

Break the Cycle of Violence in the Holy Land

*A Statement of Bishop Thomas G. Wenski
Bishop of Orlando
Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Policy*

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Once again the land that is holy to Jewish, Christian and Muslim believers is wracked by violence and fear. The tragic and terrifying cycle of provocation and response, of occupation and resistance, has erupted in another spasm of deadly violence. This cycle must be broken, especially before it continues to expand into a broader and deadlier conflict. The violence must stop and a ceasefire must be secured.

The conflicts in the Holy Land and Lebanon are distinct, but they bear some fearful similarities. In both cases there were violent and provocative cross-border attacks on Israeli military personnel. The extreme armed factions of Hamas and Hezbollah, and their supporters, including Syria and Iran, bear grave responsibilities. It seems clear that these acts were intended to damage prospects for negotiation and to provoke strong responses that further weaken the chances for dialogue, agreement and progress. These attacks provoked Israeli military responses that are understandable in terms of the right to defense, but are disproportionate and indiscriminate in some instances.

As committed friends of the Palestinian people, we understand the harsh realities of occupation and the yearning for a viable state of their own, but we cannot support rocket barrages and suicide bombings against innocent Israeli civilians and cross-border attacks and abductions. Such actions violate the principle of civilian immunity and undermine the possibility of a negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As strong friends of the people of Israel, we share their frustration and anger at the provocative attacks. It is long past time for all Palestinian leaders, including Hamas, to reject violence and terror and to act in ways that will lead to the establishment of a viable state for the Palestinian people living side-by-side in peace with a secure Israel. It is also long past time for all state and non-state actors in the region, including Hezbollah, to renounce violence, recognize Israel and respect its security.

Israel has a right to defend itself, but we cannot support its sweeping counterattacks on civilian areas, civilian infrastructure, blockades and other acts of war in Gaza and Lebanon. Punishment of an entire population for the indefensible acts of extreme armed factions is wrong and causes unjustified harm to noncombatants. Such actions are also counterproductive because they deepen hostilities and widen the circle of violence. Israel must act with restraint. Otherwise we fear that Israel could isolate itself, undermine its long-term security interests and play into the hands of extremists who seek a wider confrontation and an unending battle with Israel.

As steadfast friends of the Lebanese people, we believe that Lebanon, as the late Pope John Paul II said, should be "a model" for people of different faiths living together in peace. The current

conflict puts at risk the progress that has been made to free Lebanon from outside domination and from being used as a pawn in a larger struggle. Our Conference is deeply disturbed by the provocative acts of Hezbollah against Israel that precipitated the current crisis and provoked the disproportionate Israeli military responses. Both the initial act and the resulting reactions endanger the Lebanese people and their vulnerable democracy. As our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, recently said: “[N]either terrorist acts nor reprisals, especially when they entail tragic consequences for the civilian population, can be justified.”

Our Conference calls upon the United States to exert greater leadership with all parties to the conflicts and to work more intensively and multilaterally to end the provocations and violence, to secure a ceasefire, to restrain Israel, to move toward negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians to bring about security for Israel and a viable state for the Palestinians, and to ensure the independence of Lebanon.

The recurrent cycles of deadly violence endanger the stability of Lebanon and undermine those brave people on both sides who seek a just two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The sadly recurring and predictable cycles of violent provocation by extremist elements and some disproportionate responses not only take human lives, but they damage the hopes of Israelis for security, of Palestinians for a viable and free state, and of Lebanese for a future of peace, true independence and prosperity.

Our Conference appeals to all leaders in the region and to the leaders of our nation to make it clear that violence, from whatever side, for whatever purpose, cannot bring a lasting or just peace in the Land we call Holy. We join our prayers with those of our Holy Father who said about the current crisis: “Let us pray to Mary, Queen of Peace, to implore from God the fundamental gift of concord, bringing political leaders back to the path of reason, and opening new possibilities of dialogue and agreement.”