 Palestinian owned structures⁶, including over 1,450 structures built by international donors including the U.S. As a result of these actions, over 10,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes and over 140,000 Palestinians suffered losses.

During the period between 2012 and 2022, while Palestinians were being forcibly displaced, according to Peace Now, the number of Israeli settlers living in the West Bank (not including East Jerusalem) increased from 341,000 to over 465,000⁷. During the same period, settlers established over 77 new illegal outposts on stolen Palestinian land. In East Jerusalem, the number of settlers increased from 197,000 people in 2012 to over 229,000 in 2020, all while Palestinian land was confiscated and homes were demolished. The new government is now moving to further settlement growth, legalize outposts as new settlements, and further Israeli control over all of Jerusalem. The new Israeli government has made it clear that this is the reality they strive to make permanent.

Israeli actions on the ground have created a reality based on inequality and discrimination. A growing number of legal experts and human rights organizations including Amnesty International,

⁶ <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/122535>

⁷ <https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population>

Human Rights Watch, al-Haq, B'Tselem, and Yesh Din say this situation meets the international legal definition of the crime of apartheid⁸.

The U.S. bears at least partial responsibility for this reality because of its uncritical support – politically, diplomatically, and financially – for the Government of Israel and its failure to demand accountability. This situation must change. When Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke about the incoming Israeli government, he named Palestinian rights as a value to which the US must commit. Living that commitment means holding Israel accountable and ending unrestricted assistance.

As Christian leaders in the United States, it is our moral responsibility to question the continuation of U.S. financial assistance to the government of Israel's as rights violations worsen. Realizing a just and lasting peace for Israelis and Palestinians will require accountability. As Israel continues to violate the rights of the people living under its control, violating international law and principles of human rights – as well as US laws – the US must end its military support of Israel, which amounts to \$3.8 billion per year. This position is consistent with our advocacy for peace and justice – and criticism of US military aid to countries of the Middle East - more broadly. Continuing military aid without any accountability will only lead to further violence and abuse.

Your urgent action is needed to end violence and to hold Israel accountable for its ongoing and flagrant violations of Palestinian rights. Taking this action will increase security for all people in the region.

With respect and gratitude, and a sense of urgency, we offer you our prayers.

Sincerely,

American Friends Service Committee
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
United Church of Christ
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Pax Christi U.S.A.
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society
Mennonite Central Committee U.S.
Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding and Policy
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Presbyterian Church (USA)

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/israels-apartheid-against-palestinians-a-cruel-system-of-domination-and-a-crime-against-humanity/>; <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>, <https://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/18174.html>, https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid; <https://www.yesh-din.org/en/the-occupation-of-the-west-bank-and-the-crime-of-apartheid-legal-opinion/>