
GUEST VIEWPOINT

We must make peace in Middle East

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Mother Teresa once said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to one another."

As leaders in our respective Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, we are deeply concerned about the ongoing crisis in Palestine and the prospects for a meaningful, lasting peace in that troubled region. We recognize that religious traditions often have been a source of conflict in the Middle East and continue to be misused to inflame hatred and violence.

It is painful to witness the ongoing strife, and yet we cannot give into despair. Each of our traditions can be a strong force for peace and justice. We believe that people of different faith traditions can and must join together to work in collaboration for a just and peaceful resolution to the current crisis in Palestine and Israel.

The violent takeover of Gaza by Hamas and its subsequent ouster from the Palestinian government has created a volatile situation that threatens to pit the leaders of Gaza against those of the West Bank. While many factors have contributed to this crisis, we recognize that this fundamental conflict is at its heart: Many Israelis feel they cannot negotiate with those who do not recognize their right to exist, whereas many Palestinians feel they cannot recognize a government that has occupied their land for the past 40 years while confiscating significant portions of it.

Ultimately, the success of Hamas is the result of the failures on all sides - Palestinian, Israeli and American - to bring meaningful change for the lives of ordinary citizens living in very difficult circumstances. We are hopeful that the renewed dialogue between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas will bring new progress, and yet we are fearful that their efforts will be to no avail if there is not significant support for change on all sides in current policies and practices.

We know solving this impasse will be extremely difficult, yet it is imperative that a solution be found soon.

To that end, we hold the following to be bedrock principles on which a peaceful future depends:

- All sides must recognize the right of the other to exist without threats to their own existence.
- The occupation must end as soon as possible. Israel should return to its pre-1967 borders with minor border modifications mutually agreed upon.

- This crisis must be resolved peacefully. There is too much at stake to allow the current situation to evolve into another war.
- The "two-state solution" is the only viable solution that offers promise for a peaceful future. Therefore, there can only be one Palestine, just as there is one Israel.

The vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians want to put an end to decades of confrontation and conflict and to live side by side in two states - in peaceful coexistence, with mutual dignity and security. They know that their futures are joined at the hip and that as two proud peoples who have suffered much, whether they like it or not, Palestinians and Israelis "belong to one another." What choices the United States makes in the coming weeks will help determine if, when and at what additional human costs this vision of peace may be fulfilled.

It's not too late to save the two-state peace plan - and thus protect Israel, Palestine and important U.S. interests. Urgent action is required, however, if that plan is to have any chance of success.

Our three faith traditions guide us to believe in human responsibility and capacity for making peace, for establishing justice, and for recognizing the dignity and infinite value of every person. As religious leaders sharing a common tradition, we join together to affirm our faith in the one God who is on the side of peace and reconciliation.

For the sake of all peoples in the Middle East, we ask our government to make a just peace with respect of basic human rights for Palestinians and Israelis alike to be its top priority.

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