

# Middle East Notes

## Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

### October 25, 2012



[Read previous weeks' Middle East Notes](#)

*Please note: Opinions expressed in the following articles do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.*

Earlier this month, the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns joined over a dozen other Christian groups in signing a letter to Congress which urges a closer review of U.S. military assistance to Israel in light of required compliance with U.S. regulations regarding aid and human rights. [Read the letter here](#). Reaction to this letter has been strong; this week's Middle East Notes includes a variety of responses.

- **Jewish establishment pulls out of interfaith dialogue:** Report posted on Mondoweiss.
- **J Street sells its soul, completes evolution to AIPAC lite:** Blog post from M.J. Rosenberg.
- **Mainstream Jewish organizations earn "Israel first" designation again:** Another blog post from M.J. Rosenberg.
- **Jewish leaders outraged by letter to Congress:** Laurie Goodstein's *New York Times* article.
- **New York Times flacks for Jewish groups against 15 major Christian leaders:** James Wall blogs his response to the *New York Times* article.
- **Rabbinical support for the end of unconditional military aid to Israel:** Members of the Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinical Council stand with their Christian colleagues in their recent call to "make U.S. military aid to Israel contingent upon its government's compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies."
- **Importance and misunderstanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in U.S. politics:** Eric Alterman writes in *The Nation* that much of the confusion arises from the combined ability of professional Jewish organizations, right-wing think tanks and media-based neoconservative pundits to misrepresent both the views and the influence of U.S. Jews and to enforce their misrepresentations on the mainstream media via political intimidation.

#### 1) [Jewish establishment pulls out of interfaith dialogue](#)

**Alex Kane, Mondoweiss, October 17, 2012**

Mainstream Jewish establishment groups have upped the ante in a battle with Christian churches that was sparked by a mild letter calling on Congress to investigate whether military aid to Israel violates U.S. law.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) [announced October 17 that their group and six other organizations were pulling out of a planned interfaith dialogue group scheduled for later this month.](#)

Instead, the Jewish groups are calling for a “summit” to take place in order to “communicate face-to-face at the highest levels and determine a more positive path forward for our communities.” In other words, the Jewish establishment wants to meet on its own terms, and not discuss the human rights violations of Israel.

“These churches have squandered our trust. They either refuse to pay attention to our plea for a fair appraisal of the situation or they simply do not care,” said JCPA president Steve Gutow, a former official with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

The statement from the JCPA also conflates “anti-Christian, anti-Muslim, and anti-Palestinian activities” with “anti-Zionist activities that have found comfortable homes in [Christian] denominations,” as JCPA official Larry Gold put it.

The interfaith roundtable that was scheduled to meet later this month was created in 2004 after proposals to divest from companies doing business with the Israeli military began to gather strength in Christian denominations. ...

After the letter was publicized, Jewish establishment groups went ballistic. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) 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,” ADL head Abraham [Foxman said in a statement](#).

The Jewish Telegraphic Agency adds to the story by reporting on an alarming threat from the JCPA. Ethan Felson, the vice president of the JCPA, told the news agency that “JCPA is considering as a response asking Congress to investigate delegitimizers of Israel and to issue a resolution against their efforts.” Felson also suggested that “American Jewish groups could retaliate by advocating against U.S. aid to the Palestinians.”

Still, Jewish Voice for Peace’s Rabbinical Council has [come out in favor of the Christian letter](#). Other Christian groups that pushed for boycott and divestment at recent church meetings have also come out strongly in favor of the letter.

“Israel’s grave and systematic abuses of Palestinian human rights and violations of international law have been thoroughly documented for many years,” said Rev. Jeff DeYoe, the advocacy chair for the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church, in a statement. “We’re pleased and encouraged that church leaders from a growing number of denominations are recognizing this and taking a stand in favor of justice and freedom for all the peoples of the Holy Land. We hope members of Congress will do the same.”

[Read the entire piece on Mondoweiss’ website.](#)

## 2) J Street sells its soul, completes evolution to AIPAC lite (updated)

M.J. Rosenberg, October 13, 2012

It was inevitable. Constantly under pressure from the Jewish center-right (Reform rabbis, for instance), J Street has thrown in the towel. [Read its document of surrender.](#)

In response to the letter from Christian denominations urging that aid to Israel be compliant with U.S. policy and law, J Street has joined [Abe Foxman of the Anti-Defamation league](#) and the half-million dollar a year hacks that run the other Jewish organizations to blast the Christians. J Street's endorsement of the right-wing position is interestingly framed. It asserts that the Jewish community brouhaha about the letter is much ado about little. It says that Jews should be more concerned about achieving peace than attacking every call for it. It puts forth its own tired support for Mahmoud Abbas and the PA (without mentioning that it [urged the U.S. to veto the Palestinian statehood resolution](#) which represented Abbas's one big effort to avoid irrelevancy).

