

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

We write to request that you urgently pursue all diplomatic tools at your disposal to encourage the appropriate Israeli authorities to reconsider the charges against Issa Amro, a community leader, nonviolent activist and previous recipient of the United Nations' "Human Rights Defender of the Year in Palestine" award. He faces charges described by Amnesty International as "baseless" and "politically motivated" within Israel's military court system, which could result in years of imprisonment.¹ United Nations human rights experts expressed concern that Mr. Amro is "being unfairly targeted due to his legitimate and peaceful human rights work."²

Mr. Amro founded a Hebron-based advocacy group that counsels Palestinian youth on nonviolent means of opposing Israeli settlement activities. President Trump himself recognizes illegal settlement activity is unhelpful to achieving a lasting peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. In 2011, Mr. Amro was a guest of the State Department as part of its International Visitor Leadership Program. In 2016, the State Department highlighted Mr. Amro's military court case in its Human Rights Report among its main concerns regarding freedom of peaceful assembly in Israel and the Occupied Territories.³ A representative of the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv attended Mr. Amro's court hearing in November of last year alongside representatives of other concerned governments such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain.

We fear that Israeli military courts deliberating over Mr. Amro's charges will be unlikely to render a fair and impartial verdict given that the conviction rate within that system is 99.74 percent.⁴ Indeed, among the 18 charges that Israeli authorities allege against Mr. Amro, several—such as "participating in a march without a permit"—are not internationally recognizable criminal offenses. Amnesty International noted that a charge of assault supposedly committed by Mr. Amro in March 2013 would have been physically impossible, as Amro had already been arrested and video evidence clearly shows another man responsible for the incident. Unfortunately, such inconsistencies do not tend to deter legal action within this forum: as respected Israeli human rights group B'tselem has observed of Israel's military courts, "the threshold for meeting the requirement of prima facie evidence is so low that it poses no obstacle to the prosecution."⁵

Peaceful protest has been widely recognized as a fundamental right both in the United States and abroad. Although we strongly support Israel's right and, indeed, obligation to ensure the security of its citizens, we also support the right of Palestinians to peacefully politically organize and demonstrate. We ask that you take any and all measures to urge Israeli authorities to reconsider the charges against Mr. Amro, a principled and internationally recognized nonviolent human rights advocate.

We believe that nonviolent means of political engagement should be encouraged rather than suppressed, and that the persecution and imprisonment of peaceful activists such as

Mr. Amro only threatens the safety and human rights of both Palestinians and Israelis. As the United States seeks to assist in brokering a peace agreement between both sides, we should encourage our steadfast ally in the region to uphold our shared values and respect activists like Issa Amro: freedom of expression must be a foundation for a just and lasting peace for the Israeli and Palestinian people.

Sincerely

[Members of Congress]

1 Amnesty International, Israel/OPT: Drop baseless charges against Palestinian human rights defender,” 11/22/16. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/israel-opt-drop-baseless-charges-against-palestinian-human-rights-defender/>

2 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, “Human rights defenders under growing legal pressure in the OPT – UN rights experts,” 12/16/16. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21041>

3 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “2016 Human Rights Reports: Israel and The Occupied Territories,” 3/17. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2016/nea/265502.htm>

4 Chaim Levinson, “Nearly 100% of All Military Court Cases in West Bank End in Conviction, Haaretz Learns,” Haaretz, 11/29/11. <http://www.haaretz.com/nearly-100-of-all-military-court-cases-in-west-bank-end-in-conviction-haaretz-learns-1.398369>

5 B’Tselem, “Presumed Guilty: Remand in Custody by Military Courts in the West Bank,” 6/15. http://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/201506_presumed_guilty