

The way we see things

Jerusalem Justice and Peace Commission meeting with European Justice and Peace
May 21, 2024

1. Introduction: the context (David Neuhaus SJ)

The latest cycle of horrific violence in Israel/Palestine began on October 7, 2023. We are deeply aware of Israeli anxiety and fear after the brutal killing of 1200 people and the taking of hostages, some still languishing in the Gaza Strip. We are horrified by the Israeli retaliation that has left tens of thousands of dead and wounded and hundreds of thousands homeless. However, all this is rooted in a conflict that began more than one hundred years ago. Until 1917, Palestine was ruled by the Ottomans, having a majority Palestinian Arab population (Muslims, Christians, Druze, Jews and Samaritans) as well as other ethnic and religious minorities including recently arrived Jewish European and Armenian migrants. British colonial rule was imposed after World War I, they having already promised to create a Jewish “national home” in Palestine. They were motivated by concerns for the Jews in the face of rising antisemitism, particularly in Russia, by Biblical fundamentalism that posited that Palestine was a promised land for a chosen people, and by colonial attitudes to the indigenous population in Palestine, including contempt for Muslims and Islam. In 1917, the Jews made up 10% of the population, many of them recently arrived from Russia.

By the end of the British Mandate in 1948, the Jewish population had increased ten-fold, making up about one third of the overall population. As a consequence of the Holocaust, many more Jews were seeking to move to Palestine. British policies, especially the encouragement of Jewish migration and support for Jewish self-rule, had fomented a civil war between Jews and Arabs. In 1947, the United Nations proposed the partition of the territory into a Jewish state (56% of the land) and Arab state (42%), ignoring the Palestinian Arab majority. After Israel declared its independence, a war ensued between Israeli and Arab forces. The major world powers supported Israel. By the war’s end, Israel had taken control of 78% of historic Palestine. 750,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced from their homes in what Palestinians call the Nakba, or “catastrophe” in Arabic. While the Jewish people gained a so-called homeland, Palestinians lost theirs, many were dispossessed and made refugees. Palestinians who remained in Israel were put under military rule. Jordan annexed the West Bank and Egypt administered the Gaza Strip. In both these latter territories, huge refugee camps accommodated those displaced from inside Israel.

Following yet another war in 1967, Israel occupied the remaining 22% of historic Palestine — the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Israel began immediately to colonize these territories, establishing Jewish settlements. In the 1970s, the Palestine Liberation Organization accepted the international community’s two-state approach to a solution, demanding that the territories occupied in 1967 become a Palestinian state. In 1987, the Palestinians rose up against Israeli military occupation and in the aftermath of this the international community sponsored a so-called peace process that led to the signing of accords in the 1990s between Israel and the PLO. However, despite signing the accords, the Israeli government continued to build settlements and develop infrastructure in the occupied territories, also hindering the development of Palestinian civil society and obstructing daily life. This led to a second uprising in 2000, more violent than the first.

In 2005, the Israelis unilaterally withdrew from Gaza but almost immediately imposed a blockade when Hamas won the elections. Violence has erupted between Gaza and Israel regularly since then, leading to massive destruction in Gaza. As the US administration and

Israel promoted normalization agreements with the Gulf states and other Arab regimes, the Palestinians were pushed more and more to the margins. This is all part of the context necessary to understand what happened on October 7, 2023.

2. The situation in the Gaza Strip (Sami El-Yusef)

Since the beginning of the war on Gaza, the level of human loss and destruction has been unprecedented in our Holy Land. The statistics issued by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) are devastating, including more than 35,000 Palestinians killed and about 80,000 injured with 60% in both categories being elderly, women, and children; 1.7 million people (out of 2.3 million) are internally displaced, 60% of residential units damaged as well as 80% of all commercial facilities. 1.1 million people reached catastrophic levels of food insecurity; lack of electricity, sewage, water or communication networks.

23 hospitals out of 36 are out of service with severe shortages of medicines and medical supplies. There are 760,000 reported cases of acute respiratory infections and 410,000 cases of acute watery diarrhea. 71% of all primary health centers are out of service. 83% of ground water wells are not operating and there are 270,000 tons of solid wastewater accumulated on the streets. As for education, 73% of all schools have been destroyed leaving 625,000 school age children without any education or schooling, not to mention that all universities have been reduced to rubble. There are currently 17,000 children who are unaccompanied as they were separated from their parents and are most likely orphans. It is also worth mentioning that of those killed, there were 967 aid workers, health workers, civil defense staff and journalists killed while on duty!

