

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS, AND RELATED PROGRAMS

**FY22 Public Witness Written Testimony - Jeremy Ben-Ami, President, J Street**  
June 11, 2021

Thank you Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Member Rogers and the other members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to offer the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement's views on US assistance for Fiscal Year 2022 to our ally Israel, the Palestinian people and to other partners around the world. We greatly appreciate how this committee has worked together for many years on a bipartisan basis to ensure robust appropriations in each of these areas.

**Meeting Aid Commitments to Israel Fully and Appropriately**

Maintaining a strong, vibrant US-Israel relationship based on shared values and goals is a core American interest. US support for Israel as a democracy and a national home for the Jewish people is an historic and crucial commitment. An enduring relationship between the United States and Israel promotes common interests in the security, economic and strategic spheres.

American assistance to Israel, including maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge, remains an important anchor for that relationship, as well as to ensuring that Israelis have confidence and assurance to take steps to preserve the possibility of a negotiated two-state resolution to the conflict that will necessarily involve concessions regarding land by both sides. J Street strongly urges the subcommittee to appropriate \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing security assistance for Israel in Fiscal Year 2022 in accordance with the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding agreed to under President Barack Obama - the biggest pledge of US military assistance made to any country in our nation's history.

At the same time, we believe that this US security aid must be used only to address to Israel's genuine defense needs as contemplated by the MOU, and not to help implement or sustain illegal, unilateral actions which undermine Israel's security, trample on Palestinian rights and contravene longstanding US interests and values. In particular, American taxpayers must not foot the bill for annexation in the West Bank - whether *de jure* or *de facto*.

That requires clear, specific restrictions on the use of our assistance to ensure that US-sourced military equipment — including equipment bought with our aid — cannot be diverted by the Israeli government to support acts of creeping annexation or violations of Palestinian rights. Restricting US aid to use only for specific purposes is responsible, standard practice. Such use

restrictions are very different than cutting aid (i.e., ending or reducing it outright) or conditioning it (i.e., withholding aid until certain conditions are met).

At a minimum, Congress should require greater transparency about how equipment bought with US aid is actually used. US security aid to other recipient countries is currently subject to much more stringent accounting and approval measures than aid to Israel. In the interest of transparency and accountability, it is appropriate to stop applying a double standard and ensure Congress and American taxpayers have due visibility into how US aid is used by Israel, as well.

### **US Bilateral Assistance Benefitting the Palestinian People and UNRWA Funding**

Just as ensuring the security of Israel is a vital American interest, so is restoring and maintaining robust US assistance benefiting the Palestinian people through both bilateral aid and funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, also known as UNRWA. J Street therefore urges you to recommend in Fiscal Year 2022 appropriations that not less than \$360 million from the Migration and Refugee Account be made available to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and that not less than \$225 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) be made available for assistance to the West Bank and Gaza.

Subject to stringent statutory limitations and congressional and executive oversight, US assistance benefiting Palestinians has served as an essential component of efforts by nearly every previous administration of both parties to enhance security and quality of life for both Palestinians and Israelis, as well as the security of the entire region. This is especially true when it comes to the region-wide operations of UNRWA, to which the United States has, until the Trump administration, typically provided around a quarter of the agency's operating budget.

UNRWA provides vital humanitarian and development services to Palestinian refugees, including but not limited to primary and vocational education, health care and emergency relief. UNRWA operates not just within the West Bank and Gaza, but in neighboring countries which rely upon its efforts to assist millions of Palestinians whom they would otherwise be unable to adequately provide for. Recipients of UNRWA services include more than two million Palestinian refugees living in Israel's strategic ally Jordan, and nearly half a million Palestinian refugees impacted by the horrific conflict in Syria. We believe that US funding to UNRWA should be provided in accordance with all applicable US laws and with ongoing careful examination of its policies, as well as due consideration of further reforms to ensure its curriculum and practices meet acceptable standards for non-discrimination and tolerance.

The direct relationship between US assistance to Palestinians and the security and stability of Israel and its neighbors is undeniable, but far from the only reason Congresses and

administrations have consistently provided such aid. As the work of this subcommittee has shown time and again, in addition to the strategic necessity for generous US assistance to vulnerable populations, there is a clear moral imperative to do what we prudently can as a great country to help others in need. US assistance to Palestinians is, in addition to its purely practical benefits, a means of recognizing their dignity and standing as individuals and as a people. It is an acknowledgment that their suffering is real, and a reiteration of our commitment to help end the conflict at the root of it. Even when Congress decides to leverage US aid in order to challenge troubling policies of the Palestinian leadership, as was the case in consideration and passage of the Taylor Force Act, lawmakers were also careful to maintain key elements of assistance, including humanitarian aid, essential medical programs and people-to-people projects.

We want to see this bipartisan commitment continue. Yet, despite this aid being vital to Palestinian well-being, Israeli security and prospects for peace, we continue to see unconstructive and often politicized efforts to prevent this assistance from reaching the Palestinian people. Mirroring the disastrous policies of the previous administration, some continue to oppose important and urgently necessary moves by the Biden administration to disburse Palestinian aid already appropriated by Congress. The delay in these funds cruelly punishes Palestinian civilians and marginalizes and undercuts Palestinian leadership that not only recognizes Israel's right to exist, but cooperates with our ally to prevent acts of terrorism by Hamas and other malicious actors.

