

Churches for Middle East



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United Church of Christ
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United Methodist Church
General Board of Church and Society
General Board of Global Ministries:
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May 2, 2006

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States

The Honorable Mahmoud Abbas
President of the Palestinian Authority

The Honorable Ehud Olmert
Prime Minister-Elect of Israel

Dear President Bush, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert,

We write to you as leaders of churches and church-related organizations from the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions that work together in Churches for Middle East Peace.

With a sense of great urgency, we appeal to you to take immediate actions that can restore hope for peace between the state of Israel and the future state of Palestine. With anguish, we recognize the tremendous grief, anger, suffering and fear felt by both the Israeli and Palestinian people. With alarm, we observe the growing danger that this unresolved conflict brings to the people of the United States as anti-American sentiment is fueled by the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. With hope, we ask for your intervention in four areas of deep concern: the pending humanitarian crisis, the cessation of violence, the establishment of a mutually negotiated border between Israel and the future Palestine, and the status of Jerusalem.

The looming humanitarian crisis among the Palestinian people is our most immediate concern. We have heard reports from a recent Churches for Middle East Peace delegation to Jerusalem and the West Bank and from staff of humanitarian and development agencies that the cut-off of aid to the Palestinian Authority and the strict limitations on aid going through NGOs poses a threat of massive dimensions. We ask each of you to adopt policies and take actions that provide both space and opportunity for the newly elected Hamas government to make positive changes, while finding mechanisms that allow financial assistance to reach the Palestinian people immediately.

President Abbas, we encourage you to maintain your persistent commitment to peacemaking and nonviolence. We were deeply grieved by the suicide bombing in Tel Aviv on April 17 and alarmed by Hamas officials' statements condoning this terrible act of violence. We urge you and the Palestinian people to remain

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steadfast in pursuit of peace and to press the officials of Hamas to accept previous agreements regarding Israel and to renounce violence.

Prime Minister Olmert, we commend you for declaring that under your leadership Israel will withdraw from additional occupied land and dismantle some settlements in the West Bank. Such actions, undertaken in consultation with the Palestinians, could be important moves forward in Israel's compliance with UNSC Res. 242, which continues to be the internationally accepted legal basis for resolution of the conflict. We also urge you to end the practice of targeted assassinations and incursions into Palestinian areas.

President Bush, your vision of a two-state solution that provides for a viable state of Palestine living in peace alongside a secure and internationally recognized state of Israel remains our goal – a goal that is shared by the majority of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, according to polling data. Yet, steps are being taken by both governments that make this solution increasingly difficult. As you continue to press Hamas to change, we ask you to remain diligent about changes being made by Israel on the ground. We applaud your statements, and those of Secretary of State Rice, that no one should try to unilaterally predetermine the outcome of final status agreement and encourage Prime Minister Olmert to heed your words.

It is extremely important that decisions on the final status issues of borders, Jewish settlements, refugees, water and the sovereignty of Jerusalem be agreed upon in the context of negotiations and with the strong leadership of the United States in cooperation with the Quartet and the Arab League. We believe that in you, President Abbas, the Israelis do have a partner with whom to negotiate. That is the only means by which the outcomes will be viewed as legitimate and conducive to a durable peace between Israel and its neighbors. Prime Minister Olmert, if you choose to unilaterally disengage from portions of the West Bank and the environs of East Jerusalem, we urge you to publicly declare that the withdrawal lines are not permanent borders and that those will be determined in negotiations with the Palestinians.

Similarly, we ask for Prime Minister Olmert's assurance that the separation barrier is only temporary, and that its route, where it extends beyond the Green Line, is not a permanent border. The separation barrier is having a tremendously negative impact, both psychologically and economically, on the Palestinians and on the potential of a viable Palestinian state. While the separation barrier may prevent some terrorist attacks, we believe Israel's security lies ultimately in a negotiated end of the occupation that is accepted by the United Nations as the fulfillment of Security Council resolutions and is consistent with the requirements of the Geneva Conventions.

Churches for Middle East Peace has long advocated the sharing of Jerusalem by the two peoples and the three faiths. The severing of Bethlehem and other parts of the West Bank from East Jerusalem by means of the separation barrier and restrictive residency and other laws is extremely troubling. It is no longer possible for Palestinian Muslims and Christians in the West Bank and Gaza to worship at their holy sites and to have access to Jerusalem-based institutions. We believe that a negotiated solution for Jerusalem, that takes into account the profound dimensions of the Holy City for Jews, Christians, and Muslims globally, is the key to Middle East peace and the eventual reconciliation of the Abrahamic family.

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President Bush, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert, you alone are capable of reawakening your peoples to the promise of peace. Our urgent appeal to you is witness to the great numbers of people of the Christian tradition, in the United States and globally, who pray for peace and for your strength and courage to be peacemakers.

Sincerely,

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