As for the humanitarian aid trickling into Gaza, before the war, an average of 500 truckloads of supplies entered Gaza on a daily basis. That daily supply did not exceed 216 trucks in any single day. This was again reduced to zero in recent days as Israel took over the Rafah crossing leading to severe shortages of food, water, medicine, and fuel.

These statistics paint a very bleak picture of the current state of affairs in Gaza, which is only part of the story. The human tragedies we hear about on a daily basis including amputation operations without anesthesia, are simply too much to bear. Humanity has been lost in Gaza!

As for our small Christian community which counted 1,017 people at the beginning of the war, most members took refuge at a number of Christian institutions in Gaza with the majority taking refuge at the Roman Catholic Holy Family Church complex where roughly 600 people stayed. An additional 250 stayed at the Orthodox St. Porphyrius Church with smaller numbers at other locations. Since the beginning of the war, the Christian community has lost around 34 people: 20 killed by Israeli army attacks and 14 have died due to lack of medical services. That constitutes a little over 3% of the community which is devastating for any community. Additionally, we estimate that around 25% of the Christian community has fled Gaza through Egypt to other destinations, witnessing very dangerous circumstances along the way.

As for the physical damage to the Christian institutions, a quick survey reveals that all 14 Christian institutions (all of which are located in and around Gaza city in the north) have been either totally destroyed or severely damaged with most of them closed and no longer providing services in education, health, and social services. The process of rebuilding will be a long and tedious one by any standard.

Since the beginning of the war, the role of the Catholic Church has been to sustain the livelihood of all refugees under its care including at our sister Orthodox Church and immediate Muslim neighbors. This includes adequate supplies of food, water, medicines, personal items, and fuel supplies to over 1,000 people on a daily basis. That has been a huge undertaking given the lack of humanitarian deliveries, especially to the north, and the need to buy supplies at black market prices that are 10-20 times their normal pre-war prices. Once the war is over, the Church has big dreams not only to re-establish its institutions and the services it provided, but potentially expand such services in other areas where the need is greatest.

3. The situation in the West Bank (Dina Nasser)

2023, before October 7, was already the worst year in the history of the occupation with many dead and wounded as a consequence of brutal army and settler violence, unleashed by an extremist ethnocentric government determined to annex all or most of the West Bank. The UN Human Rights High Commissioner has reported: “Since October 8, the situation in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is alarming and urgent, amid the increasing and multi-layered human rights violations of Palestinians occurring there.” Communities have become isolated as extremist settler violence has been on the increase, protected by the Israeli occupying forces. Leading to systematic attacks on communities, setting fire to homes, to land and most recently attacking the humanitarian aid trucks passing through the West Bank.

Restrictions on access, movement and livelihood has intensified. Travel to main cities and towns in each governorate has been more restricted through the setting up of barriers in the form of new gates that can shut off whole communities from each other. Huge cement blocks and mounds of earth prevent vehicular travel. By December 2023, OCHA reported that 49 new access obstacles were established, and 100 of the previously existing obstacles have had their status changed, bringing the total number of obstacles to 694. The access of Palestinians from the West Bank to East Jerusalem, including to hospitals, schools and holy sites has been even further restricted. Access of humanitarian workers to East Jerusalem has also been all but blocked. Access of Palestinians to their lands to harvest olive trees has become a life-threatening risk as Israeli settlers attack the harvesters in much of the West Bank and more so in villages near Israeli settlements. There has been a stunning increase in unemployment as a consequence of all this.

According to Palestinian sources, before October 7, more than 110,000 Palestinians held permits, to work in Israel. These have been largely suspended, mostly affecting Palestinian laborers. The International Labor Organization, in its report in March 2024, stated that if the war continues until the end of June 2024, the annual unemployment rate for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which includes Gaza and the West Bank, is projected to rise to about 46%

The displacement of Palestinians and the demolition of their homes has also intensified. 648 structures have been demolished, some under the pretext of having no permits in areas B and C. 18 herding communities have had their shelters destroyed leading to the displacement of 3985 vulnerable people including women and children.

The war has created a smokescreen for massive arrests throughout the West Bank. To date there are 9300 political prisoners languishing in Israeli jails, including 78 women and 250 children.

