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The Road to Peace - Vision and Courage

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Washington DC

"Advocacy Days" by the Churches for Middle East Peace

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In these times of great peril and uncertainty, with talk of war in the air, with military men and women mobilized and ready to unleash their might, with institutions and alliances that have served the cause of peace for decades fragmented and at cross purposes, it is hard to see through the fog and to advocate a course of moderation when the word moderation itself has become loaded and suspect. However, it is my intention to do just that.

The horrendous impact of September 11 could have provided the impetus for soul searching and the examination of issues, attitudes, policies, and raw unfiltered emotional attachments. It could have encouraged all of us to pull back and to draw a circle of sanity isolating the violent and extremists on all sides. Quite to the contrary, it has, in effect, given more credence and prominence to fundamentalists and ideologues, people who advocate the clash of civilizations and religions in pursuit of their own construct of history and mythology.

These fundamentalists and ideologues whether Jews, Christians or Muslims can best be called "clashists" for short, to rhyme with fascists. They have been expanding their sphere of influence, demonizing each other's civilizations, demeaning the religions and symbols of their opponents and escalating the rhetoric of incitement and hate. In short, the zealots, the Crusaders and the jihadis posited themselves to speak for their religious or racial tribes but, as it turned out, they had much more in common with each other than they did with the rest of us.

The rest of us, unencumbered with divine certitude about the future and open to reason and compromise, have found it harder to have a public voice and space. It is our task to reclaim both. The new image of Islam-violent, uncompromising, and hostile-has been reinforced almost irrevocably in our time by the attacks of September 11 and the stream of images and legends about al Qaeda since. Search for the roots of violence has been sought in Islamic

texts with metaphysics serving as a historical source to explain events of the day. The only general comment I am willing to make is that, since inception, Islam has been used as a legitimizing force for each and every state that has ruled the Muslim World—from India to Morocco and even Andalusia—until the dawn of the twentieth century when other, more ethnic and secular forms of claims to statehood emerged.

The stifling of the opposition and the absence of any margin of political discourse imposed by unpopular and corrupt oligarchies during the past few decades have allowed for the emergence of political Islam. This vehicle of opposition had the historic legitimacy, and the physical outlets in mosques and schools, to challenge a failed political, economic, cultural and moral order. The secular, cosmopolitan, and progressive currents of the mid-twentieth century have become a spent force of rhetoric and impotence by the end of it. Wild atavistic yearnings to rebuild past glory clashed with the unbearable realities of the present. The outcome was that bizarre militant undertakings committed in the name of Islam have defamed the religion as they defined it in the minds of so many people. The calumnies heaped on Islam, Arabs, and Muslims at the present mostly deliberately and by people who know better, have to be refuted, endured, and overcome, but that is a monumental task that I will simply mention as I set it aside.

Serious voices of self-criticism have been raised, most recently by a distinguished group of Arab scholars, working under the auspices of the United Nations, in a report on Human Development in the Arab World. In this report three deficits were clearly identified: deficit of freedom, of women development, and of education and fund of knowledge. It is making an impact across the Arab World. Blaming "the other," regardless of the merits of the case, is not acceptable any longer as the sole explanation for the woes that beset the Arab World. Genuine homegrown problems have to be acknowledged and dealt with if the future is to bring a better promise than the present. A significant and thoughtful segment of the Arab people understands the overarching need to improve governance from within irrespective of relations with the West and Israel.

The Arab Islamic World and the Christian Western World have not come into conflict in our time solely over the Palestinian issue. I do not happen to think that this issue played a major part in the September 11 terrorist attack. However, I believe that dealing with Palestine, which evokes so much passion and symbolism, can and should provide the way out of the present quagmire, as it opens vistas for a peaceful century.

The Palestinian problem is an abscess that has remained undrained by the necessary surgeon for too long. It continues to weaken the body politic, not just of the Arabs and Israelis, nor the Islamic world, but that of the world, but that of the world at large. It casts its shadow across the globe with promises of dark and sinister days ahead. It has served, and been used by the "clashists" as the ultimate symbol where emotions are at their most raw and where passion can too readily override reason. It has become the new last refuge of the scoundrels.

