

## **HB 476: Testimony before Ohio House Committee on Government Accountability and Oversight by Douglas Kerr, on May 3, 2016**

My name is Douglas Kerr. I reside in Cleveland, where I have lived for 50 years. I am a retired physician, working now for peace in Israel and Palestine. I am testifying in opposition to HB 476. I am going to speak about my view that this bill is in fact anti-Israel, because it supports the continued occupation of the Palestinian territories. First, I want to tell you my personal story about how I came to this point of view.

I was born in Beirut, Lebanon before WWII of American parents who were on the faculty of the American University of Beirut. My mother was born in Cincinnati. Her nephew Robert Reckman served for 15 years as a member of the Ohio House of Representatives and was elected majority leader. My parents met in Turkey after WWI while working to help Armenian orphans escape from the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which 1.5 million Armenians were killed. This preceded the Holocaust and was considered by the Nazis as a model for what they later did in even greater numbers.

In 1940, my family suddenly found themselves in enemy territory after the Nazi invasion of France and as American refugees fled south to Palestine and to America. We returned to Lebanon after the war by way of Haifa. In 1948, I witnessed the Palestinian refugees streaming north from what is known by most Israelis as the War of Independence and by Palestinians as the Nakba (or disaster). In 1967, Israel occupied all the Palestinian Territories and caused another wave of Palestinian refugees.

In 1984, my older brother, Malcolm Kerr, who became President of the American University of Beirut, was assassinated in his office by professional terrorists under directives from the revolutionary government of Iran. Malcolm was a Middle Eastern professor of political science in California and accepted this position during the Lebanese civil war and Israeli invasion of Lebanon. He was the most prominent accessible American civilian in Lebanon at that time.

His assassination changed our lives. My wife and I decided to work for peace in the Middle East. Since then, I have worked primarily with Interfaith Peace Builders, who I am representing today, as well as Cleveland Peace Action, Churches for Middle East Peace, the United Methodist Kairos Response, and Jewish Voice for Peace. I am not Jewish, but my daughter-in-law, who has lived in Israel and other members of my family are Jewish. We have visited Israel and the Palestinian occupied territories 5 times in the past 10 years, most recently two years ago just after the collapse of the US supported peace negotiations.

For many years, I supported the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine as the most feasible and just outcome of the current situation. This remains the official position of the US government over some 50 years. But the prospects for two states have greatly diminished, particularly in recent years. Israel and the occupied territories have virtually

become one state under Israeli military occupation. The primary reason for this is the intent of Israeli government to control the West Bank and continue to build settlements, a separation barrier, and infrastructure, which fragment and diminish Palestinian land to a degree that makes expectation for a future Palestinian state virtually hopeless. The military occupation is necessary for this to happen.

The primary goal of all various forms of Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions is to end the Israeli occupation. BDS is a non-violent movement initiated and supported by most segments of Palestinian society, including the Christian Kairos Response, and is a call for international support to put pressure on Israeli government to change its policies. It is not anti-semitic or anti- any religious or ethnic group. It is even supported in part by some Israelis (eg: "Boycott from Within").

I agree with the written testimony of Debra Hirshberg, a Jewish Ohio resident, supporter of Israel, and opponent of HB 476, that this bill has an agenda to gain support for the settlement project and permanent status of the occupation. Israeli citizens and American Jewish supporters of Israel are divided in their support of the occupation and settlements.

In my opinion, Israel, as the dominant force has the power to determine its own future, and has to make realistic choices about the current non-sustainable situation. Do they want to become a predominantly Jewish democratic state, living in peace with its neighbors? The Palestinian authority and the Arab League have long accepted this alternative. Do they want to expand the state of Israel to include all of the land from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, including a majority of Palestinians who should have equivalent human and civil rights? Or do they want to continue the current non-sustainable situation with ongoing unjust suppression of the Palestinian population, the prospect of already increased violence, and international rejection, which has been called "Fortress Israel"?

The state of Ohio has no responsibility for participating in this choice for Israelis and Palestinians. HB 476 fails to address the complexity of these controversial social and political choices, and could be characterized as unwise and both anti-Israel and anti-Palestinian by many Ohio citizens.

I understand that the sponsors of this bill are trying to support friends in the current Israeli government, but at times, true friends should not enable what is a long-term self-destructive course of behavior.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present this testimony.