

National Interreligious Leadership Initiative For Peace in the Middle East

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Christian, Jewish and Muslim National Leaders Meet with Under Secretary Burns; Urge Specific Steps in Preparation for U.S. Hosted November Peace Conference

In a meeting on Friday, August 10, 2007 with Under Secretary for Political Affairs, R. Nicholas Burns, a delegation* of prominent Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders of the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East expressed their support and the support of their communities for the Bush Administration's renewed commitment to work for Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace as a high priority of U.S. policy. The religious leaders support the Administration using its remaining time to work for peace in a concerted way. Continuing a dialogue begun with Secretary of State Rice, they presented specific ideas related to preparations for the Mideast peace conference President Bush announced the U.S. will convene this Fall.

The religious leaders' delegation discussed two key questions with Under Secretary Burns related to the peace conference: Who would be at the table? What would be on the table?

The delegation expressed the hope that the international conference will involve not only Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but also all of Israel's neighbors, i.e., Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, as well as Saudi Arabia, and that the conference agenda will address all the important issues related to resolving the conflict, including Israeli-Palestinian final status issues related to borders and security arrangements, settlements, refugees and Jerusalem. The delegation also raised the idea that the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative, representing 37 Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders, including heads of twenty-five national organizations, might do something public, possibly including a meeting with the President, to demonstrate public support for the goals of the international conference.

Taking note of recent high level, official Syrian and Israeli interest in talks, the fact that Syria is an endorser of the Arab Peace Initiative, and that U.S. hosted Israeli-Syrian negotiations in 1995 and 2000 achieved substantial progress toward a peace agreement, consistent with the Baker-Hamilton Report recommendations, the religious leaders urged that the United States offer to facilitate restarting Israeli-Syrian negotiations as part of preparation for the Fall meeting.

The leaders expressed support for Secretary Rice's ongoing initiative of meeting regularly with Israeli and Palestinian leaders to achieve specific improvements on the ground and to develop common understandings about possible mutually acceptable solutions for final status issues, including refugees and Jerusalem. While appreciating the challenges and noting that there has been some progress on security cooperation and release of Palestinian prisoners, the delegation expressed the view that the U.S. needs to press harder for more speedy progress on specific steps by both sides, including the Palestinian Authority disbanding militias and confiscating illegal weapons and Israel removing illegal outposts, halting settlement expansion, and improving freedom of movement. The religious leaders pledged united support for determined U.S. efforts to achieve substantial progress in the coming weeks on these steps and on principles to resolve final status issues as part of creating a positive context for the international peace conference.

In a follow-up letter to Under Secretary Burns, the religious leaders also urged that the United States immediately work for a comprehensive ceasefire in Gaza and the West Bank, a goal that in recent months Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas and Hamas leaders all have supported. The religious leaders believe that a ceasefire would not only reduce suffering and relieve fears on both sides, but also would create a context in which other essential steps would be politically more possible. Recalling the frustration that former Quartet Representative James Wolfensohn experienced in part due to the narrowness of his mandate and given the integral relationship between halting violence and generating economic progress, the leaders urged that Tony Blair, as the new Quartet Representative, be directly involved in efforts to achieve a comprehensive ceasefire.

While the religious leaders expressed understanding and support for current U.S. policy of working with President Abbas and they support increasing effectively monitored humanitarian and development assistance to Palestinians in the West Bank and in Gaza, they believe the split in governance between Gaza and the West Bank is not consistent with the goal of a durable, negotiated peace between the Palestinian people and Israel. Appreciating Secretary Rice's July 18 statement that, "There is one Palestinian people and there should be one Palestinian state," the religious leaders delegation urged that in the lead-up to the international conference, the United States should quietly support efforts to form a united Palestinian government – whether by negotiations or new elections – that can represent Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and is committed to rejecting violence, respecting previous agreements, and negotiating a two-state solution with Israel.

The religious leaders thanked Under Secretary Burns for this dialogue process and said they looked forward to meeting in September as preparations for the Fall peace meeting go forward. The leaders emphasized that there is substantial majority support in churches, synagogues and mosques across the country for active, fair and firm U.S. leadership for Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace. They reiterated their offer to arrange a public manifestation of support for the international peace conference this fall.

*The National Interreligious Leadership Delegation that met with Under Secretary Burns included:

Archbishop Aykasian Vicken, Armenian Orthodox Church in America;
Dr. Stephen Colecchi (for Cardinal McCarrick), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops;
Bishop John Schol and Rev. James Winkler, United Methodist Church;
Rev. Canon Brian Grieves, The Episcopal Church;
Catherine Gordon (for Rev. Cliff Kirkpatrick) Presbyterian Church USA;
Rabbi David Saperstein, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism;
Rabbi Amy Small, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association;
Dr. Sayyid Syeed, Islamic Society of North America;
Dawud Assad, Council of Mosques, USA;
Ronald Young, Consultant, National Interreligious Leadership Initiative (NILI).

The December '06 National Interreligious Leadership Initiative consensus statement, "Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace: From Crisis to Hope," endorsed by 37 Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders, including heads of 25 national organizations, is available by E-mail from: usicpme@aol.com