And then it covers its bases by asserting that it agrees with ADL and the others that aid to Israel is an entitlement. It must never be questioned unless you also add "criticism of Israel's behavior with appropriate criticism of, for instance, rocket fire from Gaza into Israeli civilian areas." You must also "put the present situation into a historical or political context that might provide a fuller appreciation for the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over many decades."

Blah, blah, AIPAC, blah. The church letter is about the \$2.5 billion aid package to Israel. As far as I know, the U.S. does not provide the rockets fired from Gaza. As for putting the current situation in a context that "might provide a fuller appreciation for the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over many decades," I say tell that to the people of Gaza, including the 1,400 Palestinians killed during the 2009 Israeli onslaught (including 700 civilians and 250 kids under 16). What's that context again?

I have no doubt that the people who run J Street fought the rabbis and donors to avoid having to put out this statement. They always fight. (The fought against having to oppose Palestinian statehood at the UN). They always give in.

I hear that Rabbi David Saperstein of the Reform movement threatens to pull "my rabbis" out if J Street strays too far from AIPAC. He's the lobby's enforcer, a great progressive on all matters NOT related to Israel and the Palestinians because he too is intimidated by his donors.

So I feel sorry for J Street. But I do not see any reason to support it. It is, at the end of the day — in fact, long before the end of the day — just another Jewish organization that lacks the courage of its supposed convictions.

If Israel attacks Iran, I am sure Saperstein will demand that J Street go along with that too. And J Street will. It is terrified not to be part of the organizational consensus, terrified that the Israeli

ambassador will be angry with them, terrified at being outsiders like, you know, the Biblical Jewish prophets. It wants to be part of an amoral and immoral consensus and, guess what, it is.

### **3) Mainstream Jewish organizations earn “Israel first” designation again**

**M.J. Rosenberg, October 9, 2012**

Have you noticed that none of the mainstream Jewish organizations have expressed much anger about Pam Geller’s anti-Muslim hate signs going up on trains, buses and subway stations in the Bay Area, New York and now Washington. A couple have issued mild statements of tepid disapproval (most have said nothing) but without any of the vehemence they employ when say, a pro-Palestinian student group organizes at some college somewhere.

The organizations seem not to get that (1) these ugly placards insult Muslims and incite violence against them (after all, how else to respond to “savages”) and (2) these ugly placards endanger Jews who could be turned on by those set off by the signs. Personally, I think Pam Geller would like to see the shedding of blood by either side as a tool for her fundraising efforts and to help spread her message of hate.

But the Jewish organizations are quiet. My guess is that one reason why is that many of them share donors with Pam Geller (AIPAC, in particular) and never, ever want to anger a donor. Another reason is that these organizations never express concern about Muslims, other than to denigrate them. Every major Jewish organization supported the Gaza war, opposed the Goldstone report condemning it, and demanded that the U.S. veto Palestinian statehood at the United Nations (even though the resolution they forced us to oppose embodied U.S. policy). And, third, they are all busy demanding more sanctions on or war with Iran to be too concerned about hate here at home.

But then today the organizations demonstrated yet again where their hearts are. They are responding with a mighty roar to word that 15 church organizations are demanding that Congress evaluate the \$3.5 billion U.S. aid package to Israel. The churches ask that before aid is disbursed Congress should determine that the recipient is in compliance with U.S. law. In response, the Jewish organizations went ballistic, coming this close to calling the letter anti-Semitic (what a surprise!). ...

Think about it. The church groups are asking only that the disbursement of U.S. aid be “contingent on the Israeli government’s compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies.” Now, the organizations may not know this but the disbursement of all domestic assistance (Social Security, food stamps, subsidies to farmers and everyone else) is contingent on “compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies.” Moreover, the current economic situation has put all those programs under scrutiny, and most have sustained cuts which have cost many Americans (including cops and teachers) their jobs. The one program exempt from scrutiny and from cuts is the aid to Israel program. In fact, every budget slashing proposal passed or pending in Congress exempts Israel and only Israel (no, the U.S. military is not exempt while the Israeli military is).

And now AIPAC's satellite organizations are screaming at church groups for simply asking that we subject Israel to the same process that we subject Americans too.

Take a look at the statement from the Jewish Council on Public Affairs. It is the policy arm of the Jewish federations, the largest Jewish domestic charity in the country. Once its focus was almost entirely on Jewish needs here. Now, like the others, it is just AIPAC lite, agitating over Israel, Palestine and Iran (Iran, Iran).

Here is what its head Rabbi Steve Gutow (former AIPAC official) and his nominal boss Larry Gold said about the church letter: "We reject the call to reevaluate foreign aid to Israel – and we continue to support targeted aid to Palestinians. Foreign aid remains a vital instrument," said JCPA President Rabbi Steve Gutow. "U.S. aid to Israel is not 'unconditional,' as the letter claims. It reflects the shared values of America and Israel and furthers our shared goals for peace and security and is vital to advance the security of both peoples."

