

Churches for Middle East Peace



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May 5, 2009

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
Washington, DC

Dear Secretary Clinton,

Thank you for your leadership, together with President Obama and Special Envoy Mitchell, in working to achieve Israeli-Arab peace. The visit this month of his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth is a demonstration of the deep connection we as Christians have to the Holy Land – its two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, and its historic Christian community.

As a coalition of 22 national church bodies – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – we urge your attention to the alarming decline in numbers of our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters. We believe the potential for a Holy Land devoid of its indigenous Christian community has implications not only on religious and cultural grounds but also for U.S. national security interests, making your work to bring peace, stability and security through a just and lasting two-state solution even more urgent. Indeed, Christians play a critical role in the formation of a democratic and pluralistic Palestinian state. Their presence is necessary for Jerusalem to remain an interreligious city and their active participation in civil society and the continued good work of Christian schools, hospitals and other humanitarian institutions is an important element of a stable Middle East.

Ineffective peace efforts have allowed a dangerous combination of rising extremism, expanding settlements, and spiraling violence and terror to fester, leaving the searing wound of a separation barrier that cuts off Bethlehem from Jerusalem and severs the Holy Land's historic Christian villages and religious narrative. Palestinian Christians, a small and dwindling community that is today less than 2 percent of the Palestinian population, are disproportionately affected by the ongoing conflict, occupation, political upheaval and economic deterioration. Lacking hope for a positive future for their children, many Christians are emigrating in search of a more stable situation. While ultimately only a political agreement can preserve the Holy Land's Christian community and longstanding religious diversity, we urge you to address several specific issues as part of the Administration's broader efforts to resolve the conflict.

Restrictive Israeli residency and "family unification" laws and regulations in East Jerusalem, combined with severe limits on housing including the demolition orders you cited during your March trip, are interfering with Christian as well as Muslim, family life in Jerusalem. Palestinian East Jerusalemites are at risk today of losing their residency rights if they obtain citizenship from another country or if they reside elsewhere for more than a few years, even if their family has lived there for generations. In addition, a "temporary order" on family unification, dating back to 2003, froze the process by which West Bank residents were able to acquire residency in East Jerusalem and stipulated unworkable age requirements, thereby hindering marriages. These policies are contributing to the rapid decline of Jerusalem's Christian population, from 31,000 in 1945, down to less than 8,000 today.

Moreover, the church institutions that hold the Christian community together are themselves facing dire challenges. Israeli visa and permit restrictions currently inhibit the movement of several hundred Arab clergy, as well as other religious personnel, in and out of the Holy Land and between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and raise concerns about the ability of the Church to continue to fulfill its mission.

Finally, while Palestinian Christians maintain generally good relations with their Muslim neighbors and with the Palestinian Authority, as a minority community they are vulnerable and will benefit from further efforts to strengthen the rule of law in the West Bank and Gaza.

We believe that concrete steps to address the situation of Palestinian Christians will bolster your comprehensive peace effort and can be acted on in a manner that fully respects Israel's security needs while helping to build the foundation for a viable Palestinian state with effective governing institutions. Through your persistent diplomacy we hope this broken land can one day soon become a model for good relations – an antidote to rising intolerance and fundamentalism – and a place where all the children of Abraham can live together in peace with dignity and security.

Sincerely,

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