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US Service Members to Congress: ‘Stop Genocide’

As Israel continues its genocide against the Palestinians, the number of active-duty U.S. conscientious objectors is increasing, writes Marjorie Cohn.



Protesters form “the people’s red line” around the White House to demand end of Gaza genocide on June 12, 2024. (Diane Krauthamer, Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

On June 4, a coalition of active-duty service members, veterans and G.I. rights groups launched a campaign called Appeal for Redress V2 to encourage military personnel to tell Congress to stop funding genocide in Gaza.

Israel’s genocidal operation, now in its ninth month, has killed more than 37,000 Palestinians and wounded nearly 85,000.

The campaign is sponsored by Veterans For Peace (VFP), the Military Law Task Force of the National Lawyers Guild, About Face: Veterans Against the War and the Center on Conscience & War. It is modeled after the 2006 Appeal for Redress issued during the occupation of Iraq.

During that campaign, almost 3,000 active-duty, Reserve and Guard personnel sent protected communications to their members of Congress urging an end to the wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Appeal for Redress V2 was formulated to help G.I.s directly tell their representatives that they oppose U.S. support for Israel's genocide in Gaza.

"We will not stand by silently while genocide unfolds," Senior Airman Juan Bettancourt, an active-duty member of the U.S. Air Force, stated at a June 4 press conference announcing the campaign. "We refuse to be complicit" in the "unspeakable carnage," said Bettancourt, who is seeking separation from the U.S. military as a conscientious objector.

Kathleen Gilberd, executive director of the Military Law Task Force of the National Lawyers Guild and my coauthor for Rules of Disengagement: The Politics and Honor of Military Dissent, told *Truthout* there has been an increase in the number of applications for conscientious objection (CO) and other types of honorable discharge from the military.

"Many military personnel have serious objections to the U.S. support for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians," Gilberd said.

According to a June 3 statement from Bill Galvin, counseling director at the Center on Conscience and War, "Almost all of [the CO applicants] cite the carnage in Gaza as something that their conscience would not allow them to ignore. Some have expressed feeling complicit in the violence."

Gilberd noted the significance of these protests, saying: "As in the Vietnam War, Iraq War and Afghanistan War, G.I. resistance is a powerful force for peace. The National Lawyers Guild's Military Law Task Force and our allies stand in support of these military dissenters and resisters."

Senior Airman Larry Hebert, who recently conducted a hunger strike in front of the White House in solidarity with the people of Gaza, noted at the press conference that, "Genocide didn't start on October 7." He added: "It's been going on for 76 years. It's time for it to come to an end."

[See: Active-Duty US Airman Refuses to Eat While Gaza Starves]

Hebert was referring to the 1947-48 Nakba, when 750,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from their land in the process of creating the state of Israel. Hebert said the groups

sponsoring the Appeal for Redress are calling for a ceasefire, an end to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory and protection of the human rights of Palestinians and their right to self-determination.



Hebert stands outside of the White House with a sign explaining his hunger strike. (Veterans for Peace)

“I have been taught that honor and integrity are pivotal to being a soldier,” Army Sergeant Johnson said in the June 3 press release. “It hurts me to my core that the same country that instilled these values in me would proudly support a genocide.”

He added, “It is our duty as service members to uphold Geneva Conventions and international law. That is why I am pleading for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and for humanitarian aid to be distributed throughout the entire Gaza Strip.”

Will Hopkins, former executive director of Veterans For Peace, said at the press conference it was “absolutely unconscionable” that U.S. money has been used to kill more than 14,000 children in Gaza.

“The Appeal for Redress, initiated by military personnel, provides an important, protected way for service members to tell their members of Congress that they oppose the U.S.’s funding and support of Israel’s genocide in Gaza,” Gilbert told *Truthout*. “It is literally the tip of an iceberg of military dissent about the war and the U.S.’s role.” She cited the significance of individual, small, silent protests — in addition to bold and public acts of refusal.

Indeed, some of the speakers at the press conference honored the memory of Aaron Bushnell, an active-duty member of the U.S. Air Force who set himself on fire on Feb. 25 outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. to protest Israel’s genocide and U.S. complicity in it.

He live-streamed the act, stating, “I will no longer be complicit in genocide” before he lit himself on fire, repeatedly yelling “Free Palestine!” as the flames engulfed him.



Remembering Aaron Bushnell sign at a Pro-Palestine demonstration on April 21, 2024, in Marseille, France. (AN2303, Wikimedia Commons, CC0)

Major Harrison Mann, a Jewish officer who worked for the Defense Intelligence Agency, recently resigned from the U.S. Army over what he called the United States’ “nearly unqualified support for the government of Israel,” which he says has “enabled and empowered the killing and starvation of tens of thousands of innocent Palestinians.”

