

# Comment on President Obama's Middle East speech

**Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson**

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I appreciate President Barack Obama's speech on the Middle East this week. It contains principles that resonate with the principles in previous statements by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the region.

I agree with the president that the status quo with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unsustainable. We, and those we accompany in the region, have been and remain committed to an outcome where Israelis and Palestinians co-exist in justice and peace, as citizens of viable and secure Israeli and Palestinian states. Building on the president's statement, we also continue to support a negotiated, final status agreement which achieves a "shared Jerusalem" serving as a capital to both Palestine and Israel, with access to and full rights in the city for Jews, Christians and Muslims. The ELCA has said that terrorism and violence by individuals, groups and states must stop. The occupation must end, and Israel must withdraw its civilian population and military presence from all territory it has occupied since 1967. Moreover, a unified Palestinian governing authority must recognize Israel's right to exist.

Without real pressure to halt Israeli settlement expansion and no sign of unconditional commitment by either of the parties to an immediate return to negotiations, there is a heightened danger of renewed violent conflict. Such conflict would bring more suffering for Israelis and Palestinians and potentially fan the flames of extremism throughout the region.

With respect to developments throughout the Middle East and North Africa, we, too, uphold the right to self-determination so that the God-given dignity of all people is respected and recognized. This principle, though, must be fully realized everywhere, without exception, so that peace, justice and development will be possible.

We support efforts, in concert with others, to enable all people of the region to lift the bonds of oppression, wherever they may be, so that everyone can live a full and flourishing life in which all of their human rights are preserved and protected. As the president noted, this process demands the practices of mutual respect by our country along with others. Similarly, it is essential that our country should work toward promoting better understanding among religions and the defense of the rights of all religious groups for the sake of inter-communal cooperation

throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

I am supportive of the president's call for these principles to be "translated into concrete actions." These principles need to be applied consistently, especially to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As the presiding bishop of the ELCA, I seek those things that support God's mission of restoring community in this world God loves. This means that no state and no person should be left undefended and that no one should be stripped of one's rights. The ELCA is committed to work for positive changes to replace the current unsustainable status quo. As a church, we do this not for the sake of any one ethnic or religious group but rather for the sake of all God's beloved children.

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson  
Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America