

## **Seeking Justice, Peace, and Equality in Israel-Palestine:** *After October 7th and in the Shadow of the Gaza Catastrophe*

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This guide is being written more than a year after the start of a period of extreme violence in Israel-Palestine as well as Lebanon. It's a time that has been marred by great anguish and turmoil, beginning with the horrific attack by Hamas in southern Israel on October 7, 2023, and then continuing with Israel's military assault on Gaza, which has wrought widespread devastation of the entire coastal enclave. These events have had tremendous physical, psychological, ecological, and generational effects. We especially recall human dimensions of fear and grief — Palestinian children trapped under the rubble of bombed homes in Gaza crying out for their parents, families of Israeli hostages pleading for diplomacy to save their loved ones, and escalating and widening conflict.

At different points throughout this past year, the regional conflict escalated, including Iran deploying missiles and Hezbollah firing rockets on Israel, and Israel undertaking assassinations and increasing attacks on southern Lebanon and Beirut, ultimately launching a ground invasion into Lebanon. A fragile Lebanon cease-fire was reached in late November while the Gaza violence is ongoing, with ceasefire negotiations once again under way as of early January 2025.

However, these outbreaks of agonizing violence did not emerge from an otherwise peaceful context. Prior to October 7, 2023, Gaza was under blockade by Israel and Egypt since 2007. The Palestinian population in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza have been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. These political realities mean that Palestinians lack many of the basic human and civil rights available to citizens of Israel.

Thus, longstanding issues of injustice remain unresolved, namely the securing of Palestinian rights and freedom.

(For a short primer on the history of Israel-Palestine, see the EJF resource [Injustice in the Holy Land.](#))

It is critical to take a look back at how 2023–2024 has created a new chapter of ever more grievous harm in the Holy Land and also to consider how, in alignment with the Catholic and Jesuit traditions, we can promote justice, peace, equality, and dignity for Palestinians and Israelis and remain hopeful amid untold suffering and hardship.

## **Sacred Lives Lost: Palestinian, Israeli, and Lebanese**

Recognizing the inherent dignity of each human person, it is vital to grieve the thousands of sacred lives lost in the Holy Land this past year. The traditions of our Jewish and Muslim siblings teach that “whoever destroys a life, it is as if they have destroyed a whole world, and whoever saves a life, it is as if they have saved a whole world” (Surah Al-Ma'idah, verse 32 and Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). At the time of writing, the many lives lost include:

- 1,200 Israelis - from infants to grandparents - were killed during Hamas' brutal attack on October 7th, and more than 250 were taken hostage, of which an estimated 100 remain in captivity, some reported dead; Hezbollah's attacks killed another 47 civilians.
- In Gaza, at least 43,000 Palestinians, an estimated 70% women and children, have been killed in Israel's indiscriminate military assault, and another 100,000 are estimated to be injured.
- It was also a deadly year in the West Bank as settler violence and Israeli military actions intensified, claiming 736 Palestinian lives.
- Israeli attacks over the last year killed more than 3,000 Lebanese.

Beyond the numbers, we can recall just a few of these precious lives lost in 2024, including Hind Rajab, the 6-year-old Palestinian girl who was killed in Gaza on January 29, 2024, by Israeli forces along with six family members and two paramedics trying to rescue her; Aysar and Asal Abu al-Qumsan, twin newborn Palestinian babies killed on August 13 in an Israeli air strike and discovered by their father after returning home with their birth certificates; Israeli hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin killed on August 31 in Hamas captivity after his parents had advocated globally for a hostage deal; and Dina Darwiche, a Lebanese aid worker, and her youngest son Jad who were killed by an Israeli missile in eastern Lebanon on Sept. 23.

Recognizing the need to protect Palestinian, Israeli, and Lebanese lives, Pope Francis has frequently reiterated a call for a ceasefire, which he first issued on October 29, 2023. He has been a model of empathy — meeting with families of Israeli hostages and

Palestinians with relatives killed in Gaza, and he calls the Catholic Church in northern Gaza daily, which is sheltering around 500 people (Christians and Muslims).

