



Hill Notes

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PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ISRAEL-PALESTINE

[T]he State Department announced the convening of an international peace conference in Annapolis ... to pursue the vision of a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians—two states living side by side in peace and security.... For decades, our Conference of Bishops has worked and prayed for peace in the Holy Land. In more recent years, we have joined with Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders in the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East to support a two-state solution to the conflict.

--Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., President, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 21, 2007

What is the position of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

USCCB has a long history of energetically working to promote a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians. The Conference strongly supports a two-state solution to the conflict with security for Israel and a viable state for Palestinians. Israelis and Palestinians need the active support of the United States and the international community to take substantive reciprocal steps to improve conditions on the ground and help restore people's hopes that a peace agreement is possible. Palestinian leaders must do their part to improve security by blocking illegal arms shipments and disarming militias and must improve governance and transparency as they build their capacity for a future state. Israel needs to freeze expansion of settlements, withdraw "illegal outposts," release additional Palestinian prisoners, and ease movement for Palestinians by reducing the number of military check points and addressing the impact of the security wall.

What is the situation on the ground in Israel and Palestine?

Despite the longstanding conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and the legitimate grievances and suffering of both peoples, a majority of Israelis and Palestinians support a just peace that leads to a two-state solution. At the same time, both sides are discouraged and skeptical of peace efforts. Israel is terrorized by periodic crude rocket attacks from Gaza and the threat of suicide bombers who refuse to accept its existence and legitimate need for security. Palestinians are angered by the longstanding occupation, Israeli military responses, confiscation of Palestinian lands by the route of the security barrier and expansion of settlements in the West Bank, and deepening poverty and a deteriorating humanitarian situation, especially in Gaza. The dire humanitarian situation in the Palestinian Territories harms the best interests of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Why is it important for Congress to support strong U.S. leadership for peace at this time?

In November 2007, the U.S. convened a meeting at Annapolis attended by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Palestinian President Abbas and representatives of other countries interested in advancing a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Notably a number of Arab states participated. President Bush has set a goal of reaching a peace agreement in 2008. Given this initiative and the likely negative consequences of failure to reach an agreement, both for the peoples of the region and for U.S. prestige and efforts to counter terrorism, it is critically important that Congress be supportive of peace efforts and refrain from actions that can undermine U.S. leadership for peace.

What is happening in Congress regarding the issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace?

Senate Resolution 321 reaffirms support for a "true and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the establishment of two states, the State of Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security, with recognized borders." The resolution calls on President Bush to "pursue a robust diplomatic effort to engage the State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, begin negotiations, and make a two-state settlement a priority." It also "welcomes the Arab League Peace Initiative" and "calls on Israeli and Palestinian leaders to embrace efforts to achieve peace and refrain from taking any actions that would prejudice the outcome of final status negotiations." USCCB supports this resolution and has urged senators to cosponsor it.

In addition, it is important that members of both the Senate and the House support the Administration's full request for aid to the Palestinians with appropriate oversight and accountability. This aid was incorporated into the Iraq supplemental (\$410 million) and the FY09 Foreign Operations Appropriations bill (\$155 million). Improving the daily living conditions of Palestinians, bolstering the Palestinian economy and increasing the capacity of the Palestinian government to build effective institutions are essential to the peace process. While effective accountability for Palestinian aid is important to ensure that funding does not fall into the hands of militant groups, this must be done in ways that do not hamper the delivery of aid in a timely manner. Unfortunately, in the omnibus spending bill that passed in December, Congress approved a ceiling of \$218.5 million in assistance for the West Bank/Gaza in the supplemental, just over half of the \$410 million the administration had requested. Additional restrictions were also placed on the aid, hindering its delivery.

Congress should also act positively on the President's separate request in the FY09 budget for \$155 million to "promote Israeli-Palestinian peace by laying the groundwork for a sustainable Palestinian state through building credible, transparent institutions and improving governance; advancing the rule of law; expanding public health and basic education; building infrastructure; creating jobs; and generating micro-enterprise."

What else can Congress do?

Congress should act in a bipartisan manner in seeking to resolve conflicts between Israelis and the Palestinians. Members should weigh carefully any statements or actions which might undermine efforts to advance a just peace by prejudicing the outcome of negotiations (i.e. demands on the status of Jerusalem) or by appearing to support intransigence on either side.

Why is making 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 greatly contribute to regional stability. 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."

What is the Church doing to promote a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians?

Since 2003 USCCB has been part of an unprecedented initiative of 35 U.S. Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders who urged the U.S. government to work to revive the peace process. USCCB also launched the Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land 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 to raise a united voice with policy makers and the wider public. For the past seven years, leaders of bishops' conferences from Europe and North America, including USCCB, have met in the Holy Land to enhance solidarity with the Church there and to press for a just peace. In addition, Catholic Relief Services, the overseas relief and development agency of the U.S. bishops, is on the ground providing humanitarian and development assistance in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.

Is USCCB concerned about the dwindling Christian community in the Holy Land?

The emigration of Christians from the Holy Land is of great concern to the bishops of our nation and to the Church throughout the world. The main factors for Christian emigration are lack of economic opportunity and the ongoing conflict. The failure to reach agreement on implementation of the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See also weakens the Church's presence in the Holy Land. Many Church agencies and institutions are put at risk by Israeli tax policies and other problems and the ministry of priests and other Church personnel is hampered by Israeli visa problems.

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

Visit the web at <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.shtml> or contact *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3160 (ph); 202-541-3339 (fax); scolecchi@usccb.org.