



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

Background on the Holy Land **February 2012**

In the Holy Land, where tensions between Palestinians and Israelis affect the stability of the entire Middle East, it is necessary that the leaders of these two peoples adopt courageous and farsighted decisions in favour of peace.

--Pope Benedict XVI, January 9, 2012

BACKGROUND

The Middle East is a land holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims. 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 and independent Palestinian state.

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 following the Second World War. 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 yet to be established.

The past few years have been particularly volatile. In January 2005 Palestinians elected President Mahmoud Abbas. Despite new leadership, the Palestinian Authority (PA) 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 perceived 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) separate some households from their families and crops, and effectively confiscate Palestinian lands and water resources in the West Bank.

These factors 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. Its designation as a foreign terrorist organization led to reductions in international assistance to the Palestinian Authority as donors struggled with ways to assist Palestinians without supporting Hamas. In 2006, armed conflict was 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 itself, but its military response was disproportionate and indiscriminate in some instances, endangering civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure in Gaza.

In June 2007 Hamas took control of Gaza. In response President Abbas dissolved the Hamas-Fatah unity government and formed a new PA government. The PA remains in control of the West Bank and is trying to implement political and economic reforms. But rocket attacks from Hamas-controlled Gaza and indefensible suicide attacks on civilians contributed to legitimate Israeli 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. Israel's military response, its continuing blockade of Gaza, expansion of settlements, maintenance of numerous check-points within the West Bank, and expanding construction of a separation wall deep in Palestinian areas place strains on the Palestinian economy, deepening poverty and raising Palestinian anger and hopelessness.

In different ways, the actions of both Hamas and Israel increase the misery and tensions that breed violence and impede the creation of a viable Palestine and a secure Israel. The humanitarian situation is difficult in West Bank but dire in Gaza, where Israeli sanctions have limited access to basics such as food, fuel, and medical supplies. Catholic Relief Ser-

vices (CRS) is providing aid in both Gaza and the West Bank, but is sometimes hampered in its work, especially in Gaza. Internal political disputes in Israel and the continuing tensions between Hamas and Fatah complicate the search for a just peace. Although the Obama Administration made Israeli-Palestinian peace a high priority little progress has been made toward a two-state solution. In January 2012, with strong U.S. encouragement, Israel and the PA entered into preliminary talks under the sponsorship of Jordan, but a final solution remains unlikely. In September, PA President Abbas applied for Palestinian membership in the United Nations, sparking an aggressive movement in Congress and Israel to withhold funding from Palestinians should they continue to pursue any unilateral efforts to establish a state. Withholding these funds cuts off humanitarian assistance to poor Palestinians, increases desperation among Palestinians, undermines Israeli security, and compromises prospects for a two-state solution by undermining the capacity of Palestinians to build institutions for a future state.

USCCB RESPONSE

National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East (NILI): Since 2003 USCCB has been a leader of an unprecedented interreligious initiative of 35 U.S. Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders who urge the U.S. government to exercise strong leadership for a two-state solution. Cardinal McCarrick and Bishop Hubbard participated in a December 2009 NILI delegation to the Holy Land and in meetings with the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor in September 2010. Cardinal McCarrick and Bishop Madden joined NILI meetings with Deputy Secretary of State Burns and Senator Kerry and Representative Fortenberry in January 2012.

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. It invites bishops and Catholic leaders to work with local Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious leaders for peace.

USCCB Advocacy: USCCB insists that a just peace demands an end to violence, recognition and security for 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 to 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 responses. The dire humanitarian situation in Palestinian areas is not in the best interests of either Israelis or Palestinians. Non-governmental organizations, including CRS, play a crucial role in delivering aid.

The Christian Communities in the Holy Land: A major concern for USCCB is support for and solidarity with the Church in the Holy Land. Christians 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. Negotiations on the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See, which is critical for the future of the Church and for religious freedom, remain incomplete. Some Church institutions are put at risk by Israeli tax policies and land confiscation, and ministry 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.

ACTION REQUESTED: Engage in prayer and pilgrimage, and support projects; see website for guidelines. Despite some discouraging developments, Catholics cannot abandon the Holy Land’s people or pursuit of a just peace.

- **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 release and support funding to build the Palestinian Authority’s capacity for governance of a future state and to provide urgently needed humanitarian aid for Palestinians.
- **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. .
- **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/about/international-justice-and-peace/ or contact: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), scolecchi@usccb.org.