

**31 US JEWISH, MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS CALL
FOR US TO TAKE CONCRETE STEPS TO PROMOTE PALESTINIAN-
ISRAELI PEACE**

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**Text of a letter from National Interreligious Leadership Initiative
for Peace in the Middle East to President George W. Bush**

Urgent Steps Needed on the Road to Peace

The United States, in coordination with the Quartet, should immediately take the following steps to renew momentum on the Road Map -

1. Strongly reiterate the Road Map's unequivocal call for an end to all acts of violence and work actively with the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli Government and Arab states to achieve and maintain a ceasefire agreement.

Comment: Ending violent attacks and counter attacks is essential to making progress on the Road Map. During the several week period following the Aqaba Summit when there were no violent attacks the Road Map began to develop traction and people on both sides began to believe that the Road Map could work. The United States, in coordination with the Quartet, should work actively with the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli Government and the Arab states to avoid any further escalation of violence and to achieve a ceasefire agreement, including an effective system for monitoring and publicizing violations by either side.

2. Exercise active, determined U.S. and Quartet engagement, including consistent, visible presence of the special Presidential Envoy and larger scale, public monitoring of implementation required by both sides.

Comment: Given the legacy of three years of violent confrontation, the level of mistrust between the parties, and the pressures on Israeli and Palestinian leaders, there is need for active high level, public engagement by the United States and the Quartet, including consistent, visible presence of the special Presidential Envoy, in pressing for implementation of steps required by both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government. The monitoring system for measuring implementation needs to be larger, more vigorous and visible.

3. Determine with more specificity steps which each side must take and set a timetable for taking them. (See below for Specific Steps to be taken by the Palestinian Authority and Israel.)

Comment: The Road Map is clear in calling for parallel and simultaneous steps by each side to begin to address the core concerns of the other side. The United States, in coordination with the Quartet, should spell out specific steps each side must take, along with an explicit timetable for taking them. Monitors should report publicly on the performance of each party in relation to these expectations.

4. Support benchmarks for possible mutually acceptable solutions based on the principles and ideas generated in earlier negotiations and in current Israeli-Palestinian civil society projects, such as the Nusseibeh-Ayalon initiative and the Geneva Accord.

Comment: Reflecting the vision articulated by President Bush on June 24, 2002, the Road Map's goal is the emergence (by the year 2005) of a viable, independent and democratic Palestinian state living side by side in peace with the Jewish state of Israel. The Road Map views progress toward this goal as "a vital element of international efforts to promote a comprehensive peace on all tracks, including the Syrian-Israeli and Lebanese-Israeli tracks." The goal of comprehensive Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace requires that the United States and the Quartet work to restart negotiations on all tracks. The principles and ideas discussed in formal and informal negotiations (Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Taba, Egypt in 2000-01 and currently in the civil society projects such as the Nusseibeh-Ayalon initiative and the Geneva Accord; and Israeli-Syrian negotiations at Wye, Maryland in 1995) provide important hopeful benchmarks for possible mutually acceptable solutions. Focusing public attention on these ideas can help allay fears on both sides and build support in the Middle East and here for realistic compromises on crucial, sensitive issues, including security, refugees and the future of Jerusalem.

Specific Steps for the Palestinian Authority

The United States, in coordination with the Quartet, should insist that the Palestinian Authority -

5. Continue and deepen the process of democratic reforms and financial accountability.

Comment: It is essential for progress in negotiations and for the future of a Palestinian state that the process of democratic reform and financial accountability continue, including support for a Prime Minister and Cabinet level ministers with real authority, the development of a constitution, free press, free and fair elections, consolidation of security forces, and progress on other judicial, administrative and economic benchmarks, as established by the International Task Force on Palestinian Reform. The U.S. and Quartet should adopt a realistic, balanced approach of pressing for continuing the democratic reform process, while not appearing to dictate the choice of leadership for the Palestinian people.

6. Take effective action to halt violent attacks against Israelis, punish those who commit any such acts, and gain commitments from all factions to cooperate in implementing the Road Map.