"The singling out of Israel by the signatories is disappointing but not surprising," said JCPA Chair Larry Gold. "Although the letter acknowledges that Palestinians share some responsibility for the conflict, there is no call for investigation of Palestinian intransigence. It is telling that the call for action regarding human rights in other parts of the world is reduced to a mere footnote.

"The letter could also have highlighted the relentless attacks on Christians throughout the Middle East, including the brutal oppression of Coptic Christians or just as easily have called for a suspension of aid to Palestinians until the Palestinian Authority take steps such as returning to the negotiating table. That would have been equally unhelpful but might have mitigated the obvious conclusion that the signatories bear a deep and singular antipathy for Israel."

"Most Americans, including most Christians support a strong U.S. Israel relationship and recognize that foreign aid is a wise American investment. This is also the view of the leaders of both parties in both houses of Congress and both candidates for president," said Gutow. "Those signatories to this letter are out of sync with these mainstream values."

"We eagerly await the day when these church leaders step away from their troubling fixation on hurting Israel and adopt an approach to peacemaking that fosters reconciliation rather than conflict," said Gutow.

Crazy? My favorite part is where the letter specifically supports "targeted" aid to Palestinians (both measly and with so many conditions USAID barely knows how to legally deliver it) while demanding that the massive Israel program be unconditional. And naturally Gutow talks about how "most Americans" support unconditional aid while, of course, knowing that it is inconceivable that any American would accept that a foreign aid program be exempt from the requirements we put on domestic programs. And then it goes off about the Copts in Egypt!

[\*Read the entire blogpost on M.J. Rosenberg's website.\*](#)

#### 4) [Church appeal on Israel angers Jewish groups](#)

Laurie Goodstein, *New York Times*, October 20, 2012

[A letter signed by 15 leaders](#) of Christian churches that calls for Congress to reconsider giving aid to Israel because of accusations of human rights violations has outraged Jewish leaders and threatened to derail longstanding efforts to build interfaith relations.

The Christian leaders say their intention was to put the [Palestinian](#) plight and the stalled peace negotiations back in the spotlight at a time 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 (USA), “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 human rights of other people.”

The Jewish leaders responded to the action as a momentous betrayal and announced their withdrawal from a regularly scheduled Jewish-Christian dialogue meeting planned for Monday. [In a statement, the Jewish leaders](#) called the letter by the Christian groups “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](#), an umbrella group that helped to convene the meeting. “We’re certainly not getting anywhere now.”

The Jewish groups have called for the Christian churches to send their top officials to a “summit” meeting to discuss the situation, an invitation the Christian leaders say they are considering.

The Christian leaders involved are mostly from the historically mainline Protestant churches. Many of these same churches have taken up contentious resolutions to divest their stock holdings from companies that sell military and security equipment to Israel. Meanwhile, successive Israeli governments have found stalwart support in conservative evangelical American churches.

The breach is all the more bitter because it involves Jewish groups known for cultivating strong interfaith relationships, including the Reform and Conservative movements, the American Jewish Committee and B’nai B’rith International.

[Read the entire piece on the New York Times website](#)

## 5) [New York Times flacks for Jewish groups against 15 Christian leaders](#)

James M. Wall, October 20, 2012

You have to know American Jewish leaders are really riled up when they call on the *New York Times* to flack for them against 15 leaders of Christian churches who had the audacity to send a letter to the U.S. Congress, which said, with proper Christian indignation:

*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.*

Is that clear? These church leaders are saying it is their moral responsibility to tell the Congress that it must hold Israel accountable to U.S. laws and policies when it disburses money to Israel. So what's the big news angle in the [New York Times](#) story for Saturday, October 20, following the release of the [letter from the 15 leaders to Congress](#)? The lead of the story should be that "American Jewish leaders defend the action of a secular state that receives more U.S. foreign aid than any other nation in the world."

What these so-called "outraged" Jewish groups are saying is that their feelings are hurt. These American Jewish leaders have worked so hard over the decades to maintain "good relations" with their Christian colleagues, and just as they were about to have yet another "good relations" meeting between Christians and Jews (no mention of Muslims, it must be noted), here come 15 Christian leaders demanding accountability from a secular foreign state for human rights violations carried out with American money.

Horrors, what a thing for Christian leaders to say! ...

[Read the entire piece on Wall's blog](#)

## 6) [Rabbinical support for the end of unconditional military aid to Israel](#)

Rabbi Brant Rosen, October 15, 2012

The undersigned members of the Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinical Council stand with our American Christian colleagues in [their recent call](#) to "make U.S. military aid to Israel contingent upon its government's compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies."

