

American Friends Service Committee • Episcopal Church • Friends  
Committee on National Legislation • Mennonite Central Committee, US  
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United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

February 18, 2009

Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

General James L. Jones  
National Security Council  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Secretary Clinton and General Jones:

In February of 2007 a delegation of 13 Christian leaders representing many of our organizations traveled to the Islamic Republic of Iran in an effort to reduce tensions and build bridges between the United States and Iran. During our visit we met with Muslim and Christian leaders, government officials including President Ahmadinejad and former President Khatami and other Iranians. When we returned to the United States, we felt that there was the possibility of a new day in U.S.-Iranian relations. Sadly for both of our countries, that possibility was not realized.

We believe that today there is both greater possibility and more urgent need for our two countries to move to a more open and just relationship. We welcome the comments this week of both President Obama and President Ahmadinejad that look to new openings in diplomacy between our two countries based on mutual respect.

Our conclusions of two years ago regarding the necessary steps to improving U.S.-Iran relations remain valid today:

- immediately engage in direct, face-to-face talks;
- cease using language that defines the other using "enemy" images;
- promote more people-to-people exchanges including religious leaders, members of Parliament/Congress, and civil society.

During his campaign, President Obama repeatedly voiced his support for direct diplomatic engagement with Iran. That was the first of our recommendations and we continue to believe it essential. While we believe the appointment of a person directly

responsible for that engagement would be a positive signal to Iran, we also believe that the timing and the individual named will be important signals as well.

We would also welcome the opening of a U.S. Diplomatic Interest Section in Tehran. The latter step, which was considered by the Bush Administration, would have both great symbolic and practical significance.

We are grateful that President Obama has already changed U.S. language regarding Iran and we are hopeful that Iran will continue to do so as well. Inflammatory language and demonization by leaders in either country undermine the possibility of new and improved relations.

We continue to support more people-to-people exchanges, an effort that would be greatly enhanced by the opening of a U.S. Interest Section in Tehran. We were disappointed that two such exchanges have not taken place already this year. The U.S. denial of some visas for a planned return trip of a delegation of Iranian religious leaders in January caused them to cancel their trip. Subsequently Iran denied visas for the U.S. badminton team for a planned visit February 6. In September 2007 an Iranian religious delegation to the U.S. was also canceled because of visa issues. This was of special concern to us because the Iranian government had built a bridge toward the American people by inviting our delegation to Iran in 2007.

By his willingness to pursue diplomacy with Iran and his more measured rhetoric, we believe President Obama has taken important steps toward the rebuilding of U.S. – Iran relations. We urge him to continue this approach and to commit to the necessary duration of negotiations, without being bound by artificial timetables.

As representatives of faith-based organizations, we remain committed to supporting these and other confidence building measures, which we hope will move our two nations from the hostile relationship of the past to one of mutual respect and peace. We would welcome the opportunity to work with you to achieve President Obama's hope of moving "our policy in a new direction."

Sincerely,

Ron Flaming, Director  
International Programs Department  
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Ed Martin, Quaker International Affairs Representative for Iran  
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Jonathan Evans, Middle East Consultant  
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