



## **Resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian Crisis**

**A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops  
June 15, 2001**

During the last nine months we have watched with sorrow and dismay as opportunities for peace in the Middle East have been lost in a spiral of violence. This violence is clearly seen in the destruction of so many homes, in the growing number of wounded and disabled, and most of all in the number of Palestinians and Israelis who have lost their lives, including many children and youth. This cycle of violence has exacerbated an already dangerous situation and dimmed prospects for peace. In this time of darkness, we make our own the prayer of Pope John Paul II:

The terms of the Middle East drama are well known: The Jewish people, after tragic experiences connected with the extermination of so many sons and daughters, driven by the desire for security, set up the State of Israel. At the same time the painful condition of the Palestinian people was created, a large part of whom are excluded from their land.... Gathered here today, we present to the One God, to the Living God, to the Father of all, the problems of peace in the Middle East and also the problem, which is so dear to us, of the rapport and real dialogue with those with whom we are united--in spite of the differences--by faith in one God, the faith inherited from Abraham. May the spirit of unity, mutual respect, and understanding prove to be more powerful than what divides and sets in opposition." (Homily at Otranto, Italy, Oct. 5, 1980)

In this spirit, we reiterate our strong call of November 2000: "The only acceptable option is an end to the violence, respect for the basic human rights of all, and a return to the path of peace." (U.S. Catholic Conference, November 15, 2000.) A way must be found to return quickly to genuine negotiations, embracing, as far as possible, the gains made in the last rounds of final status talks. We deeply regret that the negotiations last summer and fall did not achieve a lasting settlement. Despite that failure and recent, terrible events, it is not too late to embrace nonviolence, dialogue and negotiation as the only road forward. The steps toward a just and lasting peace remain the same: real security for the State of Israel, a viable state for Palestinians, just resolution of the refugee problem, an agreement on Jerusalem which protects religious freedom and other basic rights,<sup>1</sup> an equitable sharing of resources, especially water, and implementation of relevant UN resolutions and other provisions of international law.<sup>2</sup> These steps will pave the way to a future of cooperation and accommodation rather than occupation and conflict.

As supporters of the State of Israel and a state for Palestinians, we recognize that each side in this conflict has deep, long-standing and legitimate grievances that must be addressed if there is to be a just and lasting peace.

It is necessary for all to recognize that Palestinians rightly insist on an end to Israel's three-decade-long occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and to the continued establishment and expansion of settlements. Palestinians see this occupation, maintained by force and marked by

daily indignities, abuse and violence, as a central underlying cause of the present crisis. Israel has a fundamental right to security, but security will not be won by ongoing annexation of Palestinian land, blockades, air strikes on cities, destruction of crops and homes, and other excessive uses of force.

It is also necessary for all to recognize that Israelis rightly see the failure of Palestinians to demonstrate full respect for Israel's right to exist and flourish within secure borders as a fundamental cause of the conflict. Palestinian leaders must clearly renounce violence and terrorist acts against innocent civilians, take effective steps to stop them, and bring to justice those responsible. The violence undermines the trust required to make peace and weakens the Palestinian search for justice. The Palestinian Authority must show the Israeli people that it is fully committed to prepare its people to live in peace with Israel.

These times call for new attitudes on the part of all the parties to the conflict. "We all know," the Holy Father said during his recent visit to Syria, "that real peace can only be achieved if there is a new attitude of understanding and respect between the peoples of the region, between the followers of the three Abrahamic religions.... [I]t is important that there be an evolution in the way the peoples of the region see one another and that at every level of society the principles of peaceful coexistence be taught and promoted." (Remarks upon arrival in Damascus, Syria, May 5, 2001.)

In the same spirit, this is a moment that requires that more Palestinian leaders and supporters of the Palestinian cause not simply advocate a Palestinian state, but also be unambiguously clear about Israel's right to peace and security, and the imperative to end all violence. This moment equally requires that more Israeli leaders and supporters of the State of Israel not only defend Israel and her people, but also advocate for the legitimate aspiration of Palestinians to live in their own homeland with dignity. At the same time, each community must refrain from inciting hatred against the other. We pray that the voices urging respect for the rights and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians will be heeded by their leaders and people. The just claims of both peoples should also enjoy the active support of Christians throughout the world. Civic, educational and religious leaders should be challenged to refrain from fanning the flames of ethnic and religious prejudice and be encouraged to promote a process of reconciliation without which peace will never be a reality.

While peace will ultimately spring from new attitudes and new ways of acting on the part of Palestinians and Israelis, our government, as well as the entire international community, must be actively engaged, in appropriate and significant ways, in working for a just and comprehensive solution to this conflict. We expect that they will do so in a way that responds respectfully to the legitimate claims and expectations of both parties, and does not acquiesce in unilateral actions which undermine negotiations.

As Catholics in the United States, we have a special concern for the toll the Israeli-Palestinian struggle is taking on the Christian communities in the area. The native-born Christian presence in Israel and the occupied territories, less than two per-cent of the total, risks shrinking into insignificance, in no small part due to the present troubles and their human and economic consequences. Other developments, such as the concerns of Christians about the Nazareth

mosque, only exacerbate a sense of marginalization. As a result of these and other factors, the future of a living Christian presence in the Holy Land is in doubt. The Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, himself a Palestinian from Nazareth, has pleaded with families to remain as faithful witnesses to the Gospel in the Holy Land. Regrettably, many families have already emigrated and many more are tempted to do so. Partnerships with Catholic parishes in the Holy Land are one way to encourage the Christian presence there.

Mindful of our historic debt to the Church in the Holy Land and our duties of solidarity to a sister church in severe need, we ask Catholics in the United States to join in strengthening the Church there during the present crisis and supporting its work for a just peace. We urge Catholics to be much more conscious of and give much greater attention to the crisis in the Middle East, and do what they can to support a living Christian presence in the land of Jesus' birth. We urge them to be unflagging in pressing our government to play an active and constructive role in the search for a just peace. We urge them to reach out in dialogue and joint action with Jews, Muslims and other Christians in this country. Finally, we urge them to support generously the urgent relief and development work of Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of the Holy Land, and other worthy initiatives. The efforts of these and other organizations would be severely undermined if the U.S. government were to cut off humanitarian aid for the occupied territories, as some are proposing.

We pray that the God of peace, who has called us to be ambassadors of reconciliation, will achieve what human means alone cannot. Confident in God's blessings, we ask U.S. Catholics to join us through their prayers, their fasting and their good works in assisting Palestinians and Israelis, Jews, Muslims and Christians, in securing justice and peace in the Holy Land.

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<sup>1</sup> The question of Jerusalem involves two aspects. Territorial sovereignty is a bilateral question for Israelis and the Palestinian Authority to resolve equitably and by negotiations according to UN Resolutions. The religious dimension of Jerusalem, especially the "Old City," involves the need to preserve its unique and sacred character, both the Holy Places and the living communities of believers there. In order to safeguard the religious and human dimensions of Jerusalem, the Holy See has long advocated a special statute, internationally guaranteed. This statute would secure: (1) freedom of religion and conscience for all; (2) the juridical equality of the three monotheistic religions; (3) respect for the identity and sacred character of the City; (4) protection of and freedom of access for all to the Holy Places; (5) the regime of "status quo" in Holy Places where it applies. This statute, to be negotiated by the two parties in consultation with the three religious communities, could be guaranteed by the UN, the sponsors of the peace process, or another entity, but, in any case, should be sanctioned by the United Nations.

<sup>2</sup> Among the pertinent UN Resolutions are nos. 242, 338, and 194.

