



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

Background on Israel and Palestine September 2015

“My thoughts turn above all to the Middle East, beginning with the beloved land of Jesus which I had the joy of visiting last May, and for whose peace we constantly pray. We did this with extraordinary intensity, together with the then President of Israel, Shimon Peres, and the President of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, inspired by a confident hope that negotiations between the two parties will once more resume, for the sake of ending violence and reaching a solution which can enable Palestinians and Israelis alike to live at last in peace within clearly established and internationally recognized borders, thus implementing the ‘two state solution.’” --Pope Francis, January 12, 2015

BACKGROUND

The Holy Land is a place of great spiritual importance for Jews, Christians and Muslims. In recent decades it has also been the site of great conflict that takes a devastating toll on all who live there and contributes to instability in the region. The U.S. Government has repeatedly advocated for negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. Secretary Kerry devoted significant time and energy to the most recent round of peace talks. Unfortunately, after nine months of negotiations these efforts stalled. The fragile talks were at times jeopardized by violent acts on both sides, including settler attacks and rockets fired from Gaza, and by Israeli settlement expansion. Israel’s cancellations of an agreed upon release of Palestinian prisoners, the approval of more settlement construction, Palestine’s signing onto 15 UN conventions and the formation of a Hamas-Fatah unity government derailed the talks in April 2014.

A tense situation gave way to a new breakout of violence in the summer of 2014. The tragic kidnappings and murders of three Israeli youth, the arrests of hundreds of Palestinians and the searches of hundreds of Palestinian homes in the West Bank, and the kidnapping and murder of a Palestinian youth, who was burned alive, set the stage for renewed conflict between Hamas and Israel. Hamas indiscriminately fired rockets into civilian areas of Israel. Israel launched a military response that lacked proportionality. The hostilities between Israel and Hamas intensified, bringing death and destruction, especially to the civilians of Gaza. During the 90 day conflict more than 2,100 Gazans died, most of them civilians, including children, women and elderly, along with 66 Israeli military personnel and 6 Israeli civilians.

The August 26th ceasefire appears to be holding, but the war left a deep wound on both sides. Meanwhile, the situation in East Jerusalem has grown worse with dangerous and violent clashes triggered in part by conflicts over the Holy Sites. Catholic schools in Israel went on strike at the beginning of the school year to protest progressive reductions of government subsidies, already far below the levels for private Jewish Orthodox schools. The government has also imposed a tuition cap, financially squeezing the Catholic school system.

In August 2015, Israel’s Supreme Court granted approval for the building of a separation barrier through the Cremisan Valley. The Cremisan Valley lies in the West Bank on Palestinian land adjacent to Beit Jala and Bethlehem. The separation barrier through the Cremisan Valley will have devastating effects for the local community, confiscating Palestinian agricultural and recreational lands of over 50 Christian families, and separating Salesian institutions from their ministries. This threatens the livelihoods of Bethlehem Christians, pressuring more to leave the Holy Land.

The route of the separation barrier, settlement expansion, restrictions on Palestinian travel and the blockade of Gaza all contribute to growing desperation that breeds violence and undermines a two-state solution. A September 2015 UN report found that Gaza could become uninhabitable by 2020 if the current economic and political trends continue. The report states, “Three Israeli military operations in the past six years, in addition to eight years of economic blockade, have ravaged the already debilitated infrastructure of Gaza, shattered its productive base, left no time for meaningful reconstruction or economic recovery and impoverished the Palestinian population in Gaza.....” The current situation is not good for either Israelis or Palestinians. Time is running out for a workable two-state solution, but it remains the most realistic option to end the conflict.

In January 2015, Palestine expressed its frustration at the lack of progress towards a just peace by submitting its

3211 Fourth St., NE, Washington, DC 20017. Tel: (202)541-3160 Fax: (202)541-3339

application for membership to the International Criminal Court (ICC), allowing Palestine to file complaints against Israel with the Prosecutor's Office. This move has been met with criticism from the U.S. Government claiming it is counterproductive and could escalate tensions. Some Members of Congress have been particularly critical of the ICC action. Within the very first days of the 114th Congress, legislation was proposed to terminate the \$400 million in annual aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) in an effort to punish Palestine for joining the ICC. This action would have devastating humanitarian consequences and could cripple the PA, undermining security coordination with Israel.

USCCB POSITION

The path to peace in the Holy Land requires respect for the human rights and dignity of both Israelis and Palestinians. People of good will on both sides of the conflict want the same thing: a dignified life worthy of the human person. Israelis should not have to live in fear of Hamas' indiscriminate rocket attacks on civilian areas. At the same time, Palestinians should not have to live in fear for their lives from air and ground attacks or to suffer the humiliations of occupation. USCCB has worked with Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders in the United States to make a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians a top priority of US foreign policy.

Through regular visits to the Holy Land, USCCB acts in solidarity with the vulnerable Christian community that has suffered as a result of this ongoing conflict. In September 2014, 18 Bishops along with USCCB and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) staff undertook a Prayer Pilgrimage for Peace in the Holy Land. Throughout their Pilgrimage, they spread the message that prayer is powerful, peace is possible, and that we must work towards a two-state solution. In coordination with the Pilgrimage, the Bishops called on Catholics to pray for peace in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East.

For decades, USCCB has urged U.S. leadership for peace. Only the emergence of a viable and independent Palestinian state living alongside a recognized and secure Israel will bring the peace for which majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians yearn. This two-state solution enhances Israeli security, preserves Israel as a Jewish majority democratic state, gives Palestinians the dignity of their own state, allows access to the Holy Sites of all three faiths, promotes economic development in the region, and undermines extremists who exploit the conflict. The Holy See supports the two-state solution and has recognized the "State of Palestine."

The events of the past two years clearly demonstrate that there is no military solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that the status quo is unsustainable and a recipe for recurring violence. While reaching an agreement has proved to be difficult, the Church remains hopeful that peace is possible. It is more urgent than ever that the United States and the international community reengage in the difficult, but essential, work of building a just and lasting peace. The United States, in coordination with the Quartet (UN, EU, Russia, US), should offer a balanced and fair framework to the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority as the basis for negotiating a peace agreement. Without a peace agreement, there is a risk of more unilateral actions and renewed violence. This would be tragic for both Israelis and Palestinians and contribute to more acute instability in the region. Public officials must be creative, take new approaches, and build bridges not walls. The conflict must be humanized by fostering more interaction between Israelis and Palestinians. Peace will only come when all parties respect the fact that the Holy Land is sacred to three faiths and home to two peoples.

The ongoing conflict assaults the dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis, with the suffering people in Gaza carrying a particularly heavy burden. The continued blockade in Gaza dramatically impedes rebuilding and contributes to desperation that undermines Israelis' legitimate hope for security. It also creates intolerable levels of unemployment and pushes ordinary people into deeper poverty. The international community must continue to respond to the urgent humanitarian situation in Palestine. The work of CRS and similar organizations on the ground in both Gaza and the West Bank is vital for reducing human misery and promoting peace.

Unfortunately, there is a risk that important funding for development programs, democracy building and security coordination will be cut. USCCB urges Congress to resist efforts to cut off assistance to the Palestinians as this would have a far-reaching negative impact on Palestinian communities and the region as a whole. Assistance to Palestinians, already heavily conditioned, is essential for humanitarian purposes and for building capacity for a Palestinian state. It supports civil society and vulnerable communities. Cutting this funding is not in the interests of either Israelis or Palestinians who long for peace.

RESOURCES: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/israel-palestine/index.cfm> Contact: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), scolecchi@usccb.org.