



December 12th, 2023

**Your Beatitudes,
Your Graces,
Dear Sisters and Brothers,**

While our hearts are heavy with the somber reality of the unfolding Genocide in Gaza, I write to you from the Holy Land, as we gather in the spirit of Christmas, a season of hope, love, and joy, to bring attention to the Israeli atrocities affecting Palestinians this Christmas season and call for a decisive action towards a permanent ceasefire and end of the aggression on Gaza,

We are devastated by the scale of death and destruction inflicted upon our people besieged in Gaza. Israeli relentless bombardment has killed over 18,000 Palestinians, 70% of them are women and children while the number of wounded is nearing 50,000. over 8,000 are reported missing under the rubble, either dead or waiting to be rescued, and 1.8 million Palestinians have been forcibly displaced, in a scene similar to that of the painful 1948 Nakba.

There is no safe place in Gaza. Entire neighborhoods have been reduced to ruins, including Muslim and Christian institutions and places of worship. The Al Ahli Baptist hospital in Gaza was hit by an Israeli airstrike, massacring over 500 sick, wounded and displaced Palestinians. The compound of the St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza, the third oldest church in the world, was bombed by Israel, massacring 17 Palestinian Christians. The Arab Orthodox Cultural and Social Center and the Rosary Sisters school were also shelled, causing severe damage. The Al Omari Mosque, an iconic landmark and Gaza's oldest mosque has been largely destroyed by Israeli airstrikes. As a result of the massacres, the already low number of Christians living in the Gaza Strip has been reduced by 2%.

Such attacks are part of broader and brutal campaign of Israeli terror against the Palestinian people for decades, with knowledge of the entire world. Despite appeals from UN experts calling on the international community to stop the Genocide against the Palestinian people, efforts to reach a ceasefire at the United Nations have been thwarted by the United States' veto, thus making it a partner in crime and in the killing of Palestinian innocent lives.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, I urge you to remember those who are suffering in your Christmas sermon, and to offer prayer for families who bear the heavy burden of loss. This Christmas season, let's recall the 84-year-old Palestinian Christian music teacher Elham Farah, who was fatally shot by an



Israeli sniper and left to die on the pavement. Let's honor the memory of Viola, Yara and the 17 Palestinian Christians killed by Israeli airstrikes that hit the Greek Orthodox Church, preventing them from celebrating Christmas with their loved ones. Let's reflect on Khaled, who kissed the eyes of his beloved granddaughter Reem, before putting her to rest, and let's not forget the countless women and children killed, wounded, displaced and reported missing.

With this Israeli brutal aggression on Gaza, the Heads of Churches in the Holy Land made the decision to cancel Christmas celebrations in the Nativity City of Bethlehem. For the first time, the tradition of lighting Bethlehem's tree and joyous festivities will not take place. What was once a season of joy has transformed into a season of mourning. I urge Churches worldwide to follow the lead of their local Churches in Bethlehem the birthplace of Jesus, recognizing that when one part is not well, none of us are truly well.

Bethlehem, like other parts of the occupied West Bank, has been subjected to daily Israeli military raids, closures, killings and detentions of its residents. While Israel is bombing Gaza, it is unleashing a campaign of ethnic cleansing in the occupied West Bank. Since October 7th, 276 Palestinians have been killed at the hands of Israeli soldiers and settlers (without counting the number of Palestinians killed since the beginning of this year), exceeding already last year's death toll, which has been designated by the UN as the deadliest year for the Palestinians since the UN started counting in 2005.

In Jerusalem, where the situation has radically deteriorated, the Armenian community in Jerusalem, is fighting to protect its land and property from being stolen by Israeli occupation authorities and settlers. Their steadfastness demands our attention and concern. May we find inspiration in the resilience of those who continue to hold onto their faith and traditions despite the challenges they face.

The injustices endured by the Palestinian people is a stark reminder of the urgent need for justice. Let us not forget those who are denied basic human rights and the freedom to celebrate this season in peace. In the midst of the rubble, we see the symbol of Jesus, reminding us of the enduring spirit of hope even in the face of adversity.

In the face of these hardships, we extend our heartfelt thankfulness to the Churches that have courageously denounced Israeli crimes and advocated for Palestinian rights. Your commitment to justice and your unwavering support for those who suffer do not go unnoticed. We appreciate your dedication to the principles of compassion, equality, and human dignity.

In this Christmas message, we earnestly call on all Churches and individuals to stand up for Palestinian rights, denounce the injustices inflicted upon



Palestinians, and continue to push for an end to this ongoing tragedy and for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Let us unite in our collective efforts to bring about positive change, and may the light of Christmas guide us towards a future of justice for all.

Sincerely,
Dr. Ramzi Khouri
Member of the PLO Executive Committee
Head of the Higher Presidential Committee for Churches Affairs in Palestine