Comment: The Palestinian suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism not only are morally indefensible and generate tremendous fear, frustration and anger among Israelis, but also have very seriously hurt the legitimate interests of the Palestinian people. The new Palestinian Prime Minister, the Interior Minister and the Palestinian Authority as a whole must find ways to prevent these attacks and to gain agreement from all Palestinian factions on supporting, or at least not interfering with, the steps required by Palestinians in implementing the Road Map.

7. Cooperate with regional and international efforts to cut-off aid to and dismantle those groups which persist in planning or carrying out acts of violence against Israelis.

Comment: The Palestinian Authority should consider individuals or groups which persist in planning or carrying-out violent attacks against Israelis to be illegal and against the fundamental interests of the Palestinian people. In such cases, the Palestinian Authority should cooperate with international efforts to cut-off any funds to such individuals or organizations, and effectively dismantle those organizations.

8. U.S., regional, and international support and (effectively monitored) economic aid should be increased to bolster the Palestinian central authority's capacity to consolidate and strengthen its security forces, prevent terrorist attacks; and to deliver humanitarian aid, vital services, and development assistance to the Palestinian people.

Comment: Three years of violent attacks, counter-attacks and military reoccupation have taken a terrible toll on the capacity of the Palestinian Authority to provide security or vital social services. Increased U.S. and international (effectively monitored) economic aid is essential to rebuilding and enabling the Palestinian Authority to carry out its responsibilities in implementation of the Road Map, including consolidating security forces, preventing terrorist attacks and becoming the reliable, primary source of services and aid to the Palestinian people.

Specific Steps for the Israeli Government

Simultaneously, the United States, in coordination with the Quartet, should insist that the Israeli Government -

9. Take effective action to dismantle all unauthorized settlement outposts established since March 2002 and freeze expansion of existing settlements.

Comment: The Israeli government's continued support for expansion of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza is a major threat to the viability of a future Palestinian state, directly undermines Palestinian confidence in the peace process, compounds Israeli security problems, and represents an additional economic burden on a seriously hurting Israeli economy.

10. Exercise measures, such as lifting curfews and easing restrictions on movement within the West Bank and Gaza, to improve the humanitarian situation of Palestinians.

Comment: Reports have documented the terrible humanitarian crisis Palestinians face as a result of the three years of violent confrontation and reoccupation of Palestinian areas. There are measures which the Israeli Government can and should take, such as lifting curfews and easing restrictions on the movement of people and goods within the West Bank and Gaza, which would improve the humanitarian situation.

11. Halt construction of the Security "Fence" or "Wall" beyond the Green Line around settlements in areas which require confiscation of more Palestinian land and threaten the viability of a future Palestinian state.

Comment: It is understandable, even if it is no solution, that Israeli frustration over continued violent attacks by Palestinians led to support for building a Security "Fence" or "Wall" to separate

Israel from the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. However, the actual and proposed route of the Wall is complicated by Israel's commitment to defend Jewish settlements. The Wall has been and is being constructed in some areas which require confiscation of more Palestinian land, effectively enrage the local Palestinian population, and threaten the viability of a future Palestinian state.

12. In coordination with the Palestinian Authority demonstrating capacity to prevent violent attacks, withdraw Israeli military forces from areas reoccupied since September 2000.

Comment: As the Palestinian Authority demonstrates increased capacity to prevent violent attacks against Israelis, Israel should withdraw its military forces from areas reoccupied since September 2000. Achieving real security for Israelis and ending the occupation for Palestinians are the twin essentials for building peace. The United States needs to engage directly with the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority at a high level to develop specific steps and a timetable for this process.

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BELIEFS

Mideast Initiative Pushes Beyond Platitudes

By PETER STEINFELS

Statements by religious leaders about world events come with the frequency of Sunday sermons, and are all too often no more memorable.

A major exception may have occurred on Tuesday, when 32 prominent Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders announced a National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East, a collaborative effort to push the United States into vigorously and visibly pursuing its road map for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

The difference this time lies in who these religious leaders are, what they said and what they are planning to do.

