



Reflections from the Holy Land – October 2023 (II) Gaza Again!

Last Friday, I wrote my usual reflections to share with our friends around the world and I was ready to edit over the weekend and send it out on Monday. The events on the following day, Saturday 7 October 2023 turned the Holy Land upside down and will be a day that will go down in history. I have decided to share the original reflections given that they contain a lot of positive information but also to write new reflections with focus on the latest conflict.

We all woke up early Saturday morning to the strange sound of sirens followed by explosions, some far while others so close that our building in the Old City of Jerusalem shook. Once the news started to come out, it was clear southern Israel was under a surprise and unprecedented attack from Gaza. As the events of the day unfolded, it had become clear that not only rockets were being fired but a massive incursion was underway characterized by what history may term to be one of the biggest intelligence failures of our time. Hamas with its limited capabilities was able to cross one



of the most fortified, technologically advanced, and expensive borders ever built and take over the border crossing notoriously called Erez and advance to take over nearby military camps, police stations, and complete communities in southern Israel. It resembled something you watch in Hollywood movies not in real life. Given it was a Saturday and the last day of the Sukkot holiday for the Jewish faith, the surprise element clearly was a factor. The shock did not end there, but the slow response on the Israeli



side allowed Hamas to go even deeper with larger numbers and inflict great damage, especially with killing many innocent people including many who were peacefully attending a concert in the desert close to the border in addition to around 300 soldiers and police officers. Additionally, around 150 soldiers and innocent civilians were taken back to Gaza with the intention to exchange them for the thousands of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails including women and children.

Today, five days into this war, there are over 1,200 Israelis killed and around 2,400 wounded and in Gaza close to 1,200 killed and 5,300 injured of whom roughly half are children, women and elderly. On both sides innocent civilians are suffering. These numbers only account for the first four days and will undoubtedly rise quickly with developments. Israel has already declared a state of war and called over 500,000 reservists and a land incursion into Gaza seems imminent. With that, the casualties and destruction level will surpass all expectations and increase dramatically. Additionally, skirmishes on the northern border so far did not escalate into all our war, but in such a flammable atmosphere, another small incident could trigger a major escalation. On the West



Bank, a full closure is implemented with severe restrictions where no one can move around beyond their immediate area of residence. This does not apply to Jewish settlers living in the West Bank who are free to travel with no restrictions. Certainly, there goes the tourism sector again, delivering a severe blow to employment.



As for the humanitarian crisis it is important to point out that the Gaza strip is inhabited by 2.2 million people who live on 364 square kilometers (141 square miles) including 1,000 Christians. It has been blockaded from all sides since 2006 when Hamas came to power. It is considered one of the most densely populated areas on earth. It lacks any proper infrastructure with electric supply not exceeding 4-8 hours per day depending on location, no meaningful potable water supply, broken sewage networks and unemployment exceeding 50% in the general population (70% amongst women and youth), in addition to a broken and primitive health network. The situation is exacerbated now with the declaration of the Israeli Minister of Defense a couple of days ago that Israel is cutting off electricity, water, fuel, food and medical supplies. This scenario paints a very bleak picture



before this latest round, and one can imagine how it is today, coupled with the destruction of the last few days let alone the threat of a possible land incursion soon. A true man-made humanitarian catastrophe in the making!

As of now, 36,600 buildings including residential towers, governmental offices, businesses including bank branches and the telecommunication network

were either completely or severely / partially destroyed over the past few days resulting in 339,000 people to date who are totally displaced and took refuge mostly in schools. For us, the Holy Family Church and parish complex in Zeitoun became a shelter starting last Sunday and currently around 150 people (45 families) take refuge there. An additional 5 families took refuge at the Thomas Aquinas Center at the edge of Shate' refugee camp. Today, the Holy Family School at the Remal neighborhood opened up as a shelter for the neighbors who lost their homes as Remal was wiped out. The Church will continue to provide support as much as we can during these dangerous and challenging times. Not only the material needs of so many are taken care of, but the spiritual side as well with daily masses conducted and a continuous reminder to stay close to the faith.





We are overwhelmed and deeply touched by the dozens of inquiries on a daily basis and the offers of support from our friends from around the world who expressed concern about the loss of innocent lives on both sides and the evolving humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Most notable has been two personal phone calls received by the Gaza parish priest Fr. Gabriel from His Holiness Pope Francis who expressed great concern and solidarity and wanted to get a firsthand assessment. What we promise is that the Church will continue to be that beacon of hope to all and a source of support during crisis and always spread the message of peace at a time when the prevalent calls on the streets are for revenge and killing. As soon as the field situation allows, a survey of needs will be conducted and shared with our friends so that the proper resources can be made available quickly to support our devastated community. Let us not forget that Palestinian children like all other children have names and families that love them and have dreams and aspirations and want to live a normal life. The root causes of this conflict must be addressed if peace is to be achieved. Please keep praying for us so that Justice and Peace can prevail and an immediate end to the hostilities will lead to a political solution that will put an end to these unending cycles of violence and suffering. God bless!

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