The most troubling aspect of the Palestine / Israel conflict is that the outline of the historic compromise seems to be evident for all to see, but the solution is no closer to realization now than it has ever been. The contours of this compromise solution are:

1. Palestine alongside Israel, with borders defined by United Nations Resolutions 242 and 338.
2. Shared Jerusalem that fulfills the political aspirations of two peoples and the three monotheistic religions.
3. A fair and lasting solution of the refugee problems that is sensitive to justice and

international law.

4. An end to occupation and settlements.

5. Peace with the Arab World based on exchange of land for peace and open borders for all.

6. A Marshall plan to rebuild Palestine and peace.

This vision of a lasting peace has the support of majority of people all over the world. It has received public support in one form or another of the United Nations, the United States as represented by the President and Secretary of State, the European Union, the Arab League, the Quartet, and the majority of the Palestinian and Israeli public. However, no progress has been made to bring about this vision of peace because the opposing forces, clearly in the minority, have had enough passion and clout to frustrate the will of the majority.

The great fear for the Palestinians is to be uprooted and end up without a state; the great fear for the Israelis is to be destroyed, uprooted, and to end up without a state. There are people on both sides who feed these fears through words and deeds and we need to see to it that they do not speak for us. We, on the other hand, must agree that occupation cannot stand and protestations about security cannot be used as a cover for annexing and expropriating Palestinian lands. We also must agree that suicide bombings, and any violence against civilians is abhorrent, intolerable, and must end forthwith. We collectively, honorably and finally should bring the will of the international community to bear to provide workable and enforceable remedies based on a two-state solution as outlined above.

The "clashist," and other more nuanced operatives who are endowed with more confidence than sense, have been blocking the two-state solution with guile, ingenuity and brute force. In doing so they are blocking the only chance of peace in our time. To endorse a one-state option now is either to condone occupation or to advocate apartheid or to lay the groundwork for ethnic cleansing. The possibility that Muhammad and Shlomo can, at this time, live peacefully side by side as equals, though laudable, is a fantasy. The advocates of a single state do not seem to be mindful of the fact that it dismisses the nostalgic centuries-old vision of the Jews to live in a state of their own. This realized vision would not be abandoned in negotiations. In addition, these advocates seem not to be aware that this option relieves the pressure and public sanction against settlement building and expansion. The Palestinians are no less entitled to a state of their own than the Israelis. It is that simple.

To understand the meaning of the Palestinian problem to the Palestinians, the Arabs and the Muslims one has only to consider the feeling of the Jews about the Holocaust visited upon them by Europe; a mixture of vulnerability, shame, and outrage, a sense of irretrievable loss, a testimony to communal and individual weakness and a sense of violation and betrayal by humanity. This is the stuff that led both peoples to want to have a space of their own without masters or slaves, a place of their very own. We cannot redress the grievances and injustices of history nor can we achieve unadulterated justice for all, but we can answer the most basic fears of these two peoples as we bring about a vision of a more just future with prospects of a life-indeed, a better life-for generations to come.

Justice for the Palestinians, as defined by a two state solution, has so deeply permeated the psyche of the Arab people that surveys showed that this issue has been cited by individuals surveyed as the most significant personal issues in their lives. It has hampered the latitude of maneuverability of Arab governments and restricted the parameters of public discourse to make it impossible for anyone to defy the consensus and retain their viability in the public arena. Passions of a humiliated Arab people, beset by economic and cultural degradation, have focused on the Palestinian issue to the exclusion of other more immediate issues in their

lives. This happened at a time when bilateral relations between the United States and individual Arab states have been distorted by a secondary relationship. The United States views its relationship to each of these states through the prism of their individual stances of Israel.

