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June 16, 2022

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin,

I write to voice my strong support for the ongoing mission of the Office of the United States Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority (USSC) in Jerusalem, and to urge that the position continue to be filled by a general and flag officer (GFO). While I understand the congressionally-mandated requirement to reduce the number of active duty GFOs by 2023 per the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act and appreciate the difficult choices as a result, the USSC is critical to Israeli security, U.S. interests in the Middle East, and stability in the region. I am concerned that downgrading the USSC's rank will weaken the USSC's mission and imperil U.S. security interests in the Middle East.

The USSC is the key vessel through which the United States facilitates security cooperation between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF), and is arguably the most successful counterterrorism initiative ever between Israel and the Palestinians. This security coordination aims to build trust between both sides by facilitating constructive institutional interaction between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, helping prevent terrorism against Israeli and Palestinian civilians, and combatting efforts by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to establish a foothold in the West Bank.

Following the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act in 2018, the Palestinian Authority declined to accept U.S. assistance for joint security cooperation programs overseen by the USSC. In 2019, Congress passed the Promoting Security and Justice for Victims of Terrorism Act, which enabled the restoration of this important security cooperation between American, Palestinian, and Israeli security forces. The passage of this law sent a clear message of our nation's commitment to the security and wellbeing of Palestinians and Israelis alike, and it is not in our interest to now undermine that message by demoting the USSC from GFO rank.

The credibility of the USSC depends in large measure on it being led by a GFO. It directly signals a high-level of U.S. support for this vital mission, and allows the USSC to interact on a peer-to-peer basis with Israeli and Palestinian generals and flag officers. It also establishes U.S. leadership in the coalition of the other seven NATO countries who are part of the mission – many of whom assign officers of a comparable rank as a U.S. GFO.

Congress intentionally sought to curtail the number of generals and flag officers in the FY2017 NDAA for the purpose of reducing waste at the Department of Defense and establishing a less bloated command structure. Since the USSC is housed at the Department of State, downgrading its rank will not fulfill the intent of Congress in implementing needed institutional reforms within the Pentagon. A RAND report commissioned by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness identified 132 GFO positions that did not meet the criteria for a required GFO, and the USSC was not among those positions. Downgrading positions like the USSC, which are assigned outside of DOD, would circumvent the intent of Congress to ensure proper leadership for our Armed Forces in the days ahead.

Should the USSC be less effective or be eliminated, it will have clear detrimental consequences for Israeli security, Palestinian safety and stability, and U.S. leadership in the Middle East. Accordingly, I respectfully request that the USSC not be included in any reduction in active duty GFOs.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

In God We Trust,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Lankford". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "L".

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James Lankford  
United States Senator