

Palestinian American Congress
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July 20, 2012

Councilmember Steve Cohn
Sacramento City Council
City Hall
915 I Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Councilmember Cohn:

Thank you for your June 11 response to my March 12 letter raising concerns about the proposal that the City of Sacramento formalize a sister city relationship with Ashkelon, Israel.

In addition to copying your June 11 letter to the Mayor, the President of the Sister City Council and others, we understand that you have also sent it to your constituents as stating your position on this matter. Therefore we feel it is best to address your letter specifically paragraph-by-paragraph, which we have done below.

Your letter states: "... *I will not respond point by point to the allegations in your letter, though it appears to me that the letter contains numerous false or misleading statements.*"

We are not aware of any "*false or misleading*" statements in our letter. To the extent that you take issue with any statement, please identify the specific statement(s) so that we can address those and clear up any misunderstandings.

Your letter states: "*My main point is that the Sister Cities program is designed to allow people-to-people interaction despite our political or religious differences....The Sister Cities program is most certainly not a forum for political debate.*"

We agree that sister cities should allow "*people-to-people interaction*" without regard to "*political or religious differences.*" It is the "*people-to-people interaction*" of ordinary citizens, not of government entities or professional advocacy organizations, that is the very foundation of sister cities. This is reflected both by sister city visionary President Dwight Eisenhower and Sister Cities International. President Eisenhower saw sister cities as non-governmental efforts coming from "*the people themselves.*" The Sister Cities International website clearly states that Sister City projects are to be the efforts of "*a volunteer group of ordinary citizens*".

In direct contradiction to the sister city spirit expressed by President Eisenhower and Sister Cities International, Ashkelon is not being proposed by a "*volunteer group of ordinary citizens,*" but by a professional organization, the Jewish Federation's Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), which advocates on behalf of a foreign government, the state of Israel.

That this "*people-to-people interaction*" should be without regard to "*political or religious differences*" is also part of the directive of Sacramento City Council Resolution 2009-777 which explicitly states that a possible future sister city with an Israeli city would be "*inclusive of the citizens of Sacramento, including the diverse cultural and religious communities in the area.*"

By selectively excluding members of our community based on their religion, ethnicity, and historic national origin, Ashkelon repudiates this City Council Resolution. Palestinian-Sacramentans who hold Israeli issued IDs are not allowed to visit Ashkelon without a rarely-issued special permit. Based on their religion, ethnicity, and national origin, other Palestinian-Sacramentans would be typically subjected to extensive interrogation, including strip searches, and not infrequently refused entry if they attempted to visit Ashkelon.

Your letter states: *“As a long-time supporter of the Sister Cities program, I have participated in many Sister Cities programs ... Until now, I have never been asked to weigh in on the politics or human rights allegations involving any of these countries, although certainly there have been numerous human rights and other abuses alleged to occur in all of them in the not-too-distant past.”*

As discussed above, Ashkelon was proposed by a professional organization whose mission is to provide political advocacy on behalf of the state of Israel. The organization’s own website lists the city of Ashkelon as a tool for political advocacy. Therefore, to the extent you are asked to weigh in on illegal politics or human rights violations perpetrated by the state of Israel, it is the proposal to designate Ashkelon as a sister city itself that raised these questions.

Further, this is not an abstract issue confined to the Middle East. In fact, this issue has a direct bearing on Sacramento and its residents. As discussed above, if the City Council votes to designate Ashkelon as a sister city, the City Council will put the City of Sacramento in a position where it could be forced to discriminate against its own citizens on the basis of nationality, which would be a violation of the United States and California Constitutions.

The Sacramento City website expresses that sister cities *“promote peace through mutual respect, understanding and cooperation.”* This statement amplifies President Eisenhower’s assertion that sister cities are to allow people to *“give expression of their common desire for friendship, goodwill and cooperation for a better world for all.”* These terms used to define the sister city relationship, *“mutual respect,” “understanding,” “friendship,” “goodwill,”* and *“cooperation,”* are indisputably grounded in respect for human rights. Such terms also express the values of our own community, which we would want reflected in any sister city relationship.

