



Reflections from the Holy Land – March 2024 Life must go on!

Who would have thought in October 2023 that this ugly war would still be going at full force in March 2024? After more than 160 days, the level of destruction and innocent human loss is simply staggering. In Gaza 31,500 people have been killed 70% of whom are women and children; 73,500 people are injured without proper medical support as a mere 12 hospitals are still only partially functioning; 70,000 homes are completely destroyed and 290,000 are severely destroyed representing 60% of all housing units; 1.7 million people out of 2.3 million are internally displaced representing 75% of the population living in makeshift shelters or on the streets with little support mechanism; 17,000 children are unaccompanied or separated from their families; and 625,000 school age children are denied an education, not only this year but most likely next year as well as most schools have been damaged and the rest are used as shelters. The humanitarian assistance trickling in is only a mere fraction of the pre-war levels causing severe shortages of food, drinking water, medicine and fuel, which all appear to be used as weapons leading to hunger, dehydration, and spread of diseases! The saddest part is that the world keeps watching from a distance allowing this suffering to continue. If these facts do not make you cry, what will?

As for the situation of the small Christian community, there are 600 people who have taken refuge at the Holy Family Church complex and an additional 200 at the Greek Orthodox Church. It has been and continues to be our responsibility to care for their needs since the beginning of the war including food, water, clothing, medicines, and personal items to the best of our ability given the limited supplies in Gaza. The Christian community has been devastated with human loss as 30 people have died already (20 to war hostilities, and 10 due to lack of proper medical services). This is 3% of the community which is devastating for any community. The damages to our institutions in Gaza have been extensive, especially to the Holy Family School in Remal, the Thomas Aquinas Center; and the Daughters of Charity handicapped children's home which is part of the parish complex, let alone the Rosary Sisters School in Tal alhawa. The damage is in the millions of dollars, and it will take a very long time to get the damage fixed. Additionally, it is reported that the homes of 40 Christian families were completely destroyed; 48 severely destroyed; and an additional 85 with moderate damages making them uninhabitable. Once the war is over, most Christian families will have no place to go to and will most likely remain in the Church complex for a very long time!

As for the situation on the West Bank, since the beginning of the war, 418 people have been killed during various incursions in most locations and 4,665 injured including 718 children. There were 624 violent settler attacks, along with the numerous army checkpoints have fragmented the West Bank and deemed travel risky and lengthy as people get stuck at checkpoints for hours. There are also 1,620 who were displaced from their homes due to demolitions. The economy is collapsing due to three main factors: firstly, the crash of the travel / pilgrims related businesses primarily affecting the Christian communities in Bethlehem and Jerusalem; secondly the revocation of most work permits that Israel used to issue to Palestinians from the West Bank to access daily jobs in Israel possibly affecting 100,000 breadwinners. These workers are actively being replaced by workers from various countries around the world. Thirdly the suspension of the transfer of tax revenues collected by Israel to the Palestinian Authority since October 2023 deeming the PA unable to pay salaries to approximately 180,000 civil servants since then. With this, unemployment is at record highs with no prospect for any relief soon.

As for Israel, on October 7, it is reported that 1,162 people were killed including 33 children and 5,400 people injured. Since the war started 247 soldiers have been killed in Gaza and 1,476 injured. There also remains in Gaza 134 hostages out of the roughly 240 kidnapped on October 7. Additionally, approximately 200,000 are displaced from their homes mostly from the northern and southern areas and are placed in hotels around Israel.

Since the beginning of the war, the Latin Patriarchate immediately started to plan its intervention whether in Gaza or the West Bank in order to support as many people as possible during their time of great need. For Gaza that translates to providing the pure humanitarian support of subsistence to the 800 Christians in the two churches as well as our Moslem neighbors. This will continue as long as the war continues and well after. As for the West Bank, and during the months of November and December, a massive scheme was launched to support needy families, especially those who lost employment due to the war through providing food coupons, rental support, utility bills, tuition support and medicines. To date close to 11,000 people were supported and these programs continue. In addition, we turned all our projects to labor intensive job creation projects to employ those who lost their jobs. Projects were implemented in Zababdeh, Jenin, Taybeh, Beit Sahour and many other locations. Additionally, and as of January, our attention shifted to job creation, and an emergency version of the successful AFAQ project in collaboration with Bethlehem University was relaunched to generate job opportunities at various levels including internships and small business development through a small grants scheme. Hundreds of families will be assisted until June through these various schemes allowing people to live a dignified life.

A few days ago, the Holy Land Commission of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher concluded their spring semi-annual visit, and it was a great opportunity for us to show them what we have been doing with the generous funds received from the Order. It was also a chance to have strategic discussions about the future, not only for Gaza, but throughout the four countries covered in the Diocese which will not be neglected. As we reflected on the work going on, it became clear that despite the extensive humanitarian support provided, the schools continue to provide a quality value-based education; and the pastoral care services have been expanding dramatically. In particular and over the past few months several centers were launched including the Family center with two locations, one in Beit Jala and the other in Ramallah; the Counseling center will start operations soon in Bethlehem; the Pastoral center was inaugurated in Haifa encompassing the family center and the youth chaplaincy; and finally the demand for the courses offered to the laity through the Spiritual Formation Center based at the Seminary in Beit Jala surpassed all our expectations. In short, life goes on and we are delighted at all the positive developments despite the relatively grim outlook as a result of this catastrophic war. The Church is well and alive!

Next week, we enter Holy Week in the Catholic tradition, which will be followed in a few weeks by the end of the holy month of Ramadan for Moslems and shortly thereafter the Jewish Passover, and finally concluded by the Orthodox Easter in early May. Our hope is that as all faith traditions who call the Holy Land home intensify their prayers so that a ceasefire is declared leading to an end of this devastating war and a clear path emerges towards a peaceful conclusion to this decades old conflict leading to peace, justice, and freedom to the Palestinians and peace and security to our Israeli neighbors. Everyone must recognize that neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis (Jewish, Moslem or Christian) are going anywhere, and we need to all share the land in peace, coexistence, respect and dignity for all. No human life is more precious than another as we are all created equal in the image of God and deserve a dignified life. Happy Easter, Ramadan Mubarak; and Pesach Sameach to all!

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