We are as troubled as our Christian colleagues by the human rights violations Israel commits against Palestinian civilians, many of which involve the misuse of U.S. – supplied weapons. It is

altogether appropriate – and in fact essential – for Congress to ensure that Israel is not in violation of any U.S. laws or policies that regulate the use of U.S. supplied weapons.

The U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act specifically 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.” The Christian leaders’ letter points out, in fact, that the most recent [2011 State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices](#) covering Israel and the Occupied Territories detailed widespread Israeli human rights violations committed against Palestinian civilians, many of which involve the misuse of U.S.-supplied weapons such as tear gas.

It is certainly not unreasonable to insist that foreign assistance be contingent on compliance with U.S. laws and policies. Mideast analyst [M.J. Rosenberg has rightly pointed out](#) that during this current economic downturn, Congress has been scrutinizing all domestic assistance programs – including Social Security and food stamps – to ensure that they are being carried out legally in compliance with stated U.S. policy. Why should U.S. military aid to Israel be exempt from the same kind of scrutiny?

While some might feel that requiring assistance to be contingent with compliance would compromise Israel’s security, we believe the exactly the opposite is true. As Israel’s primary ally, the U.S. alone is in a place 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.

As Jews we acknowledge that the signers of the letter, and the churches they represent, have ancient and continuing ties to the land of Israel just as we do, and that their concerns for the safety and dignity of Christians in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories is as compelling as our concern for the safety and dignity of Jews there.

We are troubled that several Jewish organizations have cynically attacked this faithful and sensitive call – and we are deeply dismayed that the [Anti-Defamation League has gone so far as to pull out of a scheduled Jewish-Christian dialogue](#) in protest. We believe that actions such as these run directly counter to the spirit and mission of interfaith dialogue. True dialogue occurs not simply on the areas where both parties find agreement, but in precisely those places where there is disagreement and divergence of opinion. We call on all of our Jewish colleagues to remain at the table and engage our Christian colleagues on this painful issue that is of such deep concern to both our communities.

We express our full support for the spirit and content of this statement and likewise call upon U.S. citizens to urge their representatives to end unconditional military aid to Israel.

[\*Read the letter with signatures on Rabbi Rosen's website.\*](#)



## 7) Shut up about the Jews already

Eric Alterman, *The Nation*, October 22, 2012

Few issues are as crucial to the future of the human race as the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and few are as misunderstood in American politics. The reasons, naturally, are complex; so too, God knows, is the conflict itself. But much of the confusion arises from the combined ability of professional Jewish organizations, right-wing think tanks and media-based neoconservative pundits to misrepresent both the views and the influence of American Jews and to enforce their misrepresentations on the mainstream media via political intimidation.

To unravel the confusion, one first has to get a few facts straight. Self-identifying American Jews constitute just 1.7 percent of the voting population, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. This compares with 51.3 percent Protestant, 23.9 percent Roman Catholic and 16.1 percent “no religion.” Of the tiny percentage of American voters who are Jewish, roughly seven percent put Israel at the top of their list of political concerns. So, overall, seven percent of 1.7 percent—or pretty close to zero percent—say they vote on the basis of policies related to Israel. And of this minuscule percentage, many are hawkish, but many others are dovish, and still others are in between or change their minds depending on the situation.

Jews, you may have heard, have been known on occasion to disagree with one another, and even with themselves. But more than 80 percent of Jews polled share the view that the United States should play “an active role in helping the parties to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict”—roughly the same number who agree that a “two-state solution is necessary to strengthen Israeli security.”

And yet it’s nearly impossible to find a story in a mainstream media outlet that reflects this reality. Almost without exception, one reads of the danger to Obama of losing Jewish voters, with the reason being their alleged unhappiness with his (equally alleged) lack of sympathy for Israel. But Obama is not losing Jewish voters to Mitt Romney: they continue to support him, in every significant poll, at the rate of approximately 70 percent. And if they didn’t, it wouldn’t be because of Israel, and it wouldn’t matter anyway. The numbers are just too tiny.

The reason these facts, while available to all, remain so difficult to discern in our political coverage is that while Jews remain liberal and dovish—even on Israel—many Jewish funders and neoconservative pundits do not. Although these people are deeply out of step with the vast majority of Jews, they wish to create a media narrative that suggests the opposite. They are aided in this task by the largely conservative leaders of “major” Jewish organizations, who work with these same funders ... who also happen to pay their extremely generous salaries. ... The fact that the policies these organizations push and the politicians they support and nurture represent views antithetical to those of the very same people they profess to speak for might be a problem in, say, an Israeli kibbutz or a Park Slope food co-op. In the world of professional Jewish organizations, however, it barely rises to the level of an inconvenience. ...

[Read the entire piece on the Nation's website.](#)