Formalizing a sister city relationship with a city that discriminates, not only against its own citizens but also against our citizens, and one in which human rights and international law are violated, not just in the past but currently on a systematic daily and continual basis, does not reflect the values of our community and could be taken as an endorsement of such violations, an affront to all of our citizens.

Your letter states: *“In fact, I voted to approve Sacramento’s Bethlehem Sister City resolution based in large part on promises by its proponents that they would not play politics with this program, nor would they oppose a Sacramento Sister City in Israel. Yet the allegations you raise in your letter would seem to disqualify any city in Israel from becoming Sacramento’s sister city.”*

Although we were not involved in the Sacramento-Bethlehem sister city initiative, our understanding is that the JCRC and Congregation B’Nai Israel objected to allowing this volunteer, grassroots, non-partisan, sister city initiative to go forward unless its approval were conditioned on the approval of a yet-to-be named unrelated city – an obstacle not put in the way of any of Sacramento’s other sister cities as far as we know. In fact, it seems quite clear that the JCRC was the one *“playing politics.”* Supporting the approval of one independent sister city relationship conditioned on the future approval of a yet-to-be-developed relationship with another city based on what appear to be “political” concerns would certainly be making the Sister Cities program *“a forum for political debate”* (something to which you object in your letter).

Based on the issues you raised about the Sacramento-Bethlehem Sister City relationship, we did review Resolution 2009-776, which the City Council passed making Bethlehem a sister city. It contains no conditions about another sister city having to be adopted in order for Bethlehem to be approved.

We would be happy to support a sister city program with an Israeli city that promotes and practices equal rights, human rights, and compliance with international law and is open to all Sacramentans irrespective of their religion, ethnicity, and national origin, when such a city is proposed.

Your letter states: *“Neither I nor the Jewish community even considered raising the fact that heinous acts of terrorism and murder against innocent civilians have taken place in Israel, because the precise point of the Sister Cities program is to build connections with people in the hope that we can overcome our differences and foster peace and good will between people of decency around the world.”*

The “Jewish community” is a broad term which presumably includes all Jews; this is a diverse group which includes a range of views, not just yours or those of the JCRC. If by “the Jewish community” you are referring to the JCRC, you should qualify your statement by the disclosure that the JCRC is an unelected body that certainly represents the viewpoints of some Jews, but according to other members of the “Jewish community,” speaks only for a minority.

Regarding terrorism and murder of civilians, we in no way condone such actions that are violations of international law and human rights. As our letter mentions, we are calling for international law to be followed and human rights to be respected, not violated. We do not presume to speak on behalf of any entire religious community, but do note that all of the Abrahamic faiths, as well as many other faiths, hold human rights in highest regard.

Your letter states: *“... I hope you will reconsider your strategy of attacking the proposal to form a Sacramento Sister City in Israel. Whether you do or not, I will be happy to meet with you and your group before the item is scheduled for action by the Sacramento City Council, provided that you keep politics out of that meeting.”*

We are not “attacking” any proposal. We are raising reasonable concerns about formalizing a relationship with a sister city in which international law and human rights are flagrantly and systematically violated and one that would exclude members of our community based on their religion, ethnicity, and national origin.

Finally, we note that you are a City Council official, elected to office by the citizens of Sacramento to represent them. It is frankly unreasonable for you to place any pre-condition on your constituents before you will accept a meeting, particularly a demand that they “keep politics out of that meeting.”

We feel it is important to meet with you and discuss these concerns. Please contact us at your earliest convenience regarding such a meeting.

Sincerely,

Adeeb Alzanon
Palestinian American Congress

cc Mayor Kevin Johnson, Councilmember Angelique Ashby, Councilmember Sandy Sheedy, Councilmember Rob Fong, Councilmember Jay Schenirer, Councilmember Kevin McCarty, Councilmember Darrell Fong, Councilmember Bonnie Pannell, City Clerk Shirley Concolino, Lisa Serna, Starr Walton Hurley, Sacramento Sister City Council