



Some Perspectives on the Current Situation In Israel and the Palestinian Authority

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Friends & Colleagues:

Many people have asked my views on the current situation in Jerusalem and the PA. In addition, I have received requests to sign statements regarding the situation. For the record, here are some of my perspectives on the current conflict. I certainly welcome any comments you may have.

The current conflict in my judgment results from some of the following realities:

1) There has been a failure to create a genuine "culture of peace" on the ground since the Oslo Accords were signed. Some progress along these lines were made on the Israeli side. But the reaction to Barak's proposals at the Camp David meeting show that, even in Israel despite polls showing continued support for peace, there was insufficient understanding within the general population of what a peace agreement would realistically require. On the Palestinian side, virtually nothing was done to develop a mentality of peace. This is one of the biggest failures of the PA leadership. Language of hatred and violence continued unabated in the media, in educational programs and in religious institutions. On the Christian side Patriarch Sabah made some statements urging reconciliation but there was no ongoing program established to inculcate a new attitude of peace. The language issue remains a central issue. Palestinians cannot shout "death to the Jews" and "down with Israel" in the streets of Gaza or Chicago, as they have, and expect Jews to espouse peace and reconciliation.

2) There was penned up economic frustration on the part of the Palestinians that was too little understood on the Israeli side. We in the West and people in Israel could talk about the progress in the peace negotiations. But to many people in the PA, especially those in the camps, these statements rang hollow. Regrettably they have made Israel the sole culprit for their terrible sufferings. In fact, the PA never made a concerted effort to divert international aid to their economic benefit. Criticisms along these lines of the PA leadership has come from within Palestine and the international donor community (including some Arab donor countries). Too much of the funding went to the exclusive benefit of the Palestinian elite. This only points to the divisions within the PA among the Tunis group, the leaders who spent much of the occupation in the West Bank/Gaza and the people in the camps. The more radical groups in the PA seize upon these social divisions. Unless the current PA leadership addresses these divisions more directly, they too could become victims of the current conflict.

But, in addition to the failures of the PA leadership, the very slow process in implementing the Oslo

Accords, especially during the time of the Likud government, is now coming back to haunt us. There was simply too little attention to the feelings of those on the ground who simply did not see much happening in terms of the movement towards a Palestinian state. Some of the development activities of the Jerusalem Municipality also contributed to the problem. While I do not subscribe to the thesis advanced in recent articles in such journals as THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY and COMMONWEAL that Israel was creating bantustans in the West Bank as a permanent reality, I can see how many in the PA felt that this might be Israel's ultimate plan despite the fact that the Israeli negotiating team was speaking in terms of a 90% return of territory. The failure to put a permanent halt to settlements in the West Bank definitely hurt the Oslo process.

3) The violence should not be portrayed simplistically as Palestinian youths with rocks against a mighty army. For one, sling-shots with rocks can be deadly weapons. But there is clear evidence, as was reported in a recent article in USA TODAY, of far more direct involvement of Palestinian gunman (including members of the PA police force). No country will stand by and allow its citizens to be attacked. Certainly the USA would react to attacks at our border crossings. Having said this, there are legitimate questions about the degree of Israeli response. I would urge the strongest possible restraint on the part of the Israelis and urge that the proposed international investigation committee do its work quickly.

4) Israel must recognize that symbols are very important in Middle Eastern culture. Ariel Sharon has become a symbol. And though I do not believe he alone is responsible for starting the violence, he does share a major part of the blame and the Israeli government needs to acknowledge this. I believe it would be disastrous for peace and for Israel's image internationally to promote Sharon to the government at this very difficult moment. It will cause the further isolation of Israel internationally and make it far more difficult for those of us committed to Israel's safety and security to defend her cause. This is especially true in religious circles where Israel has taken a bad hit, in part because of the superficial nature of a great deal of the media coverage of the situation.

5) I was approached this past week to sign on to several statements in support of Israel. While some of them, such as the one sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, leaned in the direction of peace, I could not sign on to any of them. My basic problem was that in the end they identified the signer only with Israel. I support Israel firmly. That commitment has never wavered and it will not. But that support also includes some sympathy for the Palestinian sufferings even though, as I have said above, they often depict that suffering too exclusively in anti-Israel terms. I do not believe Christians can be an effective advocate for Israel today within the Christian community if they are perceived as totally unresponsive to the plight of the Palestinians. I would hope that a dialogue could develop between Jewish organizations which have been leaders in dialogue with the Christian community in this regard. An unnuanced pro-Israel posture will marginalize a person as a voice for Israel within the general Christian community. That is the reality as I perceive it.

In this context I take issue with the group "The Churches for Middle East Peace" and their recent letter criticizing President Clinton. I regret that Bishop Fiorenza signed this statement as President of the U.S. Catholics Bishops" Conference. This Churches" for the Middle East Group has never publicly criticized any aspect of PA policy despite criticism by many within the PA and abroad. I much prefer the tone of the statement released by Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston as Chairman of the U.S. Catholic Bishops" Committee on International Policy. It is far more nuanced in its assessment of the situation.

6) I have no magical formulas for bringing the current violence to an end and resuming negotiations. That is primarily the role of governmental leaders. And such a resumption of negotiations will surely depend on the restoration of a measure of trust which has been badly undermined in the last few weeks. But those of us in the religious community and in social justice

organizations should not feel totally helpless. Eleanor Roosevelt's famous dictum about lighting a candle rather than cursing the darkness must apply. In the first instance, we need to support those in the region who have been the strong champions of peace and reconciliation and who now are in many cases almost consumed by despair. We need to support groups such as our two ICCJ member organizations the Israel Interfaith Association and the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel who in their distinctive ways are responding creatively to the current crisis. As a Vice President of ICCJ I am immensely proud of their efforts in very trying circumstances. We can also encourage efforts to bring grass roots leaders in the area together for personal encounters. International organizations such as the San Egidio community may have a significant role to play in this regard. We can encourage interreligious prayer services for peace. We hope to have one here in Chicago shortly. Finally, we must do everything to challenge the language of violence. You cannot say you are for peace and use the language of death and destruction. I remember my student days working with the Martin Luther King movement in Chicago. When King was challenged by those in SNCC and Core, who wanted to abandon the peaceful struggle for justice in favor of violence, King got up and said absolutely NO despite a very real threat to his life over the matter. We need to commit ourselves to Dr. King's vision of peace.

May God bless and strengthen all my friends in the Middle East who are struggling to bring about reconciliation in this difficult hour. Know that I am with you in prayer.

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