

National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East

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May 17, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

We write as Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders, including heads of more than 25 national religious organizations that support your priority commitment to provide active, fair and firm U.S. leadership for Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace. We strongly affirm your appointment of George Mitchell as Special Middle East Envoy and anxiously await his report and recommendations to you. We would greatly appreciate an opportunity to meet with you as well as with Secretary of State Clinton and Special Middle East Envoy Mitchell to offer our ideas and support as together we work for a lasting peace among Israelis, Palestinians and their Arab neighbors.

We believe, despite the challenges and discouraging developments, there remains a window of hope to achieve both a viable two-state solution, acceptable to majorities of Israelis and Palestinians and a final comprehensive peace between Israel and all her Arab neighbors. The upcoming visits to Washington of President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu provide opportunities for Palestinian and Israeli leadership to reaffirm their commitment to a two state solution and to steps both sides will need to make to achieve peace.

An effective, comprehensive and sustainable ceasefire covering Israel, Gaza and the West Bank is an essential step to renewing people's hopes that peace is possible. In relation to Gaza, a ceasefire needs to include Hamas' halting all rocket attacks on Israel; international measures to prevent smuggling-resupply of rockets; Israel's stopping all military operations in Gaza, and opening Gaza border crossings to allow humanitarian and reconstruction assistance. In relation to the West Bank, building on a ceasefire and improved security conditions, Israel should reduce the number of military checkpoints. Recognizing that there are extremists on both sides committed to violence, we believe some form of international presence will be needed to monitor and guarantee the ceasefire.

The United States should insist that Israel fulfill its commitment to dismantle illegal outposts in the West Bank and halt all expansion of settlements. Continuing settlement expansion directly undermines the possibility of a viable Palestinian state. On the Palestinian side, the United States should support efforts to form a Palestinian government capable of representing the West Bank and Gaza and committed to rejecting violence and negotiating a two-state solution with Israel.

We believe the United States should publicly support benchmark principles and practical ideas developed in official and informal Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, e.g. the Geneva Accord, to resolve the final status issues, including borders and security, settlements, refugees and Jerusalem. Building on ideas developed in earlier Syrian-Israeli negotiations, including those hosted by Turkey, and on principles in the Arab Peace Initiative, the United States should engage actively in promoting direct negotiations for a peace agreement between Israel and Syria.

As your Administration presses ahead with U.S. leadership for peace, we pledge our support as national religious leaders and we commit ourselves to calling upon Christians, Jews and Muslims in churches, synagogues and mosques across the country both to pray for peace and to urge Congress to support your efforts.

Respectfully,

Christian Leaders:

Bishop Howard J. Hubbard, Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace, USCCB*
His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, Archbishop Emeritus of Washington *
His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios, Primate, Greek Orthodox Church in America*
His Eminence Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, Primate, Armenian Apostolic Church in America*
Archbishop Vicken Aykasian, President, National Council of Churches of Christ USA*
Reverend Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary, National Council of Churches of Christ USA*
Bishop Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*
Most Rev. Dr. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop and Primate, Episcopal Church*
Reverend John H. Thomas, General Minister & President, United Church of Christ*
Reverend Dr. Sharon Watkins, General Minister, President, Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)*
Reverend Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk, Presbyterian Church (USA)*
Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader, Ecumenical Officer, Council of Bishops, United Methodist Church*
Reverend Michael E. Livingston, Executive Director, International Council of Community Churches*
Reverend Leighton Ford, President, Leighton Ford Ministries, Board Member, World Vision US*
Richard J. Mouw, President, Fuller Theological Seminary*
John Buchanan, Editor/Publisher, The Christian Century, Pastor, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago*
David Neff, Editor and Vice-President, Christianity Today*

Jewish Leaders:

Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism*
Rabbi Peter Knobel, President, Central Conference of American Rabbis*
Rabbi Paul Menitoff, Executive Vice President Emeritus, Central Conference of American Rabbis*
Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Rector, American Jewish University*
Dr. Carl Sheingold, Executive Vice President, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation*
Rabbi Yael Ridberg, President, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Assembly*
Rabbi Amy Small, Past President, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Assembly*
Rabbi Alvin M. Sugarman, Vice President, A Different Future*
Rabbi Merle S. Singer, Rabbi Emeritus, Temple Beth El, Boca Raton, Florida*

Muslim Leaders:

Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Syeed, National Director, Islamic Society of North America*
Imam Mohammed ibn Hagmagid, Vice President, Islamic Society of North America*
Naeem Baig, Secretary General, Islamic Circle of North America*
Imam Yahya Hendi, Muslim Chaplain, Georgetown University*
Dawud Assad, President Emeritus, Council of Mosques, USA*
Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Founder, American Society for Muslim Advancement/Cordoba Initiative*
Eide Alawan, Interfaith Office for Outreach, Islamic Center of America*
Iftekhhar A. Hai, Founding Director, United Muslims of America*

*Organizations for Identification Only

Cc: U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton
Special Middle East Envoy George Mitchell