

# Don't lose sight of Middle East peace, U.S. religious leaders say

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New York, (ENInews)--With world attention focused on tensions between Iran and Israel, a coalition of Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders are reminding U.S. presidential candidates not to lose sight of the need for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Citing the "core teachings of our traditions," the leaders affirmed on March 1 "with urgency that Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace is more vital than ever."

While statements from U.S. religious leaders on Middle East peace issues are issued fairly regularly, the statement from the National Inter-religious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East, an advocacy group, is notable partly because of its timing. It came as President Barack Obama met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the issue of ways to deal with Iran's nuclear capability.

The statement was issued by the advocacy group and distributed more widely by the National Council of Churches (USA) on 5 March.

"While majorities of Israelis and Palestinians continue to long for peace, political problems on both sides inhibit leaders from moving forward. The months ahead, leading up to U.S. national elections, present a special challenge," the statement said.

"We urge candidates not to use any rhetoric that could make prospects for peace more problematic. As Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders, we strongly caution candidates to do no harm to chances for a two-state Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement," it said.

"We're just trying to send the message that people of all faiths remain supportive of a 'two-state solution,'" the Rev. Mark Arey, director of the Office of Ecumenical Affairs, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, told ENInews. "This really presses it, and the timing was purposeful."

Talk by U.S. political leaders about possible military strikes against Iran and even Syria are not helpful right now, Arey argued, and are a distraction from other pressing issues. "The Palestinian-Israeli problem is the 'sine qua non' [essential factor]," Arey said. "When you solve that, you've solved most everything else that is significant in the region."

In addition to Arey, other leaders signing the statement included Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, Archbishop Emeritus of Washington, DC; Clare J. Chapman, interim general secretary, National Council of Churches of Christ (USA); Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; and Imam Mohammed Magid, president, Islamic Society of North America.