

Jewish and Christian groups at impasse over U.S. aid to Israel

Lauren Markoe Religion News Service | Oct. 18, 2012

An established interfaith group is in danger of disintegrating as major American Jewish groups and prominent mainline Protestant churches differ over U.S. aid for Israel -- a long-standing argument that the group was established, in part, to diffuse.

Leaders of Reform and Conservative Judaism, the American Jewish Committee, and other Jewish groups sent a letter Wednesday (Oct. 17) to their Christian counterparts on the Christian-Jewish Roundtable saying they would not be attending a long-planned Oct. 22-23 meeting.

At issue is an Oct. 8 letter that many Christian leaders -- from the National Council of Churches, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and other denominations -- sent to Congress, asking that U.S. aid to Israel be re-evaluated in light of the Jewish state's alleged human rights violations.

Israel has long been the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign assistance, almost all of which is military aid and contracts, according to the Congressional Research Service.

"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," the letter from the Christian leaders read, criticizing Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

"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."

The Jewish groups withdrew from the planned October meeting and are now asking the Christian members of the roundtable for a different meeting: to discuss the letter and "reset the framework for ongoing dialogue."

"There is no question in our minds that this is an unbalanced demonization of Israel completely lacking in context," said Rabbi Noam Marans, the interfaith director at the American Jewish Committee.

"It pretends that Palestinian human rights violations do not exist, but above all, our concern is that when the world currently is focused on the Iranian nuclear threat, Christian leaders have chosen to mount another political attack on Israel," Marans said.

Marans said he isn't sure whether the eight-year-old roundtable will survive the congressional letter flap. "The current conversation with some Christian leaders is unacceptable and needs to change," he said.

Representatives from the NCC, Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Methodist Church did not respond immediately to requests for comment.

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