Finally, there is a wide-spread fear among people in the West Bank that the massive destruction of Gaza and the expulsion of huge numbers of people from their homes could set a precedent for future Israeli actions in the West Bank too.

4. The situation in Jerusalem (Rafoul Roffa)

The current war on Gaza is certainly brutal, but the same can be said for all the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem. Palestinians in East Jerusalem face the impact of the war in various forms and shapes. An immediate consequence of the war has been the intensification of various violations including severe movement and access restrictions and a wide range campaign of arrests and detentions of Palestinians, especially youth. Furthermore, economic hardship because of the inability to access the workplace, loss of job opportunities, most notably in the tourism industry, plague the Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Since the war came on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic many found themselves ineligible to get unemployment benefits which has left them without any income at all.

Another immediate result of the war has been the closure of government offices in East Jerusalem. These closures disrupt the provision of essential services, instrumental to receiving socio-economic benefits and essential documents that are necessary for movement and travel. Due to the legal intervention of the NGO I head, we were able to help our community overcome some of these challenges and pressure the Israeli authorities to reopen some government offices, particularly the Ministry of Interior branch in East Jerusalem.

Severe access and movement restrictions resulted from the full closure of checkpoints connecting East Jerusalem and other parts of the West Bank. This has caused the disruption to the lives of all Palestinians, preventing many from accessing their work places or properties. Saint Yves was successful in pressuring the Israeli government to reopen some checkpoints, most notably Checkpoint 300, the main entry to Bethlehem, and some others. We continue our efforts to lift access and movement restrictions at all levels.

It is important to note that the rate of demolitions of Palestinian property has increased across the West Bank including in East Jerusalem. According to OCHA, as of October 7, 2023, over 132 Palestinian structures were demolished in East Jerusalem alone.

5. The situation of Christian Palestinians (H.B. Michel Sabbah)

Christian Palestinians belong to their people. They are Palestinians and whatever happens to others happens to Christians too. The conflict is not religious, between Jews and Muslims, but rather between the State of Israel and the Palestinian people. All people, Christians and Muslims, all Palestinians are involved. In the ongoing war in Gaza, the small Christian community has been greatly affected, like the entire population.

There are some incidents affecting Christians in particular, in and around Jerusalem's Old City and elsewhere. There are acts of vandalism against churches and cemeteries (for example: the Franciscan church of the Flagellation, the Benedictines on Mount Sion, the Evangelical church). These attacks are carried out by extremist religious Jews, who also sometimes spit on clergy.

Christian property is also being taken over by unscrupulous and dishonest means. Examples abound, like the Orthodox Saint John Hospice, near the Holy Sepulchre, the Orthodox-owned hotels at Jaffa Gate and elsewhere. Today, there is an ongoing dispute over the take over of a big part of the Armenian Quarter. The Old City is being transformed piece by piece. More and more Jewish settlers are moving into the Muslim, Christian and Armenian Quarters. The Israeli authorities, particularly the Jerusalem Municipality, are actively transforming the city, making

it more and more Jewish Israeli and less and less Palestinian, closing areas at will and imposing Jewish Israeli activities and presence.

In the Christian schools in East Jerusalem, the Israeli municipality seeks to impose curricula, replacing the Palestinian educational system. Furthermore, the Israeli police impose an exaggerated presence, for example at the ceremonies of Holy Week, especially during the Holy Fire on Holy Saturday. Jerusalem is often full of barriers, impeding many of the local Christians to reach the Holy Sepulchre.

Christians have an important role in political parties and in the resistance to occupation and the struggle for liberty and equality, justice and peace. The local Church of Jerusalem promotes engaged theological reflection on our situation, developing a Palestinian theology of liberation, contextual Biblical reflection and a spirituality to sustain the local community. Centers and individuals contribute to this: our own Justice and Peace Commission, the Ecumenical Sabeel Center, the Kairos Reflection Group, Bethlehem Bible College, Christ at the Checkpoint annual conferences and theologians like Catholics emeritus Patriarch Michel Sabbah and Father Rafiq Khoury, Lutheran pastors Mitri Raheb and Munther Isaac, and others. The Heads of Churches also regularly publish statements to promote awareness and advocacy in the international arena.

We are in need of your support for the efforts of Christians to not only stay in their homeland, but to actively contribute to the struggle in Israel/Palestine for liberty and equality, justice and peace. Please help make our voices heard.