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July 10, 2017

The Honorable Bob Corker, Chairman
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Benjamin Cardin, Ranking Member
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Corker and Ranking Member Cardin,

As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and President/CEO of Catholic Relief Services (CRS), we support the purpose, but are concerned about the unintended consequences, of S. 474, a bill to condition assistance to the West Bank and Gaza on steps by the Palestinian Authority to end violence and terrorism against Israeli citizens. We fear S. 474 could dramatically curtail vital assistance and exacerbate tensions, and urge that it be amended to exempt important humanitarian work.

The goal of the legislation is laudable – to end violence and terrorism. For decades, USCCB and CRS have condemned acts of terrorism and violence, and have called for a two-state solution to the conflict: a secure and recognized Israel living in peace with a viable and independent Palestine.

U.S. assistance to the West Bank and Gaza provides critically needed humanitarian and development aid that reduces desperation, undercuts the lure of extremism, and builds capacity for peace. Much of it is administered by U.S. based non-governmental agencies. CRS uses U.S. government funds, in conjunction with private donations, to strengthen the economic, civic and environmental foundations for a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel, and to respond to humanitarian crises.

In partnership with USAID, CRS is implementing Envision Gaza 2020, a five-year \$50 million project to build resilience and self-reliance in vulnerable populations through targeted emergency assistance and the expansion of employment opportunities. Such programs are in the best interests of both Israelis and Palestinians who yearn for peace. Reducing desperation and increasing opportunities, especially for young adults, improves lives and strengthens security. Catholic bishops from Europe, Canada, South Africa and the United States declared in January of this year, “We all have a responsibility to provide assistance for the people of Gaza, who continue to live amid a man-made humanitarian catastrophe.”

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns with S. 474 as currently drafted. Our staffs would welcome the opportunity to discuss our shared concerns for preventing terrorism and violence while meeting the legitimate needs of innocent Palestinian civilians.

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces
Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace

Sean Callahan
President/CEO
Catholic Relief Services