Voices of Sisters
Social Justice



The Israeli settlement Har Homa is seen on the hillside overlooking houses in Bethlehem in the valley in the West Bank, in this Dec. 3, 2019, photo. (CNS/Debbie Hill)



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Through a mutual friend, I recently had the privilege of connecting with a courageous ecumenical group of Christian leaders in Jerusalem. In the midst of a devastating war, the ecumenical group A Jerusalem Voice for Justice issued a public statement crying out against the horrific suffering of Palestinian peoples and calling for the right of Palestinians to live in their homeland. They joined worldwide calls for "equality, justice and peace for Palestinians and Israeli alike."

As the war in Gaza continues, the Israeli army is forcibly removing some 40,000 West Bank Palestinians — Muslim and Christian alike — from their ancestral homes, forcing them to live without shelter, essential services and health care. It is the largest displacement since 1967.

There are fears that with the support of U.S. President Donald Trump, the Israeli annexation of Palestinian territories is imminent. In early March, The New York Times reported that U.S. evangelical leaders were mounting a multipronged effort to pressure Trump to declare the right of Israel to claim ownership of the occupied West Bank. At a February news conference, Trump affirmed "people do like the idea."

In early March, evangelical leaders Ralph Reed, Tony Perkins and others visited Jerusalem to publicly back annexation. They are part of a Christian Zionist movement that believes that, according to the Bible, Palestine was given to the Jews. The movement insists on referring to the occupied West Bank with the ancient biblical names of Judea and Samaria. New York Republican representative Claudia Tenney has even introduced legislation that would require government references to use the biblical names.

For A Jerusalem Voice for Justice this amounts to "exploiting Biblical terminology to confuse present political realities, manifest[ing] a desire to wipe Palestine and the Palestinians off the map, claiming we do not exist." Calling to mind the parable of the good Samaritan, their statement specifically addresses "brothers and sisters in Gaza, Gaza City, Khan Younis and Rafah, and the West Bank, in Nablus, Jenin and Tulkar."

The statement passionately proclaims: "We refuse to simply pass you by. We not only do not forget you but commit ourselves to solidarity with you. We carry you in our prayers. We cry with you. We seek to make your cries heard in a world which needs to be shaken out of its complacency."



A priest places ashes on the forehead of a nun during Ash Wednesday Mass in the Church of St. Catherine in Bethlehem, West Bank, March 5. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)

Describing itself as "an ecumenical witness for equality and a just peace in Palestine/Israel," A Jerusalem Voice for Justice includes 12 prominent faith leaders from the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Evangelical and Lutheran traditions. Among them are His Beatitude Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah (emeritus), His Grace Lutheran Bishop of the Holy Land Munib Younan (emeritus) and His Excellency Greek Orthodox Bishop Attallah Hanna. Evangelical leaders include John Munayer and Samuel Munayer. Three Roman Catholic priests are also signers, along with lay leaders from both Greek and Roman Catholic traditions.

Along with Greek Catholic Yusef Daher, Jesuit Fr. David Neuhaus of Jerusalem's Pontifical Biblical Institute is a spokesperson for the group. He sent the following

replies to interview questions I emailed to him. For those of us whose understanding of this soul-searing struggle is framed primarily via U.S. media, his perspective is enlightening.

How many West Bank Palestinians are Christian and are they among the displaced?

There are about 50,000 Christians who live in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem). They are mostly concentrated in the cities of Ramallah, Jerusalem and Bethlehem and their surrounding areas. The Israeli military actions are taking place in the northern part of the West Bank and Christians there are affected, especially because of the waves of displaced people looking for shelter from the refugee camps in Jenin, Tulkarm and Nablus that are being targeted.

What is your take on the Israeli peace movement — I have an impression that many Israelis do not necessarily support [President Benjamin] Netanyahu. Are they being helpful?

It is important to distinguish between the protests that are taking place and a "peace movement." The protests are against Netanyahu and his government. He is considered by many corrupt and his government is seen by many as harming the way of life and rights of Jewish Israelis. There is anger that it does not seem that the Israeli hostages in Gaza are an absolute priority. However, those protesting are not necessarily seeking peace with the Palestinians. The peace movement that is "helpful" is made up of those associations and individuals who are interested in ending the occupation of Palestinian territories and the discrimination against Palestinians inside Israel. These are the Israelis who place the values of equality, justice and peace at the forefront of their concerns. Unfortunately, they seem few and far between right now.

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How are Christian communities, and other Palestinians, coping?

Palestinians, both Muslims and Christians, are living through a catastrophe. Those on the front (in Gaza and in the northern West Bank) are facing death and destruction. Those elsewhere are facing hardships on every level: economic, restriction of movement, unemployment, despair … They have little alternative but to cope. Some

are helped by their faith. Others, by involving themselves in social help programs. However, people are tense and depressed … Their resilience shines through when people can meet and go through the motions of living what remains of normality.

What brought you and Yusef to the point of organizing and creating a statement?

Yusef and I are part of a Catholic group that has been meeting for years. It is a kind of think tank that seeks to formulate an analytical description of what we are living to help our community, our leaders and others put words on what is happening. We have broadened this group to include other Christians because of the need to broaden our perspectives. We are particularly eager to get younger voices involved.

How can people outside Israel/Palestine help?

People outside have a very important role to play. We need your support, especially to reassure us that we are being heard. We need you to conscientize your leaders, local and national, so that they can speak out. If you can, please come and visit us to see with your own eyes what is happening here. Everyone must ask: What can I do to bring this horror to an end?

One fruitful approach might be for U.S. Christians to educate about and counter the destructive theological and political underpinnings of Christian Zionism. Here are some helpful resources:

- Confronting Christian Zionism, a webinar from Presbyterian Church USA
- Countering Christian Zionism, a toolkit for activists and local leaders from FOSNA: A Christian Voice for Palestine
- "An Ethical Critique of Christian Zionism" from Journal of Lutheran Ethics

I can think of no better way to conclude this article than by quoting the faith-filled final paragraph from A Jerusalem Voice for Justice's statement:

> As we approach Easter, we affirm yet again that the light shines in the darkness and darkness does not overcome it. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:3-5).