"I carry daily in my heart with sorrow, the suffering of the people of Palestine and Israel, caused by the ongoing hostilities ... I ask myself: do we really think we can build a better world in this way? Do we really think we can achieve peace? Enough, please! Let us all say it: enough, please! Stop! I encourage the continuation of negotiations for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and in the entire region, so that the hostages may be freed immediately and return to their anxiously awaiting loved ones, and so that the civilian population can have safe access to urgently needed humanitarian aid."

- Pope Francis, March 2024

## **Catastrophe in Gaza & Entrenched Occupation in the West Bank**

Israel's massive bombardment of Gaza has decimated much of the narrow strip's civilian infrastructure, including the collapse of health and education systems and damage or destruction to structures (more than 220,000 homes) and 68% of road networks, and all 12 universities. At least 1.9 million people in Gaza – 90% of the population – have been forcibly displaced from their homes, with evacuation orders by Israel covering about 86% of Gaza. Catholic Relief Services reports that most Gazans face crisis levels of hunger or worse and lack clean water, sanitation, and a haven from airstrikes. Israel has regularly restricted humanitarian aid from entering Gaza, and record numbers of aid workers and journalists have been killed. A Gaza testimonial recorded by Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem described northern Gaza as "no longer fit for human habitation." Many Palestinians describe Gaza as an ongoing or "second Nakba," invoking the Arabic term used to describe the catastrophe that occurred in 1948 when 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes when the state of Israel was established. Despite these harsh conditions, Christians sheltering in the churches in Northern Gaza exhibit a will to live through their daily celebration of Mass. In the West Bank, Palestinians have been living under worsening realities, with increased checkpoints and other restrictions on freedom of movement, reduced access to water, rising settler violence, settlement growth, land annexation, and a return of Israeli air attacks and military ground incursions. The Palestinian Christian community in the Bethlehem area has seen almost no tourism in the last year, and many Palestinians who worked in Israel have been barred entry, creating severe economic hardship. Moreover, in the previous year, an estimated 1,478 Palestinian buildings in the West Bank were demolished or confiscated by Israeli authorities. For example, the

Palestinian Christian Kisiya family had their land confiscated and their home demolished in the village of Al Makhrou, catalyzing multi-faith, Palestinian/Israeli, and global solidarity in support of their ongoing effort to remain on their land.

## The Application of International Law and Human Rights

Universal appeals to human rights and the application of international law have long been essential ways for Catholics to discern responses to global conflicts. As the late Fr. Drew Christiansen, S.J., wrote, “at its core, the Catholic commitment to international law rises out of the belief that the human race is one family under God.” Over the last year, international bodies have been engaged in concerns related to Gaza and the broader Israel/Palestine context. The International Court of Justice has been investigating whether Israel’s actions in Gaza violate the Genocide Convention; a preliminary opinion in January 2024 ruled that Palestinians’ rights to be protected from genocide were plausibly at risk and Israel should take steps to prevent genocide; at the same time, many experts, including Holocaust scholars as well as Amnesty International, as of December 2024, have already termed Israel’s actions a genocide. In a new book released in November, Pope Francis referenced these experts’ findings and urged further investigation into whether Israel’s Gaza military campaign constitutes a genocide. A separate ICJ advisory opinion in July 2024 declared Israel’s longstanding occupation of Palestinian territory unlawful; this follows the work of prominent human rights groups that have identified Israel’s systems of control over Palestinians in the occupied territories, as well as within Israel, as apartheid. In May 2024, the International Criminal Court also brought charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity against both groups – Israeli officials for its military campaign of collective punishment in Gaza and Hamas officials for crimes of killing civilians and hostage-taking on October 7th in southern Israel; arrest warrants were issued in November. At their core, these investigations, rulings, and reports seek to pursue legal remedies to unjust systems and practices and protect civilians from disproportionate use of force and indiscriminate violence and reprisals that violate the rules of war. Moreover, a July report of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Holy Land concluded that “neither the attacks by Hamas nor Israel’s devastating war in response satisfy the criteria for ‘just war’ according to Catholic Doctrine.”

## The Role of U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Israel and the Palestinians has long been characterized by a strong

alliance with Israel, involving largely unconditional diplomatic support and military aid. Though the United States has been a main broker of attempted Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli peace efforts, it has often sidelined Palestinian aims rather than equitably pursuing justice and peace for all. In the wake of the October 7th attack, the United States redoubled its support of Israel, with President Biden offering empathy for the suffering and trauma faced by Israelis on that terrible day while failing to extend such care to Palestinians as they faced Israel's assault on Gaza. The U.S. vetoed multiple UN ceasefire resolutions and provided a record \$17.9 billion in military aid to Israel despite concerns as the year went on regarding violations of both U.S. and international law.

