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November 9, 2021

Antony J. Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 "C" Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

I write to express my grave concern over the October 22<sup>nd</sup> decision of Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz to designate six prominent Palestinian human rights and civil society groups as "terrorist organizations." If the order is left in place, it will allow the Israeli government to close these organizations' offices, seize their assets, and arrest and jail their staff.

Action against these NGOs escalated on Sunday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, when the chief of the Israeli army's Central Command, who oversees activity in the West Bank, also signed an order declaring the six Palestinian NGOs terror groups, thereby extending Defense Minister Benny Gantz's declaration to the West Bank and seriously hindering the groups' ability to operate. Prior to Sunday's action, the groups could still legally work in the West Bank, where they were registered and active, regardless of Israel designating them terrorist organizations. The new order means that the Israeli army can act against these organizations immediately, arrest their employees on suspicion of membership in a terror group, raid their offices and confiscate equipment where they operate in the West Bank. The named organizations include Defense for Children International – Palestine, Al-Haq, Addameer, Bisan, the Union of Agricultural Working Committees, and the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees.

I welcomed the State Department's expressed concern about Israel's October 22<sup>nd</sup> decision and its request for clarification on these designations from the Israeli government. Since the initial announcement, press reports by Israeli and international media have appeared regarding the lack of proof to justify the terror label for these Palestinian groups. **I respectfully ask you to share with me the steps taken by the State Department to review these designations and I urge you to take up the matter directly with the Government of Israel and ask that it reverse this decision.** Given Sunday's declaration to extend the designation to the NGOs' West Bank operations, it is even more urgent that the United States respond.

As you know, many of these human rights organizations work closely with the international community to develop Palestinian civil society, document human rights violations, and defend Palestinians in Israeli courts. The Israeli government has targeted these organizations for decades because of their human rights activism, arresting and detaining staff, raiding their offices, targeting them for surveillance by state intelligence agencies, and making similar accusations to these organizations' donors. According to recent media reports, intelligence surveillance included using Pegasus spyware to hack their personal phones.

Past Israeli accusations that these groups are linked to terrorist groups have been investigated and rejected by the United Nations, the European Union, and U.S. officials. The U.N., the EU, and international donors have again denounced this current and most serious decision and refused to end their funding for these NGOs. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, each of which has also been targeted by the Israeli government for their human rights reporting on Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, strongly condemned the designations.

On October 26<sup>th</sup>, the bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, which I co-chair, held a hearing, *Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights: Striking the Right Balance*. The hearing took a close look at how counter-terrorism laws are abused to target and silence human rights defenders, the press, civil society, academics, and critics of national policy. I asked one of the witnesses, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, specifically about the decision by the Israeli government to designate these six Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations as terrorist groups. Her answer described how counter-terrorism laws are used to stigmatize, criminalize, and repress the work of civil society organizations that provide evidence contrary to a government's own narrative. She noted that the six Palestinian organizations targeted by the Israeli government are internationally respected and recognized for their work. I am happy to share with you the video clip of my question and her response (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/19ubxqsoLysvI2Eol7LaNSOfsagEA6xIs/view?usp=sharing>).

Mr. Secretary, it is not enough to have expressed an initial leeriness regarding Israel's decision to designate these six organizations as terrorist groups. It is now time to firmly and unambiguously denounce the actions taken and urge the Israeli government to reverse its decisions.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent human rights request. I am available to talk with you directly about my concerns and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James P. McGovern". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress