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Honorary Chairman

February 3, 2014

The Hon. Jessica L. Wright
Acting Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness)

4000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-4000

Dear Under Secretary Wright,

I write to you on behalf of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, the nation's largest Orthodox Jewish umbrella organization representing nearly 1000 member synagogues across the United States. Among our highest advocacy priorities are policies that enable individuals and institutions to conduct their affairs in consonance with their religious tenets. We therefore noted with concern the revised instructions issued by the Department of Defense on "Accommodation of Religious Practices within the Military Services".

While we are encouraged by the Department's attempt to clarify guidelines regarding religious apparel in the military, the language in the instructions removes the "presumptive permission" previously extended to military service members. Section 508 of Public Law 100-180 states that "members of the Armed Forces may wear visible items of religious apparel... except under circumstances in which an item is not neat and conservative or its wearing shall interfere with the performance of the members' military duties."

Under the new rules, service members may not wear any religious apparel without explicit permission from their immediate commanders. In the event a commander denies permission, service members must then apply for a waiver from a higher-level officer. We believe this inappropriately infringes upon religious practice in the military and violates the intent of the government statute.

While the new instructions provide that "requests for religious accommodation will be resolved in a timely manner", this does not remove the problem of forcing military service members to proactively seek accommodation for unobtrusive clothing that is fundamental to their faith.

Furthermore, we take issue with the requirement that service members must repeat requests for accommodation with "every new assignment, transfer of duty

stations, or other significant change in circumstances.” If an article of clothing presents no risk to the health and safety of other individuals, we see no reason to burden religious service members in this way.

We do not believe this process presents the best way to provide religious accommodation for men and women in the military. Rather than improve the cohesion and unity of troops, forcing religious service members to engage in a potentially daunting and time-consuming process will make them stand out and could damage the sense of unity among service members.

The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America hereby requests further clarification of the religious accommodation rules that provides a more streamlined, efficient procedure for allowing service members to wear neat and conservative religious apparel, and in a manner consistent with a presumption of permitting religious practice in America’s defense forces.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nathan J. Diament". The signature is written in a cursive style with some stylized flourishes.

Nathan J. Diament