

Jerusalem bishop: Obama's speeches showed progress, but not enough

JERUSALEM - U.S. President Barack Obama's two recent speeches on the Mideast showed "some progress," but they were "not sufficient," said Bishop William Shomali, chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Bishop Shomali told Catholic News Service he preferred to look at the positive aspects of Obama's remarks. He praised the president's approach to the need for Israel to return to its borders of 1967, before it began encroaching on Palestinian territory.

"He said it publicly, straightforward and did not hold back on it even if he also talked of exchange of land," Bishop Shomali told Catholic News Service. He said the idea of land swaps was acceptable by Palestinians if a future Palestinian state would end up on 22 percent of Palestinian land.

However, he emphasized, this does not apply to East Jerusalem.

"It should be clearly understood that Palestinians want East Jerusalem as their capital. President Obama did not say that. He knew there would be a violent reaction against him and so he kept it unsaid," said Bishop Shomali.

The bishop also said he supported Obama's call on Hamas to recognize Israel and the president's defense of Israel's security needs as long as it is in conjunction with the principle of a viable Palestinian state.

The recently reconciled Hamas and Fatah factions of Palestinian leadership reconciled, “and they should have one strategy for peace,” he said. “They should be clear in their recognition of Israel.”

However, the bishop said, Obama left too many of the political decisions up to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which put the president’s speeches in the realm of “good wishes and not good actions.” He noted the change in tone between the president’s May 19 speech outlining policy at the State Department and his May 22 speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobby.

“If Israel does not want peace, peace will not come, and the USA will not exert pressure on Israel. It is not Obama who will make peace,” he said.

He also said he believed the United States would use its veto power as the United Nations votes on Palestinian statehood in September. He said Obama “prefers the issue to be solved through negotiations, while at the same time he knows no end resolution will come through negotiations.”

Regarding the recognition of the Jewish character of Israel, which Netanyahu insists upon, Bishop Shomali said he would prefer that Israelis and Palestinians “reach an honest compromise through negotiations and not through dictated and prerequisite conditions.”

One possible temporary compromise, he said, would be that as most countries recognize Israel as a nation without focusing on its “Jewish character,” the same could be requested from the Palestinians.

“This implies a de facto recognition that Israel is a state with a Jewish majority and that there is a special relation between Israel and the Jewish people,” he said, adding that this avoids the dilemma of either a religious state with restricted democracy or a secular state with democracy.

He said he believed that once the Palestinians obtain their national rights, especially in East Jerusalem, “they will be more prepared to recognize a new formula on the special relationship between the Jewish people and the state of Israel.”

“Miracles may happen, but they need time, patience and a peaceful dialogue. The present political context does not help to produce this miracle,” said Bishop Shomali. “There is still a lot of mutual mistrust. I believe that prayer can help in a rapprochement and a true reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.”