The legacy of Jesuit martyr Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., who called for a more “just and informed” U.S. policy in Central America and El Salvador in the 1980s, points to the need for a change in U.S. policy toward the Middle East and Israel/Palestine today. The El Salvador civil war only ended when the U.S. stopped sending military aid to the Salvadoran government, which had been committing rampant human rights abuses. This approach—of halting offensive U.S. weapons to Israel—could similarly bring the current Gaza violence to an end. Thus, during a second Trump Administration, which has its own record of anti-Palestinian action, advocates must continue to press for U.S. policy grounded in peacemaking.

## **Catholic Social Teaching and Israel-Palestine**

When approaching Israel-Palestine, there can be a temptation to not “take sides.” However, neutrality in the face of injustice is not an option for peacemakers. Similarly, “both-sides-ism,” whereby both groups are equally faulted, is to be avoided because it ignores asymmetries of power. Peacemakers must also reject dehumanizing or excluding any group from a future of human flourishing. The rich Catholic Social Teaching tradition provides a compassionate and clear-eyed approach to responding to injustice and violence in Israel-Palestine:

- 1) Upholding the human dignity of all people means drawing close to the pain and anguish of Palestinians and Israelis and also requires rejecting an ethic that relies on military force and violence.
- 2) The preferential option for the poor requires advocating for Palestinian rights and for Palestinian freedom while understanding that ending systemic injustice in the Holy

Land is consistent with a commitment to ensuring the safety and dignity of Jewish Israelis. Ultimately, Palestinian liberation and Jewish-Israeli safety are intertwined.

3) Subsidiarity, which is about hearing from those most affected by an issue on the ground, invites us to heed the call from Palestinian Christians to “Come and See” and then go and tell. Even as current travel options may be limited, seek opportunities to learn via news, social media, webinars, podcasts, and other resources.

4) Solidarity calls us to accompany Palestinians and Israelis on the path to justice and peace to pursue the common good and to use our voice to advocate for change. For instance, in March 2024, the Jesuits issued a global statement titled “we cannot be silent on Gaza,” which remains timely and urgent.

“...we must actively take sides, the side of justice and peace, freedom and equality. We must stand alongside all those Muslims, Jews, and Christians who seek to put an end to death and destruction...The international community must help us by recognizing that the root cause of this war is the negation of the right of the Palestinian people to live in its land, free and equal...Let us keep hope alive, knowing that peace is possible...” – His Beatitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah and members of the Christian Reflection from Jerusalem, October 2024

### Student Voices on Gaza and Palestine/Israel

One of the Jesuit Apostolic preferences is to “accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future.” Over the last year, we have seen many college students engage in efforts aimed at ending the Gaza violence, which is made possible through U.S. weapons provided to Israel without conditions based on adherence to human rights norms. These student actions involved engaging in peaceful protest, in line with prior anti-war movements, a hallmark of American democratic history; this activity also reflects Jesuit institutions’ entreaty to students to go forth and “set the world on fire” in light of the social realities of the world. Students also urged their schools to disinvest from war, weapons, and occupation, which aligns with Fr. Pedro Arrupe S.J.’s 1973 call to “draw no profit whatever from clearly unjust sources.”

### Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and Anti-Arab bigotry.

Over the last year, we have seen increases in anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian bigotry in the United States. Many of these incidents reflect

longstanding xenophobia, while others were more directly related to the conflict in Israel-Palestine. As Catholics, we must be introspective and proactive. Anti-semitism must be rejected, including recognizing that the Catholic Church played a role in historic Jewish persecution. Some Christians continue to view Jews negatively and may wrongly blame all Jews for the actions of the Israeli government. Islamophobia must also be rejected, including recognizing how Catholics have long contributed to negative associations with Islam. Some in our Christian communities still hold discriminatory attitudes toward Muslims and Arabs, labeling them as terrorists. There is no place for anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim, or anti-Arab stereotypes or collective blaming, and peace advocates should also be on guard for any manifestation of hate in their movements. At the same time, we recognize that criticism of Israel and Zionism should not be conflated with antisemitism; similarly, criticism of Hamas is not automatically anti-Muslim. Accusations of bigotry should not be used to stifle genuine activism for human rights.

