

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom yesterday wrote to Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright urging the United States government to denounce forcefully the targeting of holy places of any religion in Israel and the Occupied Territories and to condemn those who call for violence in the name of religion. The text of the letter follows:

Dear Madam Secretary:

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has been observing with great apprehension the increasingly religious nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the potential impact of this trend on religious freedom. This is evinced by the growing instances of violence against religious sites (mosques, synagogues, and churches), the use of religious rhetoric to promote violence, the expanding controversy over religious claims to Jerusalem, and the extension of religiously-based confrontations to other areas of the world (primarily in the form of anti-Jewish actions in the Middle East, Europe, and even North America). The ongoing violence in turn has led Israeli authorities to limit access to religious sites because of security concerns. Moreover, religious conflict in the Middle East would escalate inter-religious tensions, and thus pose a threat to religious freedom, everywhere.

We therefore urge the United States government to denounce forcefully the targeting of holy places of any religion and to condemn those who call for violence in the name of religion. We hope that these goals will be emphasized by U.S. diplomats dealing with the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. In our view, the United States should call for restoration of access to religious sites when legitimate security interests are met, restoration of sites that have been damaged, and prosecution of those who perpetrate desecration of religious sites. We believe that the United States should take the lead in calling upon government and religious leaders everywhere to repudiate all attempts to turn the already grave situation in the Middle East into a conflict among religions.

Thank you for your attention to the Commission's concerns.

Sincerely yours,

Elliott Abrams  
Chairman

**The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Hon. Elliott Abrams  
- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh