

Churches for Middle East Peace: Policy In-Brief

A Compassionate, faith-based Christian Voice for Israeli-Arab Peacemaking:

Formed in 1984, Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) is a coalition of 22 Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant national church bodies and organizations. CMEP works in support of U.S. policies that are conducive to Israeli-Arab peacemaking and a positive future for all the peoples of the region. CMEP Board and staff engage directly with Members of Congress and the Administration and CMEP provides advocacy guidance to church congregants around the country. CMEP supports a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that includes an end to the violence, security for the state of Israel, an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, the establishment of a viable and contiguous Palestinian state, and an agreement on Jerusalem that allows the city to be shared by the two peoples and three faiths.

US Leadership and Diplomacy:

CMEP believes that U.S. engagement to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires Administration leadership, accompanied by bi-partisan support from Congress. CMEP urges members of Congress to support sustained and high-level diplomatic action by the Administration to make Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, together with a comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace initiative, a top policy priority. CMEP supports robust U.S. diplomacy with both Israelis and Palestinians to bring the two parties together for negotiations and a resolution of the conflict. CMEP supports a positive, constructive relationship between the United States and the Palestinians and the United States and Israel as necessary to advancing the peace process and U.S. national security interests in the Middle East. These relations must include challenging and restraining both sides, albeit in different ways. CMEP strongly supported the convening of the Annapolis international conference in November, 2007 and the launching of a new political process. CMEP has subsequently been encouraging serious follow-up to the announcement made by the Administration at Annapolis that it expects to achieve a signed agreement by the end of 2008.

A Shared Jerusalem:

CMEP supports the sharing of Jerusalem by the two peoples and the three faiths and urges the Administration to work with Israelis, Palestinians and the international community to guarantee access to Jerusalem's holy places and religious liberty for all peoples. CMEP urges members of Congress to support the Administration's position that final status issues, including Jerusalem, be determined through negotiations and to reject statements and actions, such as an immediate move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem that would pre-empt current and future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

U.S. Policy and Israel:

CMEP supports a safe and secure state of Israel. It urges the United States to pursue the creation of a Palestinian state and the end of Israel's occupation as integral to helping Israel achieve the security, recognition and normalization of relations with all countries of the region that it has long been denied. CMEP has pressed U.S. officials to urge Israel not to take actions that would prejudice the final outcome of negotiations including settlement expansion in the West Bank and Jerusalem area and the routing of its separation barrier on West Bank land. CMEP recognizes Israel's legitimate security requirements and its need to defend itself against terrorist attacks. During times of heightened violence, CMEP has also urged the United States to encourage restrained military responses. At other times, CMEP has intervened with the State Department to encourage Israel to help improve the economic situation and daily life of the Palestinians by easing movement and access.

U.S. Policy and the Palestinians:

CMEP supports the creation of an independent Palestinian state living in peace alongside a secure Israel. Following the 2006 elections, in which Hamas won a majority of seats in the parliament, CMEP affirmed the necessity for the new Palestinian government to commit to nonviolence, recognize Israel and accept previous agreements. CMEP advocates for U.S. policies that will help to moderate Hamas, reduce internal Palestinian friction, enable reform and contribute to building stable Palestinian institutions and a thriving civil society. CMEP supports robust U.S. aid to the Palestinian people via NGO's as a critical component to creating a climate conducive to progress toward peace. CMEP agrees with Secretary Rice's statement, following the June 2007 takeover of Gaza by Hamas, that "there is one Palestinian people and there should be one Palestinian state" and supported efforts in 2008 to secure a Gaza cease-fire. The U.S. should engage with and strengthen Palestinian President Abbas as he pursues Palestinian independence and statehood, recognizing that a durable peace will require Palestinian unity, based on an acceptance of the principles of one authority, rule of law and a negotiated two-state settlement with Israel.

Holy Land Christians:

CMEP has a special connection to the Palestinian Christians, their churches and institutions and has long expressed concern that the future of this dwindling community requires an end to the conflict and religious freedom in a future Palestinian state. This indigenous Christian community is increasingly emigrating due to the political and economic instability of the ongoing conflict. CMEP emphasizes the important role that Christians have to play in prospects for pluralism and democracy in Palestinian society. CMEP maintains an ongoing dialogue with Congress and the Administration about actions by both Israeli and Palestinian governments that have a detrimental effect on the dwindling Christian community. CMEP raises concerns about the impact of particular Israeli security measures (including checkpoints, permit systems, route of the security barrier, travel restrictions and closures). CMEP also urges better enforcement of the rule of law by the Palestinian Authority to ensure the safety of all its citizens, including the minority Palestinian Christian community. CMEP's communication with policymakers points out the detrimental effect that the decrease of Christian populations in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East has on religious and cultural grounds, but also on strategic U.S. national security interests, because of the moderating influence these communities have on their societies.

A Comprehensive Middle East Peace & Regional Issues:

CMEP supports a comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace and pursuit of negotiated peace agreements between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Lebanon leading toward a normalization of relations that brings Israel recognition and security. CMEP has welcomed the re-launching of the Arab League Peace Initiative as a hopeful development and opportunity for increased regional dialogue and diplomacy. CMEP believes that U.S. national security interests and Middle East stability will be significantly improved by a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of a wider regional peace initiative and agrees with the Iraq Study Group report's assertion that "all key issues in the Middle East—the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Iran, the need for political and economic reforms, and extremism and terrorism—are inextricably linked." While CMEP's focus issue is the Israeli-Arab conflict, CMEP also urges comprehensive regional Middle East diplomacy and addresses issues related to religious freedom and human rights. CMEP encourages constructive engagement with Iran and Syria to help achieve peace and stability in Iraq and resolve other regional disputes. During the summer of 2006, CMEP pressed the U.S. to help secure a ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel. CMEP urges the United States to engage in direct and sustained negotiations with Iran, together with international partners, to address the possible development and use of nuclear weapons by Iran and their support for Hezbollah and Hamas. CMEP has expressed dismay about the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish statements of Iranian President Ahmadinejad.