

Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace: From Crisis to Hope

Jewish, Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders Call on the United States to Make Peace a Priority

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Preamble

As Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders, our shared Abrahamic faith compels us to work together for peace with justice for Israelis, Palestinians and all peoples in the Middle East. As Americans, we again ask the United States to make peace in the Middle East an urgent priority. Our nation has an inescapable responsibility and an indispensable role to provide creative, determined leadership for building a just peace for all in the Middle East.

Peace: An Essential of Faith

Our faith traditions hold that every human being is created in the image of God, that human life and dignity are to be respected, and that all persons are children of the One God. This common religious heritage – which we trace to Abraham – finds expression in a common commitment to peace with justice for all God's children.

The prophet Isaiah links peace with justice. Of those who do not know peace, the prophet warns: "The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace" (Isaiah 59:8). As religious leaders we must heed the call to walk the road of justice to peace and call on others, especially our nation's leaders, to do the same.

Violence, especially against civilians, violates the dignity of the human person and is incompatible with the peace God desires for each of God's children. Our traditions share the belief that each of us is called to pursue peace. Jesus of Nazareth expressed this call in these words: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

Building peace through justice is simultaneously an urgent human challenge and a gift of God. As the Holy Koran articulates it, God is the "Source of Peace, Guardian of Faith, Preserver of Safety" (59.23). It is God who calls us to walk the just road to peace with all peoples and who makes that path possible, even when, as today, the way forward may seem unclear.

A Priority for Our Nation

The National Interreligious Initiative for Peace in the Middle East unites the voices of religious leaders of more than twenty-five Jewish, Christian and Muslim national organizations. Beginning in December 2003, we called upon the United States to exercise leadership at the highest levels to secure a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians through concrete support for the Road Map and “12 Steps for Peace.” We have been disappointed that the United States did not more actively pursue the Road Map for Peace which we felt held great promise. While much has changed since December 2003, our fundamental call for the United States to more fully engage in the work for a two-state solution to the conflict has not.

Palestinian and Israeli elections have changed the political landscape. The crises in and near Gaza and the war in Lebanon have cost many lives, destroyed communities, displaced peoples, deepened animosities, and diminished prospects for a negotiated peace.

At this time of crisis and danger, we must speak a word of hope. It is our conviction that the current crisis can also open up new opportunities for peace. Our shared faith in the One God gives us hope and reminds us that God is on the side of peace. Hatred will not have the final word. We are one human family, and people ultimately want the same things for their own families—peace, security, dignity, opportunity.

The unique role of the United States in the region and in the world gives our nation a special responsibility to pursue peace. The United States must make peace in the Middle East an urgent priority. Achieving Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace will have positive reverberations in the region and around the world. Our nation and the world will be much safer if peace takes hold in the Middle East.

A Way Forward

The crisis in Gaza and the war in Lebanon and northern Israel remind us that the status quo in the region is unstable and untenable. Military action will not resolve the conflict. The only authentic way forward is a negotiated settlement built on difficult, but realistic, compromises and security arrangements with international guarantees. The path to peace requires a rejection of violence and an embrace of dialogue. This path demands reciprocal steps that build confidence on all sides. Such a path could lead to a future of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace with security and dignity for both peoples and to a future of stability in the region with Israel living in peace and security with its Arab neighbors.

As Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders we are not naïve about the obstacles that lie ahead. We have longstanding and precious ties to peoples and communities on various sides of the conflict in the Middle East. These ties help us to appreciate the different narratives of Israelis, Palestinians and other Arabs. Each community has authentic stories of suffering and legitimate aspirations. We know that these different narratives can pull us apart, but we choose to stand together. We also know from experience that demonizing the other or seeking simply to lay blame does not move us along the path toward peace.

The way forward requires that we listen and learn from each other. The way forward requires that we work together for active, fair and firm U.S. leadership to help Israelis, Palestinians and Arab states achieve a just peace. We seek by our prayers and by our work together to build bridges among our communities and to generate interreligious cooperation and action for peace.

