NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Palestinian Christians wary about Obama's proposals

Judith Sudilovsky Catholic News Service | May. 24, 2011

JERUSALEM -- U.S. President Barack Obama's call for Israeli and Palestinian states based on Israel's 1967 borders met with a largely wary response from Palestinian Christians.

While the Palestinians welcomed Obama's proposal -- which includes mutually agreed-upon land swaps -- in May 19 and 22 speeches, they doubted that Israel would easily back away from Palestinian territory it has occupied for nearly 44 years.

Sami Awad, executive director of the Holy Land Trust and a promoter of nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, called Obama's proposal "symbolic."

"It was like every other president, he pushes the envelope a bit more than the previous president. That's not enough," he said.

Awad added that the plight of Palestinian refugees must be recognized and solved.

As an activist, Awad also expressed disappointment that Obama failed to acknowledge what he believes to be a growing Palestinian nonviolence movement that seeks to challenge Israeli policy.

Hussam Elias, an Arab Catholic living in Cana, Israel, who directs the Galilee program for the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations, noted that the crucial issue of the final status of Jerusalem had been left out of Obama's talks, even though settling on the city's future is key to reaching a final resolution to the conflict.

Even so, Obama's speeches were an indication that "the time had come" for Palestinians and Israelis to make serious moves toward a final and justice peace agreement, Elias said.

"It is clear that with the revolutions in the Middle East and all the social and political changes taking place, the current situation cannot continue," he said. "Israel needs to decide if it wants to be a part of the new Middle East or to be left out alone."

A "just peace based on clear agreements" would calm "a lot of the fire in the streets," not only in other Arab countries but also among Palestinians themselves, he said. Such agreements would allay Israeli fears that their Arab neighbors oppose Israel's existence in the Middle East, he added.

Father Raed Abusahlia, priest of Holy Redeemer Church in the West Bank village of Taybeh, said most of his parishioners believed the Americans and Israelis were "wasting their time" and preferred to see concrete action to bring about peace.

"We will continue our regular daily life," Father Abusahlia said. "We are here and we will remain here and at the end there will be a solution, but not now. We can wait another generation."

Father Abusahlia said he was pleased with Obama's call for a two-state solution with Israel's 1967 borders as a

starting point for talks, but the priest said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's strong opposition was predictable. He accused the Israeli leader of stalling peace talks until the completion of the 400-mile separation wall, which will leave Jewish settlement blocs on some 40 percent of what he says is Palestinian land. The land will then become nonnegotiable "facts on the ground" for Israelis, he said.

The priest also said the existence of one state would suffice as long as all residents --Jews, Christians, Druze and Muslims alike -- lived in equality. He expressed doubt that most Israelis, who insist on recognition of the Jewish nature of Israel, would accept such a proposition.

Warning that Israel is quickly losing its regional allies -- Egypt and Jordan -- Father Abusahlia called for Israel to make peace "once and forever before it is too late."

Father Vincent Nagle, assistant parish priest at Holy Family Parish in Ramallah, said that although there was some interest among parishioners when Obama specifically mentioned the 1967 borders, most people are "jaded and not willing to allow themselves to be vulnerable." He said he found most parishioners to be cynical about the initiatives rather than expressing optimism only to be disappointed when they fail.

Catholic Palestinian Nidal Abu Zuluf, director of the Joint Advocacy Initiative, operated by the YMCA and YWCA in the West Bank village of Beit Sahour, said he found Obama's speeches meaningless because they offered no new proposals. Obama should have been clearer about the status of Palestinian refugees and explained what he meant by land swaps, Abu Zuluf said.

"He kept his statements very general," Abu Zuluf said. The U.S. president wanted to come off "looking good," but failed to do so among Palestinians, he added.

"I personally can't agree to a state that belongs to one religion. If he recognizes Israel as a Jewish state then he must recognize Palestine as a Muslim state, Italy as a Christian state. That is not acceptable," he said.

Source URL (retrieved on *03/10/2014 - 23:06*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/palestinian-christians-wary-about-obamas-proposals