



Department of Social Development and World Peace Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on the Holy Land **February 2007**

[T]he Israelis have a right to live in peace in their State; the Palestinians have a right to a free and sovereign homeland. When each of the peoples in the region sees that its expectations are taken into consideration and thus feels less threatened, then mutual trust will be strengthened.
--Pope Benedict XVI, January 8, 2007

BACKGROUND

The Middle East is a land holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, but tragically it is also a land that yearns for a just peace. USCCB has a long history of working to address the conflict. Palestinian leaders must recognize Israel and clearly renounce terrorism, take effective steps to stop it, and bring to justice those responsible. It is reprehensible to call suicide bombers “martyrs.” Israel’s often-aggressive military response, its expansion of settlements, and its construction of a wall deep in Palestinian areas increase misery and tension that often breed violence. The route of the “barrier” presents a further impediment to creation of a viable Palestinian state that is necessary for a two-state resolution of the conflict.

In January 2005 Palestinians elected President Abbas, Israelis withdrew from some Palestinian lands, and President Bush urged a renewed peace process. The President secured U.S. funding to “support Palestinian political, economic and security reforms,” but Congress attached provisions delaying aid and making it less effective. Despite new leadership, the Palestinian Authority was widely seen as plagued by corruption, cronyism and inefficiency that crippled its ability to improve the lives of the Palestinian people who suffered growing poverty and desperation. The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, while welcome, was not seen as a result of the peace process or President Abbas’ efforts. The security situation in Gaza collapsed after the withdrawal and Palestinians believe that Israeli security measures and the wall effectively confiscate Palestinian lands and water resources.

The election of a Hamas majority to the Palestinian parliament in January 2006 was a serious setback for the peace process, a setback compounded by the intensified violence and armed conflict of this summer. This cycle of violence and the ongoing crisis in Gaza were immediately precipitated by provocative acts by Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, including abductions, cross-border raids against Israeli military personnel, and rocket attacks against Israeli civilians. Israel acted to defend its citizens, but its military response was disproportionate and indiscriminate in some instances, endangering Palestinian and Lebanese civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure. With Hamas refusing to recognize Israel and in control of the Palestinian Authority U.S. aid has been cut, deepening the humanitarian crisis. Catholic Relief Services is on the ground providing humanitarian aid in both Gaza and Lebanon.

In January 2007 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas in an attempt to revive the peace process. President Bush reaffirmed U.S. support for a two-state solution in his recent State of the Union address, but concerted U.S. leadership is required.

The dwindling Christian community feels increasingly isolated and some Christians are still emigrating. The goal of Hamas to create an Islamic state may pose a fundamental threat to the freedom and future of the Church and other Christians in the Holy Land. The precarious situation of the Church in the Holy Land is exacerbated by the failure to make adequate progress in the Vatican-Israeli negotiations on the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See. Many Church agencies and institutions are put at risk by tax policies and other problems.

USCCB RESPONSE

National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East (NILI)

Since 2003 USCCB has been part of an unprecedented initiative of 35 U.S. Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious

leaders who are urging the U.S. government to work to revive the peace process. In the wake of a difficult and tragic year, NILI leaders were convened by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick in September and agreed on a new consensus for a just peace in the midst of a seriously deteriorated situation. In December 2006 NILI released a major statement and met with Secretary of State Rice in January to urge renewed U.S. leadership for peace.

The Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land

The Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land was launched in February 2005 as part of the National Interreligious Initiative. The Campaign invites bishops and Catholic leaders to work with local religious leaders in Jewish, Muslim and other Christian traditions. The goal is to create a shared commitment to the broad outlines of a just resolution of the conflict and to raise a united voice with policy makers and the wider public.

USCCB Advocacy

USCCB insists that a just peace demands an end to the violence, real security for the State of Israel, an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the establishment of an internationally-recognized and viable state for Palestinians, just resolution of the refugee problem, an agreement on Jerusalem that protects religious freedom and other basic rights, an equitable sharing of resources, especially water, and implementation of relevant UN resolutions and other provisions of international law. USCCB believes that U.S. leadership is needed to challenge and restrain both parties to the conflict, but in different ways. We join others in calling on Hamas to reject terrorism and recognize Israel in order to enter into a sustainable peace process. We urge Israel to restrain military responses and avoid actions that compromise a two-state solution.

USCCB maintains that it is not in the best interests of either Israelis or Palestinians for the dire situation in Palestinian areas to deteriorate further. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including CRS, play a crucial role in delivering Palestinian aid. Bishop Wenski, Chairman of the Committee on International Policy, wrote several letters to congressional leaders on Palestinian aid and expressed USCCB's concerns regarding the impact of H.R. 4681 on both Palestinian aid and the peace process. In response to the crisis in Gaza, Bishop Wenski issued a statement and sent letters to U.S. officials that decried the provocative and violent acts of Hamas, criticized some indiscriminant and disproportionate Israeli military responses, called for an immediate ceasefire, urged humanitarian aid, and supported negotiations to bring about a just and lasting peace.

The Christian Communities in the Holy Land

The Christian presence in the Holy Land needs our constant support. The continuing violence and growing despair could further marginalize the Christian community and accelerate the departure of Christians. Successful completion of negotiations between the Holy See and Israel on the Fundamental Agreement of 1993 is critical both for the future of the Church in the Holy Land and for religious freedom in the region. In the past year, USCCB has worked to promote a resolution, including numerous meetings with and letters to American and Israeli officials. At the request of the Church in the Holy Land, USCCB has also intervened with officials regarding the route of the wall near the Christian town of Aboud. For the past six years, leaders of episcopal conferences from Europe and North America have met in the Holy Land to enhance solidarity.

ACTION REQUESTED

Despite significant setbacks and discouraging developments, we cannot abandon the people of the Holy Land.

- **Join the Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land.** Reach out to Jewish and Muslim religious leaders to work **together** to promote strong U.S. leadership. Website: www.usccb.org/sdwp/holylandpeace/.
- **Call for Greater U.S. Leadership.** Urge President Bush to make pursuit of a just peace a top priority and to challenge and restrain both parties. Ask Congress to support funding for NGOs providing aid to Palestinians.
- **Support the Church in the Holy Land.** Urge members of Congress and Jewish leaders to press Israel to successfully conclude negotiations with the Holy See related to the Fundamental Agreement.

RESOURCES

For additional materials, see www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.htm. For further information: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), scolecchi@usccb.org (email).