Elements of a Way Forward

We call on the United States to:

1. **Make peace in the Middle East a top priority and exercise persistent, determined leadership at the highest levels to secure a just peace.**
2. **Work, in coordination with the Quartet (U.S., European Union, Russia, United Nations), to create conditions that bring about serious negotiations on a two-state solution following the lines of the Roadmap, including:**
 - a. resolving the crisis in Gaza;
 - b. finding appropriately monitored ways to provide urgently needed humanitarian and development assistance to the Palestinian people;
 - c. achieving an effective Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire;
 - d. urging Hamas to reject violence, recognize Israel and accept previous agreements;
 - e. urging Israel to take steps to support the prospect of a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza; and
 - f. calling on Israeli and Palestinian leaders to meet in order to restart negotiations on a viable two-state solution.
3. **Build upon principles, benchmarks and practical ideas for peace that emerged from earlier initiatives.** Helpful concepts can still be found in the Geneva Accord and People's Voice model peace agreements, as well as in the "Road Map" itself. These benchmarks suggest realistic compromises for final status issues, including: borders and security arrangements, settlements, refugees and Jerusalem. Building public support for these ideas can help convince people that peace is possible and help our religious communities, the media, and political leaders focus on realistic solutions for peace.
4. **Explore bold initiatives for peace such as appointing a special envoy, hosting an international conference, and/or forming mutually acceptable security arrangements for a negotiated two-state solution.** U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and 1397 (supporting a two-state solution) provide the internationally agreed framework for comprehensive and lasting Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace. U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559 provide a framework for resolving the situation in Lebanon.
5. **Work with Israelis, Palestinians and the international community to guarantee access to the Holy Places and religious liberty for all peoples.**
6. **Support full implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559 in relation to Lebanon.** The United States and the international community must not lose

focus, as has happened after earlier crises. The United States, in coordination with the U.N. Security Council, must work with determination to maintain the current ceasefire, secure the release of kidnapped Israeli soldiers, resolve the issue of release of Lebanese prisoners detained by Israel, and support the expanded U.N. peacekeeping force working with the Lebanese army to assert exclusive Lebanese government authority throughout southern Lebanon. Consistent with Security Council Resolution 1559, the U.S. should also support disarmament of the Hezbollah militia, an Israeli withdrawal to the international border, a permanent ceasefire, and significant reconstruction assistance for Lebanon.

7. **Provide necessary and generous bilateral reconstruction assistance to Lebanon to help rebuild the civilian infrastructure and restore devastated communities, and aid to Israel to help rebuild communities that experienced destruction due to the war.** It is critical that significant concrete assistance commence quickly and be provided long term.
8. **Undertake diplomatic efforts to restart Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese negotiations for peace.** The Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Jordanian peace agreements offer precedents, the Arab League Peace Initiative offers support, and the principles and ideas from earlier Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian negotiations offer outlines for possible peace agreements between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Lebanon that would help complete the process of comprehensive Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace.

We call on the United States to encourage Palestinian leaders to:

1. **Work actively to resolve the current crisis in Gaza and achieve an effective Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire.** Resolving the crisis will involve securing an effective ceasefire, stopping attacks against Israel, punishing perpetrators of violence, releasing the Israeli soldier and cooperating with Israeli security forces to improve security for Israelis and Palestinians.
2. **Work to achieve a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire with Israel, eliminate violent attacks against Israel and punish perpetrators.** The Palestinian Authority needs to consolidate security forces, commit itself to take effective measures to prevent attacks on Israelis by extremist groups and punish those who carry out any such violence.
3. **Make clear that the Palestinian Authority is committed to negotiating a two-state solution with Israel.** The government must clearly reject violence, recognize Israel, accept previous agreements and be committed to entering into negotiations that lead to the creation of a viable, independent, democratic state in the West Bank and Gaza living side by side with Israel with security, dignity, and religious liberty for both peoples.
4. **Continue to develop democratic institutions and strengthen the rule of law, ensuring transparency and effective monitoring of aid to the Palestinian people.** These initiatives are essential both to create a more stable and effective Palestinian Authority and to engender international confidence and secure international aid and investment.

5. **Work with Israelis and the international community to guarantee access to the Holy Places and religious liberty for all peoples.**

We call on the United States to encourage Israel to:

