



Sample Op-ED

Moving from Crisis to Hope in the Middle East

(Op-Ed Article in Tidings, Southern California's Catholic Weekly, January 5, 2007)

Creating a lasting peace in the Middle East can often seem hopeless given the fractious history of the region. As Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders, we believe peace is an essential of faith. This shared commitment compels us to recognize that the light of a new future can break through the darkness of past tragedies and political failures. We believe our nation has an inescapable responsibility and an indispensable role to help make this happen.

We are increasingly frustrated that our own government has failed to show the necessary leadership to bring an end to this long standing conflict. That is why our national inter-religious initiative released a statement last week signed by 34 leaders of Jewish, Christian and Muslim organizations calling on President Bush and Congress to make peace in the Middle East a top priority.

We are not naïve about the challenges ahead. As leaders who have spent extensive time focused on the Middle East with concerns for both Arabs and Israelis, we know there are no easy answers. Our deep ties to the region help us to appreciate the different narratives of the people who live together on this ancient and contested soil. Each community has authentic stories of suffering and legitimate aspirations. The fundamental choice we face is whether to allow political, cultural and religious differences to tear us apart or to stand together in solidarity.

A time of crisis can awaken opportunities for change. The tenuous ceasefire between Israelis and Palestinians, and the Baker-Hamilton report conclusion that Arab-Israeli peace is essential to stability in the region, offer a new opportunity for urgently needed U.S. leadership. The only way forward is a negotiated settlement built on realistic compromises, a rejection of violence, and genuine dialogue.

Specifically, President Bush and the new Congress should do more to create conditions that lead to serious negotiations for a two-state solution following the lines of the "roadmap" developed by the United States in cooperation with the European Union, Russia and the United Nations, and build on the ideas in unofficial model peace agreements such as the Geneva Accord. This requires, among other steps, urging Israel to support a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza; calling on Hamas to reject violence and recognize Israel; providing humanitarian assistance to Palestinians and urging Israeli and Palestinian leaders to restart negotiations.

Our government must continue to urge Palestinian leaders to end attacks against Israel, punish perpetrators of violence, and make clear that the Palestinian Authority is fully united in its commitment to negotiating a two-state solution with Israel. At the same time, President Bush should call on Israel to resolve the crisis in Gaza. This means strengthening the current ceasefire, stopping military attacks on Palestinians, releasing Palestinian officials and other prisoners and improving security for all Israelis and Palestinians. The United States should also pursue

diplomatic efforts to restart negotiations between Israel, Syria and Lebanon. The way forward will be difficult and require hard choices. The alternative is more bloodshed and death.

Jews, Christians and Muslims trace their spiritual heritages back to the patriarch Abraham. We believe that all human beings are created in God's image. Violence in the name of God defiles all religions and the dignity of each human person. We ask our nation's leaders to show the moral and political will needed to move from crisis to hope in the Middle East so that all of God's children may soon taste the fruits of peace.

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By David Saperstein, Director, Central Conference of American Rabbis;
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Sample Op-Ed
A United Appeal for Peace in the Middle East
(Op-Ed Article in Seattle Times, January 11, 2005)

Can the moral, moderate voices among American Jews, Christians and Muslims unite to persuade our government to engage actively in pursuing peace between Israelis and Palestinians? We believe they can. We believe it is time to take center stage away from the extremists and cynics, who warp our vision about the opportunity for co-existence and who obscure the reality that majorities of Israelis and Palestinians want an end to violence and would accept a negotiated two-state peace agreement.

Although much has been written recently about the pivotal role of religion in politics, it is still very unusual for American Jews, Christians and Muslims to work together for peace in the Middle East. Despite different backgrounds and different ways we are connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we are united in our belief that peace in the Middle East is possible, and that our government must play the critical role in facilitating negotiations and strengthening the moderates on both sides, in order for the peace process to succeed.

We are three persons of faith: a Muslim, originally from the Palestinian city of Hebron in the Holy Land, with Palestinian relatives and friends who have had innocent family members killed in attacks by Israelis and believe Israelis want them to disappear; a Lutheran Bishop who, though long a supporter of Israel, regularly hears pleas for help from his Palestinian Lutheran colleague living under occupation in the West Bank; and a Rabbi, committed to the survival of Israel who knows Jews who have lost family members in Palestinian suicide bombings and still fear that Palestinians want Israel to disappear. Yet, we are committed to working together for peace.

We are joining Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders in Seattle and over a dozen cities across the nation who are making a public commitment to educate our congregations and speak to our elected officials on the necessity of direct U.S. engagement in the peace process. We are supporting the national leaders of our religious communities who have issued a united Appeal to President Bush to make Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace an urgent, top priority of his second term.

As persons who have precious bonds with people on different sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we have put aside our differences to demonstrate how both our religious teachings and the practical requirements for peace lead us to fundamental agreement. We join Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders in the Middle East who absolutely condemn the killing of innocents and call for an end to all acts of violence. And we agree that what each side needs most - real, lasting security for Israelis and a viable independent and secure state for Palestinians - cannot be achieved by violence but only by negotiations.

We are inspired by the examples of Israelis and Palestinians who, despite the violence and deep mistrust, are working together for peace, including 500 families from both sides who have had family members killed in the conflict. And we know that there are principles and ideas from earlier official negotiations and from several, unofficial model peace agreements which point the way toward possible compromise solutions to even the toughest issues, including borders,

refugees, and Jerusalem.

We are increasingly convinced that completing the peace process, rather than invading Iraq, should have been the priority for U.S. policy in the Middle East. But even now, no matter what happens in Iraq, we believe renewed U.S. leadership for Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace is essential and that resolving this conflict will significantly reduce support for extremism worldwide, and enhance prospects for democratic reform and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction in the region.

Specifically, we believe President Bush should appoint a special Presidential Envoy with a fulltime commitment to pursue negotiations. Former Secretary of State James Baker, and former Senators John Danforth and George Mitchell have been mentioned publicly as possibilities and seem to us to be good candidates. A timetable should be negotiated for specific simultaneous steps by the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority; and an effective, public monitoring system put in place to assure implementation by both sides. There needs to be a substantial increase in (strictly monitored) aid to the Palestinian Authority to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, rebuild infrastructure and provide desperately needed jobs.

Now, with Palestinian elections for new national leadership and Israel's plan for withdrawal from Gaza, we feel a deep sense of urgency that our government not sit on the sidelines. Israelis and Palestinians need America's help. In Seattle, we are forming a Jewish, Christian, Muslim interreligious initiative committed to appeal to our congregations and communities to press the Administration and members of Congress for determined, fair and firm U.S. leadership in pursuit of peace. In this way we believe the power of moderate religious voices can push extremism to the margin, give hope to people in the region, and foster the use of American power for building the road to peace in the Middle East

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