



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on the Holy Land February 2009

I express my hope that, with the decisive commitment of the international community, the ceasefire in the Gaza strip will be re-established – an indispensable condition for restoring acceptable living conditions to the population – and that negotiations for peace will resume, with the rejection of hatred, acts of provocation and the use of arms.

--Pope Benedict XVI, January 8, 2009

BACKGROUND

The Middle East is a land holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, but tragically it is also a violent land that yearns for a just peace. USCCB has had a long history of pursuing justice and peace by supporting a two-state solution: a secure and recognized Israel living in peace alongside a viable Palestinian state. The recent fighting between Hamas and Israel destroyed lives, deepened animosities, and poses new obstacles to achieving a just peace.

The conflict between Jewish and Arab populations dates back to before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Tensions rose between Arabs and Jews in response to Jewish migration to the region. In 1947 the UN recommended partition of Mandate Palestine, at the time under British rule, into two states: one Jewish and one Arab. Armed conflict ensued as British forces withdrew and Israel declared its independence in 1948. Many Arab Palestinians became refugees. The 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors resulted in the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. In 1979 and 1994 Israel signed peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan respectively, but no other Arab countries recognize Israel and a Palestinian state has not been established.

Events of the past few years have created a particularly volatile situation. In January 2005 Palestinians elected President Mahmoud Abbas. Despite new leadership, the Palestinian Authority was viewed as plagued by cronyism and inefficiency that crippled its ability to improve the lives of the Palestinian people. The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, while welcome, was not seen as a result of the peace process or of President Abbas' efforts and led to a collapse of security in Gaza. Palestinians believe Israeli settlements and the route of the security barrier which Israel constructed in Gaza in 1994 and began constructing in the West Bank in 2002 effectively confiscate Palestinian lands and water resources in the West Bank.

These realities and others contributed to the Hamas party winning a majority in the January 2006 Palestinian Parliamentary elections. This was a serious setback for the peace process. Hamas, unlike President Abbas and his Fatah party, refuses to recognize Israel, accept previous agreements and renounce violence which resulted in its designation as a foreign terrorist organization. This designation led to a dramatic reduction in international assistance to the Palestinian Authority as donors struggled with how to assist the Palestinian people without supporting Hamas. In 2006 armed conflict broke out, precipitated by unjustifiable acts by Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, including cross-border raids against Israeli military personnel and rocket attacks against Israeli civilians. Israel defended its citizens, but its military response was disproportionate and indiscriminate in some instances, endangering Palestinian and Lebanese civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure.

In June 2007 Hamas took control of Gaza. In response President Abbas dissolved the Hamas-Fatah unity government and formed a new Palestinian Authority (PA) government. The PA remained in control of the West Bank and is trying to implement political and economic reforms. But persistent rocket attacks from Hamas-controlled Gaza and continued indefensible suicide attacks on civilians contributed to Israeli anger and legitimate security concerns. In late December 2008, Israel launched a major military response that resulted in high levels of civilian Palestinian casualties in Gaza and significant destruction of property and infrastructure. Israel's military response, its blockade of Gaza for more than a year, expansion of settlements, maintenance of numerous checkpoints within the West Bank, and construction of a security wall deep in Palestinian areas have contributed to a dramatic decline in the Palestinian economy, deepening poverty and fueling Palestinian anger and hopelessness.

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The actions of both Hamas and Israel increase the misery and tensions that breed violence and impede the creation of a viable Palestinian state. The humanitarian situation is difficult in West Bank but dire in Gaza, where Israeli sanctions have limited access to basics such as food and fuel. Catholic Relief Services is providing aid in both Gaza and the West Bank, but is sometimes hampered in its work, especially in Gaza.

In a welcome move, the Obama Administration has promised to make Israeli-Palestinian peace a high priority and appointed former Senator George Mitchell as Special Envoy.

USCCB RESPONSE

National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East (NILI): Since 2003 USCCB has been a leader of an unprecedented initiative of 35 U.S. Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders who are urging the U.S. government to exercise strong leadership for a two-state solution, with a secure and recognized Israel living alongside a viable Palestinian state with justice and peace for both peoples.

The Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land: The Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land was launched in February 2005 to support local participation in the National Interreligious Leadership 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.

USCCB Advocacy: USCCB insists that a just peace demands an end to violence, recognition and security for the state of Israel, an end to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the establishment of an internationally-recognized and viable Palestinian state. It also requires an agreement on Jerusalem that protects religious freedom and other basic rights, and an equitable sharing of resources, especially water. USCCB supports consistent and persistent U.S. leadership to challenge and restrain both parties to the conflict and to hold them accountable for mutual steps needed for a just peace. Palestinians must improve security by halting attacks on civilians, blocking illegal arms shipments and disarming militias, and improve governance and transparency as they build capacity for a future state. Israel needs to freeze expansion of settlements, withdraw “illegal outposts,” ease movement for Palestinians by reducing military check points, and refrain from disproportionate military response. The dire humanitarian situation in Palestinian areas is not in the best interests of either Israelis or Palestinians. Non-governmental organizations, including Catholic Relief Services, play a crucial role in delivering aid to the Palestinian people.

The Christian Communities in the Holy Land: Members of the Christian community continue to emigrate due to the continuing conflict, fears about the future, a lack of economic opportunities, and Israeli residency requirements and visa regulations that separate family members. There is an urgent need to make progress in negotiations on the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See which is critical both for the future of the Church and for religious freedom in the Holy Land. Some 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 visa problems. Since 1998 leaders of bishops’ conferences from Europe and North America have met annually in the Holy Land to visit with public officials and the local Church to demonstrate solidarity and support.

ACTION REQUESTED: Despite discouraging developments, Catholics cannot abandon the people of the Holy Land or the pursuit of a just peace.

- **Join the Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land.** Reach out to Jewish and Muslim religious leaders to work **together** to support strong U.S. leadership. Website: www.usccb.org/sdwp/holylandpeace/.
- **Support strong U.S. leadership** that holds both parties accountable for building a just peace: the Palestinians to halt violence, improve security and governance; the Israelis to stop settlements and allow movement of people and goods. Ask Congress to support funding to build the Palestinian Authority’s capacity for governance and to provide urgent humanitarian aid for 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: Visit www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.shtml. Contact: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), scolecchi@usccb.org.