1. **Work actively to resolve the crisis in Gaza and achieve an effective Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire.** Resolving the crisis will involve securing an effective ceasefire, stopping military attacks on Palestinians, enabling the movement of goods and people, releasing Palestinian officials and other prisoners, and cooperating with Palestinian security forces to improve security for Israelis and Palestinians.
2. **Seek effective ways to restart negotiations for peace with the Palestinians.** Prime Minister Olmert should resume talks with Palestinian President Abbas as soon as possible. Bilateral negotiations are essential. The outlines for a just two-state peace agreement with the Palestinians are well known. The only realistic way to end the conflict is by means of negotiations and compromise. The twin essentials for building peace are real security for Israelis and a viable, secure state for Palestinians.
3. **Take concrete steps to support the prospect of a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.** Israel should remove “illegal outposts,” halt expansion of settlements, refrain from constructing the “security barrier” in areas that infringe on Palestinian land and reiterate its previous commitment that the route of the wall does not prejudice final status negotiations. Israel should also take steps to ease the humanitarian situation of Palestinians and promote economic development, including appropriately monitored transfers of Palestinian taxes collected by Israel to meet the needs of the Palestinian people, and freer movement for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.
4. **Support full implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 in Lebanon.** This cooperation includes withdrawal of its military forces to the international border, resolution of the prisoner issue, and cooperation with the U.N. Secretary General to resolve the Shebaa farms issue.
5. **Initiate diplomatic efforts to restart negotiations for peace with Syria and Lebanon.** The broad outlines for peace agreements with Syria and Lebanon are clear, based on the prior experience with Jordan and Egypt. The only realistic way to ensure the security of Israel and to stabilize the region is by means of comprehensive negotiations.
6. **Work with Palestinians and the international community to guarantee access to the Holy Places and religious liberty for all peoples.**

We call on the United States to encourage Arab states to:

- 1. Support formation of a Palestinian Authority government fully committed to achieving an effective ceasefire with Israel and to negotiating a two-state solution.** Consistent with the Arab League Peace Initiative, press Hamas to reject violence and accept U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and 1397 as the basis for a negotiated two-state solution with Israel. Provide aid and development assistance to improve the capacity of the Palestinians to build a viable state.
- 2. Support full implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559 in relation to Lebanon.** This includes support for the Lebanese government, with help from the U.N. peacekeeping force, asserting sole authority throughout southern Lebanon, cooperating in preventing the rearming of Hezbollah, releasing Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah, and providing assistance for massive reconstruction efforts in Lebanon.
- 3. Undertake diplomatic initiatives to restart and advance Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese negotiations for peace.** Comprehensive Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace as envisioned in the Arab League Peace Initiative requires successful negotiations for peace agreements between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Lebanon.
- 4. Work toward a comprehensive peace that recognizes Israel and ensures security and peace for all the nations of the region.** The comprehensive peace envisioned in the Arab League Peace Initiative should lead to recognition of Israel by all Arab states.
- 5. Work with Israelis, Palestinians and the international community to guarantee access to the Holy Places and religious liberty for all peoples.**

A Common Commitment to Action

As religious leaders we commit ourselves to working with the Administration and the Congress to support active, fair and firm U.S. leadership to help Israelis, Palestinians and Arab states achieve a just peace. We will pray for God's blessing to sustain all those who seek to build a just peace and will work within and across our respective faith communities to build bridges of understanding and a shared commitment to a just peace for all of the peoples of the Middle East. We commit ourselves to building public support for peace with justice for all in the region. With the blessing of God, we are confident that this urgent moment of crisis can give way to genuine hope for all God's children in the Middle East.

Signers of “Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace: From Crisis to Hope”

Christian Leaders:

His Eminence, Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, Archdiocese of Washington*
His Eminence, William Cardinal Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore*
Most Reverend William Skylstad, President, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*
His Eminence, Archbishop Demetrios, Primate, Greek Orthodox Church in America*
His Eminence, Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, Primate, Armenian Apostolic Church in America*
Bishop Mark Hanson, Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*
Most Rev. Dr. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop Episcopal Church*
John H. Thomas, General Minister & President, United Church of Christ*
The Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, General Minister, President, Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)*
The Reverend Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk, Presbyterian Church (USA)*
Ann B. Sherer, Bishop, The United Methodist Church*
The Reverend Michael E. Livingston, President, National Council of Churches USA*
The Reverend John M. Buchanan, Editor and Publisher, Christian Century*
Richard J. Mouw, President, Fuller Theological Seminary*
The Reverend Leighton Ford, President, Leighton Ford Ministries*
David Neff, Editor and Vice-President, Christianity Today*

Jewish Leaders:

Rabbi Harry K. Danziger, President, Central Conference of American Rabbis*
Rabbi Paul Menitoff, Executive Vice President Emeritus, Central Conference of American Rabbis*
Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President, Union for Reform Judaism*
Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism*
Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism*
Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Rector, University of Judaism*
Dr. Carl Sheingold, Executive Vice President, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation*
Rabbi Brant Rosen, President, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association*
Rabbi Amy Small, Past President, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association*
Rabbi Peter Knobel, Member, Council Parliament of World Religions*
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*
Naim Baig, Secretary General, Islamic Circle of North America*
Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Founder, American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA)*
Imam Yahya Hendi, Chaplain, Georgetown University*
Dawud Assad, President Emeritus, Council of Mosques, USA*
Iftekhar A. Hai, Founding Director, United Muslims of America*

*Organizations for Identification Only