Not surprisingly, the 32 included officials from the moderate-to-liberal mainline Protestant churches: Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The Roman Catholic cardinals of Washington, D.C., and Baltimore and the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops were joined by the primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in America.

More significant, however, were the joint endorsements from Muslim, Jewish and evangelical Christian leaders, representatives of three groups with critical roles in both Middle Eastern and domestic American politics.

The eight Muslim leaders included those from the nation's two largest Islamic religious organizations.

The Jewish leaders included officials from the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist rabbinical associations. The evangelical leaders included the editor of Christianity Today, the leading evangelical publication, and the president of the world's largest interdenominational seminary.

Given the range in this group and some very real theological and political divisions among the members, the statement on Tuesday was remarkably specific and substantive.

It outlined "12 urgent steps for peace."

Four steps were directed primarily toward Washington, along with the other nations that helped draw up the road map. First, restate the unequivocal call for an end to violence and work actively for a cease-fire. Second, keep a special presidential envoy consistently and visibly active in the region. Third, make the road map's simultaneous steps by Israel and the Palestinian Authority even more specific, with timetables and public monitoring. Fourth, highlight negotiations like the recent Geneva Accord as at least models or benchmarks for a comprehensive solution.

Another four steps were directed toward the Palestinian Authority and a final four toward the Israeli government. These included Palestinian actions to dismantle violent groups and institute democratic and financial reforms, and Israeli actions to dismantle unauthorized settlements, freeze the expansion of others and halt the construction of the fence where it involves confiscating Palestinian land or impeding a future Palestinian state.

John Carr, a veteran of religious coalition-building who works for the Catholic conference of bishops, marveled at the specificity of the statement. "Normally these are lowest-common-denominator things: against violence, for peace," Mr. Carr said.

Of course, these 12 steps were not telling the diplomats or embattled political leaders anything they do not already know about suicide bombing, cease-fires or West Bank settlements. But the common platform suggested that a consensus might stretch a lot further across religious opinion in the United States and run a lot deeper than a few vague phrases.

At the group's news conference in Washington on Tuesday, for example, David Neff, editor and vice president of Christianity Today, challenged the idea that vigorous pursuit of the road map by the Bush administration would imperil the president's standing with evangelical Christian voters.

Mr. Neff cited polls and studies indicating that most evangelical Christians see no conflict between their theological interpretation of God's biblical plan and the existence of a Palestinian state that does not endanger Israel.

"If the Bush administration is able to seize this moment and provide American leadership that actually results in a stable and peaceful resolution between Israel and Palestine," Mr. Neff said, "I think that almost all of America's evangelicals will praise him."

Several people at the news conference were struck by the fact that Jewish leaders were most outspoken on the need for action by Israel and Muslim leaders on action by the Palestinians.

Rabbi Paul Menitoff, executive vice president of the Reform Jewish group Central Conference of American Rabbis, and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, founder of the American Sufi Muslim Association, appeared to sum things up for the group.

The general outlines of a final peace agreement are widely recognized, Rabbi Menitoff said, adding: "On the backs of how many dead Israelis and Palestinians will the inevitable peace be achieved? Will President Bush act decisively with the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to lessen the body count?"

Imam Rauf said a solution to the Middle East conflict was a key to assuring domestic security. He also said, "We believe that 100 years more of suicide bombings will not drive Israel into the sea, and we believe that 100 years more of targeted assassinations will never dry up the reservoir of young Palestinians willing to give up their lives."

On Tuesday, the assembled leaders promised to use all the instruments at their disposal — pulpits, church bulletins, publications, e-mail messages — to build a broad movement urging that the White House and Congress make pursuit of a Palestinian-Israeli settlement a priority and a "moral imperative."

Follow-up, however, is often the weakest aspect of most statements by religious leaders. The "12 steps" will soon meet opposition, from outright doubters of the road map to Middle East peace as well as those who think Washington should stay in the background. Already, an article in the Jewish weekly newspaper Forward called the participation of Jewish leaders in the collaborative campaign a "dramatic sign of a looming rift" in the Jewish community. The Muslim and evangelical leaders can also expect sharp criticism from within their ranks.

But isn't that the price of not settling for platitudes?