*“Right now, the struggle is to try and find a way to explain what anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are, how they are both real and instrumentalized, and [to] try to find a way that puts the struggle against both on the same side of the barricade.”*

*–Fr. David Neuhaus, SJ*

## What Can You Do?

- Educate yourself and others about the root causes of violence and conflict in the Holy Land and the role of international law and human rights, U.S. policy, and Catholic Social Teaching.
- Pray for and mourn the sacredness of each life lost – Palestinian, Israeli, and Lebanese – and reject anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian bigotry.
- Advocate with government officials for more informed and just U.S. policies toward Israel-Palestine and the broader Middle East, including regional de-escalation, a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, a halt to U.S. offensive weapons to Israel, and a just peace for all in the Holy Land.
- Engage in peaceful protest to oppose systemic injustices, promote Palestinian rights and freedom, protect civilians, and urge adherence to international law by all parties.
- Urge disinvestment – no unjust profit – from war, weapons, occupation, and settlements in the Holy Land.

- Fundraise for Gaza humanitarian aid, Palestinian Christian communities, and Palestinian and Israeli human rights and peace activist groups.

## **Reflection Question:**

Of these suggested actions, what is one thing I could do? How is God calling me to respond to what I've learned?

## **Examen for Israel-Palestine**

*Adapted, in part, from a [JRS Examen resource](#)*

Become aware of God's presence: Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and hold in your heart and mind one or more of the individuals who were killed this past year in Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon—sacred life ended too soon. The scale of suffering can bring anger and sadness, despondency, and even despair. Be still and recognize that God is present in these spaces of pain and hardship.

Review: Take a moment to consider the information you know about the Gaza crisis, the broader Israel/Palestine and regional contexts, and the information you learned from this backgrounder. Was there something that helped you understand a particular issue better? An insight or point of clarity or consolation?

Pay Attention: Consider what is going on in your thoughts, words, and body as you think about the Holy Land. What do you find most challenging? What brings you desolation? Choose one feature and pray from it: Identify a thought, an image, or a feeling that you can't leave behind as you think about Gaza, Israel-Palestine, and Lebanon. Pray with it. Is there something you can do to affect it? Are you being called to further prayer, education, and/or action? Remember that God is at work in you and the world.

Look toward tomorrow with hope: Palestinian Christians often discuss the Palestinian practice of "sumud," which means "steadfastness" in remaining in the Holy Land in resistance to occupation and oppression. As you look toward the future, meditate on where you find hope—from Palestinian Christians, Palestinian and Israeli human rights and peace activists, or others. Follow their example.

## Links/Resources

- [Under siege, Catholic priests in war-torn Gaza and the West Bank care for the faithful](#) (January 2, 2025)
- [Reflection from Jerusalem from Patriarch Michel Sabbah & Christian Reflection from Jerusalem - "Keeping Hope Alive"](#) (October 7, 2024)
- [Listening to Pope Francis on genocide and the war in Gaza](#) (Fr. David Neuhaus, S.J.)
- [Catholic Letter on Israel-Palestine and Video](#) (May 2024)
- [What Should Catholics Think about Gaza, Israel, and Palestine? Catholic Social Teaching has Answers](#) (*America* magazine, Denari Duffner and Schumacher Cohen, June 2024)
- [Jesuit Global Statement on Gaza/Holy Land](#) (March 2024)
- [Gaza and Israel/Palestine: The Role of Jesuit Higher Education in a Time of Turmoil](#) (Schumacher Cohen, *AJCU Conversations*)
- [Statement on Just War Teachings by Holy Land Justice and Peace Commission](#) (July 2024)
- [Heads of Churches August 2024 statement](#)
- [September 2024 Update from the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem](#)
- [Interview of Fr. Dan Carrou, S.J. from JRS regarding Lebanon](#) (Sept. 2024)
- [Catholic Social Teaching & Advocating for Palestinians Across the Divides Podcast](#) (Denari Duffner, Nov. 2024)
- [Catholic Faith and Peacebuilding Work for Across the Divides Podcast](#) (Schumacher Cohen, Dec. 2024)

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