Washington, DC – On Wednesday, Reps. Steve Israel (D – NY) and Tom Cole (R – OK) led a bipartisan letter to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan urging the Prime Minister to stop another flotilla from departing Turkey for the Gaza Strip. Thirty-six Members of Congress signed the bipartisan letter, which asked the Turkish government to help find constructive alternatives for those wishing to provide aid to Gaza.

“Another so-called aid flotilla to Gaza is nothing but an attempt to provoke Israel. The Turkish government can help prevent violence by saying ‘no.’ We are urging Prime Minister Erdoğan to actively work to put a stop to this and join with Israel in providing real humanitarian assistance to Gaza,” said Rep. Israel.

"Turkey plays an important role in the Middle East, and its democratic leaders have a unique opportunity to prevent the turmoil that could result from allowing another Gaza flotilla to confront the Israeli security blockade,” said Rep. Cole. "During this volatile time in the region, I urge Prime Minister Erdoğan to work with Israel to avoid conflict and ensure legitimate aid is delivered without creating needless instability."
The full text of the letter is below.

May 11, 2011

His Excellency
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey
Ankara, Turkey

Mr. Prime Minister-

We write today to express our serious concern over reports that the so-called Free Gaza Movement and the IHH are planning to send another flotilla to Gaza in the coming weeks to provoke a confrontation with Israel. As members of the United States House of Representatives we ask you to help discourage these efforts and work with the Israeli government in a

productive way as it continues to allow legitimate aid, but not weapons, to enter Gaza.

The government of Israel has demonstrated a commitment to ensuring the basic needs of those living in the Gaza Strip are being met. Over the last year the capacity of existing land crossings has been increased; for example, capacity of the Kerem Shalom crossing has increased by 210 percent. More than 3600 supply trucks entered Gaza in the month of March alone, delivering tens of thousands of tons of goods, including food, clothing, medicine, and fuel. Over the past year, agricultural exports from the Gaza Strip have gradually increased and economic growth in Gaza reached 15 percent in 2010. These are all clear signs that Israeli policies are making a positive impact on the lives of the Palestinian people.

As you know, the government of Israel has a right and a responsibility to protect the Israeli people, and we all realize that the threat facing innocent Israelis by weapons smuggled into Gaza is real. In March, Israeli naval forces intercepted the Victoria, seizing more than 50 tons of weapons, including mortar shells and bullets, destined for Gaza militants. During a 3-day period in early April, approximately 130 rockets and mortars were fired at the civilian population of southern Israel by Hamas and other terrorist groups. In one case, an advanced precision-guided rocket that had been smuggled into Gaza was fired at and hit an Israeli school bus.

Israel, like any country in the world, must take whatever steps necessary to protect its citizens and that starts with preventing additional weapons from entering Gaza. If flotilla organizers carry out their confrontational plans, the Israelis will have little choice but to board the vessels and search for weapons. We fear violence could erupt just as it did last year.

We are seeking your active participation in finding a resolution that prevents violence. On April 21, Ambassador Susan Rice, the United States' representative to the United Nations, stated, "[t]he recent seizures of advanced weaponry underscore that Israel has clear security interests regarding cargo bound for Gaza", and she urged member states to "use every legal means at their disposal to discourage additional flotillas to Gaza". We echo those remarks and hope that your government can help work out a mechanism with Israel to allow legitimate humanitarian assistance to go to Gaza without provoking a needless confrontation. We are confident that Israel, as it has in the past, will continue to allow such aid to flow subject to appropriate security screening. By finding a constructive solution as an alternative to another flotilla, you have a unique opportunity to potentially save lives and be a force for stability at a particularly volatile time.

Sincerely,

STEVE ISRAEL
Member of Congress

TOM COLE
Member of Congress

HOWARD L. BERMAN
Member of Congress

HENRY A. WAXMAN
Member of Congress

JASON CHAFFETZ
Member of Congress

DENNY REHBERG
Member of Congress

GARY L. ACKERMAN
Member of Congress

HENRY CUELLAR
Member of Congress

SHELLEY BERKLEY
Member of Congress

MIKE QUIGLEY

Member of Congress

JOSEPH CROWLEY
Member of Congress

MIKE ROSS
Member of Congress

THEODORE E. DEUTCH
Member of Congress

GENE GREEN
Member of Congress

STEVE SCALISE
Member of Congress

RENEE L. ELLMERS
Member of Congress

RICHARD L. HANNA
Member of Congress

TED POE
Member of Congress

SUE WILKINS MYRICK
Member of Congress

HEATH SHULER
Member of Congress

LYNN JENKINS
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REID J. RIBBLE
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ADAM B. SCHIFF
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STEVEN R. ROTHMAN
Member of Congress

CAROLYN B. MALONEY
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JERROLD NADLER
Member of Congress

BILL PASCRELL, JR.
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SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO
Member of Congress

JANICE D. SCHAKOWSKY
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DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ
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CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY
Member of Congress

MIKE KELLY
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BILL JOHNSON
Member of Congress

DOUG LAMBORN
Member of Congress

JEAN SCHMIDT
Member of Congress

JOE BARTON
Member of Congress