



Hill Notes

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PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: IRAQ AND ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Any action or failure to act [in Iraq] should be measured by whether it moves toward these benchmarks and contributes to a responsible withdrawal at the earliest time, or whether it is likely to increase divisions, violence, and loss of life. Another necessary step is more sustained U.S. leadership to address other deadly conflicts in this region, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis in Lebanon.

EVALUATING PLANS FOR A RESPONSIBLE TRANSITION IN IRAQ

A Statement of the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Bishop William S. Skylstad, Bishop of Spokane, January 12, 2007

What is the position of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on Iraq today?

In the wake of the President's new plan for Iraq, on January 12 Bishop Skylstad issued "Evaluating Plans for a Responsible Transition in Iraq." The statement reiterates the "grave moral concerns about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation" that were expressed by the Holy See and the bishops' Conference prior to the war. However, it goes on to argue that the Conference now supports "broader regional and international engagement to increase security, stability and reconstruction in Iraq."

The statement lifts up a key moral question that ought to guide our nation's actions: "How can the U.S. bring about a responsible transition in Iraq?" Each alternative course of action "ought to be evaluated in light of our nation's moral responsibility to help Iraqis to live with security and dignity in the aftermath of U.S. military action. Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence actually contributes to a responsible transition. Our nation should seek effective ways to end their deployment at the earliest opportunity consistent with this goal."

This newest statement echoes important themes from a statement that was issued by Bishop William Skylstad in November 2006, which was discussed and affirmed by the full body of bishops in plenary assembly, and an earlier one by Bishop Thomas Wenski, Chair of the Committee on International Policy.

What is happening in Congress regarding the issue of Iraq?

The deteriorating situation in Iraq, together with new Congressional leadership and the report by the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan effort chaired by former Secretary James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton, have increased political pressures within the U.S. to reevaluate U.S. policy toward Iraq.

On January 10, President Bush set out a new policy that calls for an increase of about 20,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and the doubling of provincial reconstruction teams to help local Iraqi communities. Various congressional resolutions were pending at the time these notes were written which address or oppose the policy and set specific benchmarks to be met in an ongoing assessment of effectiveness.

What does USCCB mean by a "responsible transition"?

"Any action or failure to act should be measured by whether it moves toward [key] benchmarks and contributes to a responsible withdrawal at the earliest time, or whether it is likely to increase divisions, violence, and loss of life." Benchmarks for progress toward a responsible transition in Iraq include:

- minimally acceptable levels of *security*;

- *economic reconstruction* that creates employment for Iraqis; and
- *political solutions* that help overcome divisions, broaden participation, and increase respect for religious freedom and basic human rights.

Each strategy or plan ought to be evaluated in light of the traditional principle of “probability of success.”

If USCCB originally questioned the war, why doesn’t the Conference favor immediate withdrawal?

While USCCB and the Holy See raised grave moral concerns regarding the decision to invade Iraq, once the United States initiated military action it incurred new moral responsibilities toward the Iraqi people. As the primary occupying power in Iraq, the U.S. has both legal responsibilities under international law and moral responsibilities to help Iraqis provide security, rebuild their society and establish the rule of law.

Is USCCB concerned for the welfare of U.S. military personnel and their families?

Yes. USCCB has repeatedly expressed support for the military and their families who bear a disproportionate burden of the struggle in Iraq. The Conference also affirms the critical ministry of military chaplains who serve in the name of the Church. But USCCB wants to be clear: raising grave moral questions regarding the war, its conduct and its aftermath is not to question the moral integrity of military personnel.

How does USCCB view the tactic of “preventive war?”

In light of the moral criteria of the just war tradition, USCCB remains morally skeptical of the concept of “preventive war.” As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* clearly states: “[E]ngaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions” (# 501).

What is the USCCB’s position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

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. 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. The dire humanitarian situation in the Palestinian Territories is not in the best interests of either Israelis or Palestinians.

Why is it important for the United States to make peace between Israelis and Palestinians central to U.S. policy?

While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is clearly distinct from the conflict in Iraq, peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel would contribute to stability in the region. It would also deny terrorists a highly symbolic issue which they now exploit. The Iraq Study Group chaired by Baker and Hamilton asserted: “The United States will not be able to achieve its goals in the Middle East unless the United States deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict. There must be a renewed and sustained commitment by the United States to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts: Lebanon, Syria, and President Bush’s June 2002 commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine.” USCCB has worked with Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders in the U.S. to make a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians a top priority of U.S. foreign policy.

Where can I find more information on the positions of USCCB on issues related to the Middle East?

For Church statements on the war, visit: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.htm>. For further information, contact: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3160 (ph); 202-541-3339 (fax); scolecchi@usccb.org.