Peace, on terms that can be acceptable to their people, has become a vital need for the floundering Arab regimes as well. The Israeli public, on the other hand, so mired in fear and insecurity that it has yielded to illusory promises of military victory, hopes to erase those fears through brute force by electing Mr. Sharon. This is a mirage of security achieved by an imaginary eradication of the adversary. As a land grab seems within reach, it has motivated some extremist to act while the voices of peace grow increasingly faint and dispirited. It is tragic that the present mix of leadership and theatrics, on both sides, will only lead to more death and destruction before more sane voices prevail and sign the inevitable historic compromise.

Not much good can be said about the decision makers for the Palestinians, the Israelis, the Arabs, or the Americans about this conflict in the past few decades. There is no military solution to this political conflict. The use of F16s, tanks, bulldozers, and the relentless confiscation of land and the building of settlements are measures that appease the Jewish "clashists," but they threaten the core of the Palestinian psyche and provide a steady stream of would-be suicide bombers. The Palestinian "clashists" use indiscriminate violence to create panic and fear and to exact vengeance from Israel. Their violent tactics have hardly softened the attitude of the Israeli public. On the contrary, a right wing shift has ultimately played into the hands of the Israeli "clashists" and Likudnicks who have escalated their policy of the iron fist and land expropriation.

The ultimate suspicions of the Palestinians is that Israel plans to steal the land from underneath their feet, and that it will use all means to block their historic quest for a state, in spite of their tenacious will and unending sacrifices. After all these decades of struggle for independence the Palestinians will simply never concede defeat. The Israelis see their security threatened by all things Palestinian, real or imagined, and have at the present let brute force be their substitute for a strategy.

The daily quota of murdered Palestinians and the spasmodic and recurrent mass murders of Israelis by suicide bombers are all measures that inflict pain, panic and lust for vengeance but move us not one inch closer toward a solution. Reform of the Palestinian governance, no matter how badly needed, will bring no peace in the presence of occupation. The removal of Mr. Arafat and his incompetent entourage, if and when it happens, has to be a reflection of the free will of the Palestinian people, but that too will not advance the cause of peace if the occupation does not come to an end.

The Israelis and Palestinians are too deeply hurt to work out a solution. The United States, anguished and angered by September 11 attacks, and publicly frustrated by the incompetence of the Palestinian leadership, yielded to the temptation to blur the distinction between the commitment to Israel and the commitment to Israel's conquest. The U.S. seems to give the impression that it views the situation in Palestine as part of the global war on terror by granting a free hand to the Israeli government to wreak havoc on the lives and livelihood of all Palestinians. This could not have happened at a worse time, when the living rooms across the Arab and Muslim world flashed the images on Al- Jazeera of brutality, demolition, defiance and humiliation. American arms and political support could never have served the Islamic or the Israeli clashists better. It is the United States nevertheless that has what it takes to see to

it that abused people refrain from carrying out their deadly games.

The President and Secretary of State have yet to implement their commendable and publicly stated outline of the endgame for peace. It is hard to see how that vision can be implemented without the use of external forces, employed on an interim basis, to guarantee security for Israel and Palestine. This can be done either by the United Nations or any other body sanctioned and supervised by the United States. Such a temporary measure will halt the pain and humiliation of the occupation and military oppression, as it puts an end to suicide bombing and other acts of violence that engender fear and violence. This measure will create the circumstances needed for strategic steps for a lasting peace to be undertaken. It will suck the oxygen from the air of all those conspiracy theory "clashists" who thrive on a protracted and insoluble conflict.

A constitutional and democratic state of Palestine, alongside a secure Israel, is the ultimate weapon against the terror of zealots of all creeds. It can be the keystone for constitutional democracies all over the region. The United States stands in a class of its own as the one power that can nudge the parties to bring this project to fruition. It takes courage, as well as vision, to do that. Electoral politics and other political considerations can be far outweighed by the benefits of peace signed, sealed and delivered. The Arab League, which represents 22 Arab states, headed the call of the venerated Prince Abdulla of Saudi Arabia and committed itself to a comprehensive peace with Israel based on the land for peace formula. Let us use the awesome tools of persuasion and clout available to the only Super Power in the world to create the atmospherics and mechanisms in Palestine and Israel to bring to reality the universal vision of peace. To fail to do so is political malpractice. To shy away from trying is moral cowardice.

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