Mann went public with his resignation in May after the State Department issued a report concluding it was “reasonable to assess” that Israel had used U.S. weapons in ways “inconsistent” with international law. Shortly after that report was published, the Biden administration decided to send Israel \$1 billion more in weapons and ammunition.

The Appeal for Redress

“We know many young people join the military out of necessity to get their needs met. But they are not obligated to contribute to genocide and unjust, unlawful wars that go against their conscience,” said Shiloh Emelein, U.S. Marine Corps veteran and operations director of About Face: Veterans Against the War, in the Appeal’s June 3 press release. “You do have rights, you do have options to object, and there’s a large community of post-9/11 veterans ready to welcome you.”

The Appeal for Redress employs the language of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which says,

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people

peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a *redress* of grievances.” (emphasis added).

“Though their rights are somewhat limited by military law, service members can still speak out about their beliefs and protest the travesty of this war,” Gilberd said. Department of Defense Instruction 1325.06 protects the First Amendment rights to free speech and protests. Moreover, a federal statute, 10 U.S. Code § 1034, says, “No person may restrict a member of the armed forces in communicating with a Member of Congress or an Inspector General.”

Bill Galvin said at the press conference that military personnel have the right to be politically engaged as long as they’re off duty, off base and out of uniform and make clear they’re not speaking on behalf of the military. They can’t show disrespect to the chain of command, including the commander-in-chief.

The Appeal for Redress warns service members that they could face illegal retaliation by their command; the letter could be used against them in a court-martial for civil disobedience; and they could be punished if they reveal classified information without permission, make threats, use “contemptuous words” about chain of command (including the president) or make “disloyal” statements.

This courageous effort by service members and veterans follows in a long tradition of dissent in the U.S. military, from Vietnam to Iraq to Afghanistan. The G.I. movement during the Vietnam War was integral to ending that war.

Weapons to Israel Violates U.S. Statutes



Following an Israeli airstrike, Palestinians transport the injured to the Indonesian Hospital in Jabalia, north of the Gaza Strip on Oct. 9, 2023. (Wafa in contract with a local company, APAimages)

These active-duty service members oppose U.S. funding of Israel's genocide both because it's immoral and because U.S. government employees are violating several federal statutes when weapons are shipped to Israel.

In a Feb. 11 letter to the U.S. State Department, Veterans For Peace urgently demanded that the State Department "immediately suspend ongoing shipments of military weapons and munitions" from the U.S. to Israel. VFP also demanded "that the consideration of approvals of prospective shipments be terminated immediately."

The VFP letter cited violations of the Foreign Assistance Act, Arms Export Control Act, Leahy Laws, Conventional Arms Transfer Policy, U.S. War Crimes Act and the Genocide Convention Implementation Act.

Those laws prohibit the transfer of weapons and munitions when there is credible evidence that the arms will be used by the country to commit, or aggravate the risk that the country will commit, war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law or international human rights law.

The letter quoted the sworn declaration of Josh Paul that was filed in the *Defense for Children International–Palestine v. Biden* lawsuit in which Palestinians sued President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin for failure to prevent genocide and complicity in genocide.

Paul served as director of congressional and public affairs in the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs before resigning in October 2023 in protest of U.S. arms transfers to Israel.

"I believe it is clear that the U.S. government is failing not only to execute the due diligence required under existing U.S. laws, but is actively creating and utilizing processes that help insulate Israel from accountability or sanctions in accordance with existing U.S. laws and policies," Paul wrote in his declaration in the lawsuit.

"The failure to execute meaningful due diligence or adequately apply existing U.S. laws permits the unfettered flow of military assistance to Israel forces with minimal oversight that leads to unnecessary civilian harm, gross violations of human rights, and impunity for violations of international law."

Meanwhile, on June 6, Israeli airstrikes on a United Nations-run school in central Gaza killed at least 40 people with explosive weapons provided by the United States. The school was sheltering about 6,000 displaced Palestinians, UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini said.

And on June 8, Israeli occupying forces, with U.S. support, killed at least 274 people, including dozens of children, and injured nearly 700 in a raid to rescue four hostages held by Hamas.

The same day, tens of thousands of people demonstrated at the White House in Washington, D.C., to protest the use of U.S. weapons and diplomatic support for Israel's genocide in Gaza. The organizers of the Appeal for Redress encourage civilian supporters to share the appeal with their networks so that it reaches a larger number of service members.

Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the National Lawyers Guild, and a member of the national advisory boards of Assange Defense and Veterans For Peace, and the bureau of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers. She is founding dean of the People's Academy of International Law and the U.S. representative to the continental advisory council of the Association of American Jurists. Her books include *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral and Geopolitical Issues*. She is co-host of "Law and Disorder" Radio.

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