



## Reflections from the Holy Land

### *Hope must replace Despair!*

There was a lot of hope in recent months first with the ceasefire agreement with Lebanon, followed by a ceasefire agreement in Gaza. The guns stopped, Israeli hostages were released and the humanitarian supplies flowed in large quantities to Gaza bringing temporary relief that was thought to be the beginning of the end of this very long, bloody, and destructive war. Moving to the second phase of the agreement never materialized and Israel restarted its military attack on Gaza at a level not seen before. The number of people killed in Gaza since the beginning of the war surpassed 50,000, with tens of thousands being women and children. A tight embargo was reimposed on March 2 including water, medicine, food, and electricity creating the most difficult man-made humanitarian catastrophe in modern history. That was followed by resuming the war on March 18. Gaza has become uninhabitable to its 2.2 million residents given the level of destruction, with solid plans to empty the strip of its indigenous inhabitants. It is unclear how this scenario will unfold, but the silence around the world is deafening! As for the small Christian community, since the beginning of the war, close to 50 lost their lives with 20 killed as a result of direct hostilities and 30 due to medical neglect due to the absence of medicines and functioning hospitals. What remains is around 650 brave souls to whom we will continue to do the impossible to provide for them within our means as around 450 of them remain as refugees at the Holy Family complex in Gaza city.



The West Bank is also facing unprecedented conditions of blockades and travel restrictions, aggressive settler violence against the local population, the complete erasure of refugee camps such as Jenin and Tulkarem with clear plans for the other refugee camps scattered around the West Bank, creating a new wave of second- or third-time refugees estimated at around 40,000. Life is nothing but normal on the West Bank, with over 900 checkpoints and close to 300 permanent barriers that isolate villages and towns and transforms them into overnight prisons as directed by the Israeli forces. Traffic jams in some instances delaying travelers by as long as seven hours to get from one Palestinian town to the next has become a normal expectation! This is not to mention the record high unemployment rates that could reach 70% in some areas and some sectors. Permits to work in Israel are at the absolute minimum with Palestinian workers permanently being replaced by foreign workers at double the cost and half the efficiency. But who is counting! Life for Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank has become unbearable by any human standard. I am afraid to say that with social media and the wide spread of news networks, I suppose I am not disclosing any secrets!



As far as Israel is concerned, there are many groups within Israeli society that are protesting daily in the thousands, if not tens of thousands for various causes. Some demanding a ceasefire and securing the release of hostages as a priority; others demonstrating against the legal reforms and / or the process to fire the head of the Shabak (Israeli security agency) or the attorney general of the government, while a third group of Orthodox Jews protesting the drive to enlist them to do military service. Not a day goes by in the main cities of Israel as well as Jerusalem that does not witness a demonstration, but again is this extreme right-wing government listening to its people? Recently, the



government passed the 2025 budget which puts a huge burden on paying for this very expensive war on the shoulders of hard-working citizens with major increases in prices and taxes, and the ordinary citizen has to bear it all!

I suppose the saddest development since 7 October 2023 has been how polarized the relations between Israelis and Palestinians have become characterized by a total lack of trust. Neither side sees a partner for peace on the other side, and neither side sees the human side of the other. At the present time, the Holy Land is witnessing the convergence of feasts for all three monolithic religions. Our Moslem brothers and sisters just celebrated the end of the holy month of Ramadan; Christians are witnessing the lent season in preparation for Easter and our Jewish brothers and sisters are preparing for the Passover in a few short weeks. This is a period for fasting and prayer, a period that all are supposed to be following the teachings of their respective religion. Had this been the case, we would be in a much better world today and war would stop immediately, and peace and justice will prevail. At this stage, we are very far from this reality!



Having painted a relatively bleak but realistic reality, I must also say that we shall never give up, nor allow hope to fade. I am very proud of my work at the Latin Patriarchate where we refuse to despair and continue to design and implement humanitarian and pastoral programs that will support our local communities, not to mention education through our extensive network of schools. The extensive humanitarian programs including tuition support, medical emergencies and medicines, food coupons and cash assistance, utilities and rental payments have reached thousands on the West Bank, while the extensive job creation and income generation projects support reached hundreds. It is quite clear that we cannot extend support to everyone, but for those we were able to reach, it was a life saver for many. We shall continue to do this as long as there is a need. In this regard, it was a gratifying experience to host an expanded delegation of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher's Holy Land Commission and escort them to various parishes, schools, and centers to evaluate the impact of our work leaving us with very positive feedback.



Keeping faith and hope alive is needed now more than ever before given the extremely desperate conditions we live in. We are doing our utmost to make a positive contribution within our societies which cannot be done without the incredible support we receive from all corners of the world. Some cannot do more than pray for us, and this certainly is the most powerful contribution; others offer moral support and solidarity; and many others offer financial support. We cannot do what we do without your support and for that we are truly indebted to all our friends around the world. We never felt abandoned nor alone! Ramadan Mubarak to our Moslem brothers and sisters, and a happy Passover and Easter to our Jewish and Christian brothers and sisters.

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