

Washington Interfaith Alliance for Middle East Peace  
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January 2, 2009

President-Elect Barack Obama  
451 6th Street NW  
Washington DC 20004

Dear President- Elect Obama:

I write to you as President of the Washington Interfaith Alliance for Middle East Peace. Our mandate states: "As people of faith, we work to inform individuals and groups in the Washington D.C. area about the need for a just peace in Palestine/Israel and the multiple dimensions of the conflict. We also promote steps which U.S. citizens might take to end the occupation and the violence in the region." We are hopeful that your administration will take bold initiatives to resolve this seemingly intractable conflict and create a just and secure peace for both Palestinians and Israelis. We urge you to give this subject the utmost of priority from the very beginning of the administration. We would like to share with you what we believe are essential principles required to achieve such a peace.

Advancing human rights and respect for international law must be an essential goal in to the Israeli Palestinian conflict as well as also U.S. foreign policy worldwide. In our view of the Palestinian Israeli conflict, we are especially cognizant that the human rights of the Palestinian people have been violated beginning with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. It is a matter of international record that approximately 750,000 Palestinians were effectively evicted from their homes and villages. There are now more than 4.6 million Palestinian refugees in the Palestinian territories and neighboring countries as a result of this eviction. We recently observed the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nakba ("catastrophe"). Since the 1967 war with neighboring countries, Israel has occupied the Palestinian territories: the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. In violation of the Geneva conventions, it has promoted settlement of these territories by Israelis. Thus, in order to obtain a resolution of the conflict, it is most important to address these human rights violations. Accomplishing a just peace will be the most credible means to also provide security for the State of Israel – in fact, it is only by these means that Israeli will obtain genuine security.

The most fundamental of international human rights is the right of self-determination. The right of a people to achieve independence and elect their own representatives is the very first article in the UN conventions on civil and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights. Palestinians have been yearning for this right even before 1948 during the British Mandate. To achieve this right people must be allowed to choose their own leaders and form of government. Too often the U.S. and Israel have denied Palestinians that right: first in refusing to recognize the Palestinian Liberation

Organization (PLO) and now in refusing to recognize Hamas, which according to all responsible organizations won the 2006 parliamentary elections. The Obama Administration should be willing to talk with Hamas representatives who have indicated their willingness to achieve a just peace agreement with Israel. It should encourage Hamas and Fatah to reach accommodation and form a unity government. The Obama Administration should be prepared to accept the outcome of elections in Palestine. It should make it abundantly clear to Israel that these are bedrock principles that U.S. policy shall follow.

As an immediate priority in this regard, you should vigorously advocate to Israel (and in concert with our European allies) the lifting of the blockade of Gaza and allow all essential humanitarian and civilian goods into Gaza and also provide entry to and exit from Gaza of Palestinians. With all deliberate speed there should be established an international administration providing for the free flow of goods and people into and out of Gaza. The collective punishment of civilians by the current restrictions of food, water, fuel, medicines and other essential goods into Gaza is in violation of international humanitarian law and could constitute a war crime. Malnutrition and even the threat of cholera due to the breakdown of the sewage system and clean water are the most egregious examples of the devastating effects of the blockade. We do not condone the firing of rockets into Israel and condemn that practice which is also in violation of international law, but this does not justify punishing innocent civilians. The only effective way to stop the rockets is to lift the blockade of all essential goods and then proceed actively to achieve a just peace. Palestinians need to see tangible progress towards establishment of a viable state for violence to stop.

For a just peace to be obtained between Israel and Palestine, the U.S. must be a genuine honest broker and press Israel to recognize international law and agree to an independent and viable Palestinian state. The extreme disparity in power between Israel - one of the most powerful military states in the world - and the Palestinian Authority makes it essential for the United States to press Israel to make reasonable concessions. Otherwise, the justifiably maligned "peace process" will continue to be perceived by Palestinians as a ruse to delay and grab more land from the Palestinian territories through settlements, and now more recently the separation barrier. The Annapolis conference and follow on is just one more example of this failed "peace process."

The Arab and Muslim world perceives the United States involvement in the region conflict as providing critical military, economic and diplomatic support to Israel at the expense of Palestinians. This support is reflected in the votes on this subject in the United Nations and in the 2.3+ billion dollars in military aid which the U.S. gives annually to Israel with virtually no strings attached. If the Obama Administration would take to heart the principles and steps we have outlined above, the attitude of the Arab and Muslim world towards the United States would change dramatically. This in turn could significantly affect U.S. efforts to protect the United States from terrorism since uncritical support for Israel gives sustenance of those in the Muslim world that resort to terrorism. A change in U.S. policy would have a ripple effect on our relations with Iran, Syria, and efforts to create a stable and democratic Iraq and Afghanistan and thus allow for our

military withdrawal from those countries. These effects will also provide a friendlier environment for the state of Israel.

In conclusion, The Washington Interfaith Alliance for Middle East Peace urges the Obama Administration to:

- make the promotion of human rights and international law the cornerstone of its policy towards the Israeli Palestinian conflict;
- take immediate measures to end the humanitarian crisis in Gaza;
- give immediate priority to negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians (including Hamas), and
- press Israel to agree to a peace settlement consonant with international law and human rights.

By so doing, the U.S. standing in the world, particularly among the one billion Muslim/Arab populations will be enhanced considerably, and Israel will receive a secure standing in the region.

We would appreciate having an opportunity to meet with you and/or your representatives to further explore these ideas and receive your responses to these suggestions.

Sincerely yours,

John P. Salzberg, President