

Reflections and Updates from the Holy Land A Miracle is Needed

Over the past few days, we received many messages from our friends around the world checking on us and expressing great concern about the recent sad developments in our region. This has encouraged me to write a few updates and reflections on three main areas of conflict being Jerusalem; Gaza; and Israel, especially mixed cities and communities. Recent developments are very serious, and if not contained immediately, will drive an already boiling region into the abyss. Below are a few highlights:

Jerusalem – the city of peace that has a special place in the hearts and prayers of billions of people of the three monotheistic religions is today a broken and very divided city. What started as a legal battle of eviction of some homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem opened decades old wounds of the double judicial standards that exist in Israel giving rights to Jews to claim properties they owned prior to 1948 in East Jerusalem, while denying the same right to Palestinians who lost properties in West Jerusalem. What followed is the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan in the Muslim faith and the clear mishandling of police to access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque as well as the Damascus Gate plaza, a popular spot for social and cultural events during the evening hours after the Iftar (fast breaking meal) during this month. Tensions escalated and nightly confrontations followed almost every night between worshippers and police in the narrow streets of the Moslem Quarter, the Al-Aqsa compound, as well as at Sheikh Jarrah. Tensions further heightened during Laylat Al Qadr which is the night on which God first revealed the Quran to the Prophet Mohammad through the Angel Gabriel which is celebrated on the 27th day of Ramadan. Again, police mishandled the worshippers who traditionally reach half a million people praying at Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and set up roadblocks on the main Tel-Aviv –



Jerusalem highway to prohibit worshippers from reaching Jerusalem and limiting access to under a hundred thousand. Muslim worshippers could not understand why such restrictions were imposed and reflecting that only a few weeks ago during the Jewish Passover, no restrictions whatsoever were placed on the Jewish faithful in accessing the wailing wall in the Old City. Again, the parallels were unavoidable and the motives questionable. The climax came on “Jerusalem

Day” which is celebrated by the Jerusalem municipality as the day of reunification of Jerusalem in 1967. For the right-wing Jewish fanatics, this is a day of celebration, while for Palestinians it is considered a very sad day since the activities include annually a very provocative march of right-wing fanatic youth through the Moslem Quarter with racist chants through the parade. During the march, which was redirected by police at the very last minute away from the usual hotspots, Hamas exercised its threat that if Al-Aqsa continues to be desecrated by the Israeli police, then it will fire missiles towards Jerusalem. Sirens sounded for the first time in many years and a panicked Jerusalem reacted with fear and sadness, one that still fills the mostly deserted streets. Tensions

continue in Jerusalem as both sides are entrenched in their positions and the main issues remain unresolved.

Gaza – There has been relative calm on the southern front despite the fact that the Gaza blockade continues for over 14 years now, and there has been no improvement on the day-to-day life there. Unemployment is close to 50%; electricity still in short supply with no more than 8 hours supply per day; no water or sewage infrastructure and no economic development. The most densely populated place on earth (two million people living in a geographic area of 364 square kilometers) kept barely ticking with people finding ways to cope with the humanitarian disaster and live a substandard life. However, when Hamas decided to “stand up for Jerusalem” and fire the missiles towards Jerusalem during the march of Jerusalem Day, that opened the door wide open to a serious escalation which started four days ago and is still ongoing. Since Monday, Israel has launched thousands of air raids on the Gaza strip with constant bombing of various targets including military locations, governmental buildings, residential buildings, factories, businesses, and banks. There has been widespread destruction with no end in sight. In return, Hamas has surprised even the Israelis with sending over a thousand rockets to various locations deep in Israel including Tel-Aviv, Lod, Petah Tikva, Rishon Letzion and others. It was reported that millions of Israelis were sent to shelters for various periods, and despite the primitive nature of these locally produced missiles, there were a number of direct hits to residential buildings causing some deaths. There is a clear competition between both sides as to who can inflict more damage and score more points within their constituencies irrespective of the suffering to ordinary citizens.



Even though this is an active war zone, and it is very difficult to assess damages as the hostilities continue and become more widespread, what is clear so far is that the Rosary Sisters Convent and Kindergarten have sustained damages as there was repeated bombing on the street outside their property. The Sisters have not slept in three days and have refused to leave their dangerous premises in order to protect the school. They are tired, and traumatized and resolved that they will accept any fate that awaits them. Additionally, a number of apartments belonging to the Christian community have been damaged. The parish priest of Gaza Fr. Gabriel Romanelli assisted by Fr. Yousef Saad, have been doing a heroic effort being in constant touch with all his parishioners trying to assess damages, visiting the elderly and sick, holding masses, and putting his own life at risk to perform his pastoral duties and comfort people. These are the heroes of Gaza whom we have an obligation to support and offer every help possible as soon as the situation stabilizes.



Israel (Mixed Cities and Communities) – Despite all the disastrous developments in Jerusalem and Gaza, maybe the worst development yet has been the violent protests in many cities in Israel including Haifa, Lod, Ramleh, Jaffa, Acre and many others where there existed a cautious co-existence since the establishment of Israel in these mixed locations. There were tensions in the past, but the events in Jerusalem and Gaza seem to have a very divisive impact on these communities that have been witnessing racial tensions at a scale not seen before between Arabs and Jews where lynching is becoming a daily event. The very fragile fabric that existed for so long is being shattered and the display of hatred and racial slogans are becoming the norm. Neighbors attacking neighbors and properties under attack. Regretfully, police again is displaying double standards with a heavy hand directed to Arabs and a relatively blind eye to Jewish extremists. Various battalions of the border police have been shifted from the West Bank to these cities, and reserves are being called with the possibility of calling the army to the hotspots to restore order. Israel as has existed to date has changed dramatically and these racial tensions will have negative long-term impact on society at large. Even the President of Israel acknowledged that this is the biggest threat to Israel since its establishment.



One can only hope and pray that some calm will be restored soon in order to stop the suffering, unnecessary loss of life and destruction to property. More important, calm is needed to restore the souls and move to a different track where all of God Children can be treated equally and with dignity. There is a dire need this time to address the root causes of this never-ending conflict so that justice and peace will prevail. Had the billions already been wasted on war and destruction been invested in development, education, health, job creation and infrastructure, Gaza and the Holy Land would be in a much better place now. Let us pray that sanity will return, and the current hostilities will end immediately. Otherwise, regretfully we are in for some dark times ahead! Keep us in your prayers as only a miracle can save the Holy Land from the next disaster that is looming!

Sami El-Yousef
Chief Executive Officer
Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem
14 May 2021