

Mission Matters in Israel-Palestine

Mission Matters – January 2024

Douglas Dicks, PC(USA) mission co-worker, has been serving in Israel, Palestine and Jordan for more than 25 years. In this Mission Matters article, read his on-the-ground perspective about the humanitarian tragedy currently unfolding in Gaza and Israel.

To learn more about his ministry and to subscribe to his letters, visit his [mission connections page](#).

‘Tormented by the silence of the world’

Much has been said and much has been written, and much more will be said and written, about the events that unfolded in Israel and its subsequent rush to war, following a surprise attack launched by Hamas against Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. Breaking through the security fence/barrier that surrounded the Gaza Strip, Hamas operatives and others killed 1,200 Israelis from the local kibbutzim bordering the Gaza Strip, as well as many attending a music festival in a field not far from Gaza. They took over 230 Israelis and other nationals hostage and carried them back into Gaza.

Without question, one must unequivocally condemn the brutal slaughter unleashed on Israelis on that fateful day. Nothing can justify such mass killing on a scale such as this.

Very quickly, world leaders descended on Tel Aviv, and embraced the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in a show of both sympathy and support. U.S. President Joe Biden was the first such foreign leader to fly directly to Tel Aviv and show up on the scene, promising Israel U.S. support, including money, weapons and warships sailing toward the Eastern Mediterranean. He also warned Hezbollah, in Lebanon and Iran, against attacking Israel. On his first trip to the region, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, “Israel has a right, indeed, an obligation, to defend its citizens.” No such statement was ever uttered by the Secretary of State with regard to the Palestinians, nor about their rights to defend their people. In essence, the United States gave Israel both a green light as well as diplomatic cover to wage this war.



*“Banner hung near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve” Photo
Credit: Doug Dicks*

Biden’s visit to Israel was followed by that of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Olaf Scholz of Germany and Emmanuel Macron of France. Each one expressed their solidarity with Israel.

The West Bank was already simmering prior to Oct. 7. Actually, it was boiling. The number of Palestinians killed by Israeli soldiers or settlers was already on course to become the highest death toll of Palestinians killed in the occupied West Bank in almost 20 years. Why, then, did the world not react to nor respond to this alarming trend? Why was the death of so many Palestinians equally not condemned?

Israel’s war on Gaza unleashed alarming incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia around the world. Every Arab was seen as a potential Hamas “terrorist,” and every Jew

an Israeli settler or soldier. From the get-go, people lined up on one side or the other, and took radically tough stances, including language of sheer hatred for the other.

Immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks on the U.S., Arundhati Roy, in a missive titled "[The Algebra of Infinite Justice](#)," wrote:

"America's grief at what happened has been immense and immensely public. It would be grotesque to expect it to calibrate or modulate its anguish. However, it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try to understand why Sept. 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own. Because then it falls to the rest of us to ask the hard questions and say the harsh things. And for our pains, for our bad timing, we will be disliked, ignored and perhaps eventually silenced."

Substitute "Israel" and "Oct. 7" into the language of this paragraph, and you will get a more accurate reading of what has unfolded in Israel, in the West Bank and in Gaza since Oct. 7 of last year.



“Posters of Israelis taken hostage on Oct. 7 by Hamas hang in West Jerusalem” Photo Credit: Doug Dicks

Israel’s rush to war, in its bid to crush Hamas, has had a devastating and shocking impact on the tiny enclave of Gaza. An area of roughly 141 square miles, its population of over 2.2 million Palestinians was already living in what has been termed “the largest open-air prison in the world.” Denied basic human rights, clean water, food and freedom of movement, every essential item needed to be trucked into Gaza daily. It was said that prior to Oct. 7, 5,000 trucks were crossing into the Gaza Strip daily, in order to sustain life within Gaza.

The poorest of the poor in Gaza, which includes refugees and their descendants from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, have been displaced from their homes, and are today on the verge of starvation, disease and death. A total of 1.9 million Palestinians have been forced from their homes, most from the northern part of Gaza. Seventy percent of the homes and buildings in Gaza have been destroyed. Israel has dropped more than

25,000 tons of explosives on Gaza, the equivalent of two nuclear bombs. Today, there is no safe place in Gaza for anyone to shelter and seek safety. Unlike Israel, Gaza has no bomb shelters. U.N. agencies have likened Gaza to “hell on earth.” Entire families have been wiped off the Palestinian population registry. [The Ministry of Health in Gaza reports more than ten thousand of Gaza’s total child population have been killed since the attack on Israel Oct. 7.](#)

In November 2022, Israel elected its most right-wing government in its 74-year history. It’s current Heritage Minister, [Amihai Eliyahu stated that a nuclear bomb on the Gaza strip was an option](#), and for Gaza’s residents to consider “voluntary transfer” as a solution to the ongoing conflict.

Has the systematic slaughter of over 23,000 Gazans, 70% of whom were children and women, shocked anyone in the world? Israeli politician Ofer Cassif, speaking on Al Jazeera recently, expressed his shock at the fact that, as one who is descended from the families of those who were killed in the Holocaust in Europe, the ones who are speaking openly of destruction, elimination and burning down Gaza are those currently in power in Israel, and that, in his words, people in Israel and probably the majority support such policies.

Delivering his sermon titled “Christ in the Rubble” only two days before Christmas at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, the Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac lashed out at the international and church community, saying, “We are angry. We are broken. This should have been a time of joy; instead, we are mourning. We are fearful. The world is watching; churches are watching.”



“A tableau at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem shows the Christ child amidst rubble” Photo Credit: Doug Dicks

Rev. Dr. Isaac, in his sermon, talked openly about the hypocrisy displayed by the West and the silence of the world and the church. You can view his moving sermon [here](#).

Yet, we must not be silent, we cannot remain silent, for if we remain silent, the very stones will cry out.

In the midst of unimaginable suffering, destruction and death, it is our duty in mission to accompany our partners and our partner churches, and to continue to echo their voices in a world that appears to have gone insane. As I wrote back in 2021 on this same subject, “we follow in faith the work that was begun in Jesus Christ himself, more than 2,000 years ago and continue to bear light in places of the world that have grown dark.”

Our hope, as followers of Christ, remains embedded in and with and through the Child of Bethlehem, who came to bring life by his own death, and to be an example for all of humankind. May we see the face of Christ in those who are anguished, oppressed, grieving, fearful and downtrodden, and work tirelessly for the peace and security, and the dignity of all of God's people, everywhere.



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