



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate

June 2, 2010

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the Episcopal Church, I write to express deep concern for the circumstances surrounding Israeli forces' interception of a flotilla of ships bound for the Gaza Strip earlier this week. The deaths of at least ten persons aboard one of the ships and the injury of many more, including four Israeli soldiers, represent a grave tragedy and underscore the urgency of renewed political leadership toward ending the blockade of Gaza. As we pray for those killed and wounded, and for their families, I urge your renewed attention to the status of Gaza as part of your Administration's leadership toward a two-state solution.

The full details of this week's incident are not clear. As Secretary Clinton has noted, we do not yet know the specific sequence of events that led to the outbreak of violence, and therefore our responses must be measured and thoughtful. It is clear, however, that the deaths of civilians working to deliver humanitarian aid could not have happened absent the counterproductive Israeli blockade of Gaza. The Episcopal Church strongly supports American leadership toward ending the blockade. There are far better ways to protect Israel's security and promote moderate political leadership in Gaza than a blockade that intensifies human suffering and perpetuates regional insecurity.

Israel's stated aim in imposing restrictions on trade and movement of persons in and out of Gaza was to end rocket attacks from Gaza, undermine the political leadership of Hamas, and secure the release of an Israeli soldier who has been held hostage in Gaza by Hamas since 2006. None of these goals has been well served by the blockade. Rocket attacks, while diminished in frequency, still continue and, in fact, appear on the rise again. Hamas retains political leadership in Gaza; indeed its power has increased as a result of its control and taxation of illegal, underground trafficking of goods in contravention of the blockade. Corporal Gilad Shalit remains a hostage in Gaza.

Instead of enhancing Israel's security, the blockade has harmed its international standing and imposed an inexcusable humanitarian toll on the people of Gaza. While Israel has allowed a very limited amount of humanitarian aid to enter Gaza, the restriction on basic goods for agriculture, fishing, and infrastructure construction has caused poverty and joblessness to soar.

Today, seventy percent of Gazans live on less than \$1 per day. Forty percent of workers are unemployed, and more than ten percent of children are malnourished. Prior to the blockade, an average of 850 trucks per day entered Gaza from Israel, carrying food, goods and fuel; today, there are an average of 128. Likewise, before 2007, 70 trucks per day carried Gazan exports valued at \$330 million, or 10.8 percent of Gaza's GDP, to Israel, the West Bank and foreign markets. Today, that traffic is non-existent.

Rather than tacitly backing an ill-advised blockade, the U.S. should work with its ally, Israel, to promote constructive new policies toward Gaza that serve the aims of peace and security. These should include continued efforts to halt violence, and credible long-term strategies to support Palestinian leaders who are actively working for peace. Nevertheless, any long-term successful Palestinian government with the capacity to safeguard peace and security must draw support and legitimacy from across Palestinian society. I would encourage your administration to actively support the process of Palestinian political reconciliation so that a future Palestinian government can draw strength both from its internal support and from its external actions on behalf of peace.

Mr. President, I have been encouraged by your leadership toward a two-state solution, which The Episcopal Church has repeatedly supported. Its contours are as clear as ever: a secure Israel with defined borders, whose right to exist is universally recognized; a sovereign, independent and secure state for the Palestinian people; and shared custody and protection of the holy sites in Jerusalem held sacred by the three great Abrahamic faiths.

This week's sad events make clear that sustained U.S. attention to Gaza is a vital piece of the work of peace-making. It is time to shift our nation's posture toward the Gaza blockade and make clear to Israel that its own interests, as well as our nation's and those of the Palestinian people, would be well served by lifting the blockade. Most importantly, the search for long-term peace in the region could be robustly encouraged. Along with many other people of faith across this country, I will stand with you in a decision to move American policy in this direction.

Meanwhile, the proximity talks your Administration currently is brokering must continue even as the world seeks to discern the facts behind this week's tragedies. They must rapidly lead to direct negotiation between the parties. As you have said, we have the opportunity, at long last, to make the Holy Land "the place of peace God intended it to be."

Please be assured that this comes with my prayers for you and for all who engage the costly work of public service on behalf of our nation and our world. May your work of peace-making be a blessing to many. I remain

Your servant in faith,



The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
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