Israel's own security establishment has repeatedly warned that cuts to US Palestinian aid undermine Israeli security, in particular by exacerbating Gaza's humanitarian crisis and further destabilizing the situation in the West Bank — increasing the prospects for violence and unrest. As former Israel Defense Forces spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Peter Lerner wrote of the Trump-era cuts to this aid - prophetically, in light of last months' violence - “[I]n our region, poverty has been a breeding ground for radical recruitment, violence, and terrorism... hardballing the Palestinian into submission is likely to blow up on Israel's doorstep.”

I want to thank Chairwoman Lee and Representatives Meng, Price, Frankel, Torres, Espaillat and Wexton of this subcommittee for joining Congressman Jamie Raskin in sending a letter earlier this month signed by 144 lawmakers to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Jim Risch urging him to release his hold on some of the critical Palestinian aid already appropriated by Congress. As the letter aptly states, disbursing such aid is especially urgent as “Gaza is experiencing a humanitarian catastrophe. Buildings lie in rubble. Access to clean water and electricity is sporadic or nonexistent. Food insecurity is spreading. COVID-19 is running rampant and thousands of people have been displaced and rendered homeless. The magnitude of the crisis is staggering.”

As the letter rightly concludes, “Rendering humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian population serves American values as well as our diplomatic and security interests.” J Street urges this subcommittee to continue its longstanding practice of supporting these values and interests with robust aid benefitting the Palestinian people.

### **People-to-People and Peacebuilding Programs in Israel and the Palestinian Territories**

J Street has long supported people-to-people peacebuilding programs, which play an important role in building connections, understanding, and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. We have had the pleasure to work closely with members of this subcommittee as well as a number of incredible organizations in Israel and the Palesitnian Territories to help secure increased US funding for these programs.

That is why we were so delighted to support the passage and enactment of the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, bipartisan legislation championed by and named in honor of the former Chair of this and the full appropriations committee, co-led by Congressman Fortenberry and cosponsored by many other members of this committee. We urge the committee to further the critical progress made by this historic legislation by providing funding of at least \$50 million for programs in the Act, with at least \$35 million of this amount provided for the new People-to-People Partnership for Peace Fund at USAID.

### **Foreign Assistance & Diplomacy Worldwide**

The same security, strategic and moral considerations informing our support for generous US assistance to Israel and the Palestinian people hold true when it comes to US aid and diplomacy around the world. J Street therefore urges the subcommittee to ensure robust overall funding for global US assistance, State Department personnel and operations, financial commitments to multilateral organizations and related programs supporting peace and diplomacy.

US funding for a strong Foreign Service, multilateral institutions, humanitarian assistance and cultural exchange programs worldwide significantly impact the ability of the United States to work in concert with our allies and the international community on matters of immense strategic importance that affect every American.

Diplomacy has the ability to deliver significant national security payoffs to the United States at a fraction of the cost of military action and without any of the attendant human suffering. As Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, has stated: “It is my firm belief that diplomatic programs, as part of a coordinated strategy, will save money by reducing the

likelihood of active military conflict involving U.S. forces. The more significant the cuts, the longer military operations will take and the more and more lives are at risk.”

An overwhelming consensus of pro-Israel organizations – including J Street – have long argued for robust US assistance worldwide, and importantly urged that Israel not be treated as a special case, exempted from cuts to foreign aid while programs affecting the rest of the world are put under increasing strain. We urge the subcommittee to continue expanding generous US assistance to other partners and peoples in need, just as it has continued to increase aid to Israel.

J Street also believes robust US involvement in and funding of the United Nations and its specialized agencies is in both US and Israeli interests. While we remain very concerned about the continuing bias against Israel that sometimes surfaces in international fora, American disengagement from certain UN organs - whether by choice under the previous administration or by operation of US law - has not only failed to prevent instances of imbalanced focus on Israel, but removed the powerful voice of Israel’s strongest ally from the room.

Accordingly, we believe that US law currently operating to restrict US contributions to UNESCO – and which would sweep in any other United Nations specialized agency that grants Palestinians full membership status in the future – should be amended. American disengagement from UNESCO is just the first of many potential costly retreats this terrible law may force the United States to make from UN-affiliated agencies – including the World Intellectual Property Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency – of vital importance to America’s economy and security.

As this committee considers options for addressing this issue, we urge you to challenge familiar but unsound arguments that the Palestinians seeking to participate in international organizations is an attempt to delegitimize Israel, avoid other venues for diplomacy, or somehow represents a form of attack. Seeking membership or other status in multilateral fora is a peaceful, non-violent exercise of their rights as a people that affirms international law – in stark contrast to the actions of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other terror groups. We urge Congress not to punish the PLO or the Palestinian Authority for its approaches to such fora, and in fact believe the US government should welcome such moves as bolstering international support for a two-state outcome while helpfully obligating Palestinian leaders to adhere to the responsibilities of statehood in areas such as security, governance and human rights. At a time when we should be seeking to encourage and deepen diplomacy, retaliation against the Palestinians for lawful, non-violent moves harms the prospects for progress and only serves to isolate the United States.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our views on these critical appropriations. I look forward to answering any questions or requests for information that you may have.