

# Palestinian ambassador lauds Pope's description of Gaza war as 'defeat'



By Elise Ann Allen 

Dec 12, 2023 | Senior Correspondent

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Cardinal Parolin (left) and Issa J. Kassissieh (right) during an interview. See on Oct. 17, 2023. (Credit: Vatican Media.)

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*[Editor's Note: This is the first part of a two-part interview with Issa J. Kassissieh, Ambassador of Palestine to the Holy See and to the Sovereign Order of Malta.]*

ROME – Palestine's Ambassador to the Holy See has lauded Pope Francis' description of the current war in Gaza as "defeat" and has called for both a ceasefire and an end to Israeli settlements, urging international leaders to do more.

Speaking to *Crux* in a wide-ranging sit-down interview at the Palestinian Embassy to the Holy See, Ambassador Issa J. Kassissieh, who serves as Palestine's envoy to the Holy See and to the Sovereign Order of Malta, said Nov. 22 meeting between Pope Francis and a delegation of Palestinian families, who came from Gaza or have relatives there, gave the families hope.

"Hearing the stories of each individual about their sad stories because of the war on Gaza, I can say that the Pope was affected and was touched. As a result, when he then had a public audience, and as repeatedly he said, 'war is a defeat,'" Kassissieh said.

In a public general audience that took place after that meeting, Pope Francis referred to the war in stronger terms, saying, "Let us not forget to pray for those who suffer because of wars, and let us persevere in praying for peace, for what is happening currently is not war, but rather terrorism."

On the same day, also met with a delegation of 12 relatives of Israeli hostages taken by Hamas during their Oct. 7 surprise offensive on Israel, during which 1,400 were killed and 240 abducted.

Since those meetings took place, Kassissieh said that he observed "more engagement by the Holy See to try to reach a ceasefire."

"His Holiness represents the highest stand of morality, and truly he represents our Lord on the ground," he said, saying that in terms of the families, the pope "let them feel that he heard them, and he listened to their hearts and minds, and, he let them feel that he is well aware of their consistent suffering because of the unjust situation they're in."

Kassissieh also shared stories of some of the individuals that Francis met and he chastised the international community for enabling Israel by turning a blind eye to its expansion of "illegal" settlements in occupied Palestinian territory, calling Israel a "spoiled" child and urging a two-state solution.

Please read below for excerpts of *Crux's* interview with Ambassador Issa Kassissieh:

***Crux:* Pope Francis recently met with families of people living in Gaza or who left Gaza due to the war. Can you explain what this meeting meant to those families and the people of Palestine?**

**Kassissieh:** His Holiness is saddened to see the deterioration of the situation in the Holy Land. He wanted to express his solidarity to the grief of the Palestinians. We facilitated the visit in coordination with the Latin Patriarchate and the Higher Presidential Committee for Churches Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and others, in order to show the disastrous situation at the humanitarian level as the result of the war. His Holiness wanted to meet the families on this basis, a humanitarian basis.

He listened to the grievances of the families, one of whom, Mohammad Halalo, his whole family was wiped out. Also, one Christian lady by the name Suheir Anistas with her daughter Zara Tarazi just left Gaza, and they were sheltering in the church, and they lived with the bombardment for 40 days. They described the difficult times they passed through because of the continuous bombardments, and they spoke about the hitting of the Orthodox church and the fatalities among the Christian families. One of them, was an employees of Caritas in Gaza. Viola Amash was killed with her children, her husband, her sister, and the husband of her sister. The only one who survived from this family was her mother. Imagine the mother living now her life without her daughters and (grandchildren).

Another story was a lady who was on the telephone with her mother until the telephone was cut. After 20 minutes, she knew that her mother with the family passed away. Khadija Darabeih, the pregnant woman who received the blessing of the pope, lost her entire family last week in a devastating Israeli airstrike on her family house. Ten of her family passed away, including her father, mother, sisters, brothers, and nieces. Fatimah Abu Muaileq, 11-years-old, was the youngest in the delegation to have the audience. So, you have all of these miserable stories because of this aggressive war on Gaza. Of course, such stories would have much (impact on) any human being, because normally we should live in peace and tranquility but not war, as simple as it is.

As a result of this meeting and hearing the stories of each individual about their sad and devastating stories because of the war on Gaza, I can say that the Pope was very touched. And when he then had a public audience, there he said that 'war is a defeat,' and 'this is not war, this is terrorism.' Consistently, His Holiness asks for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid, but I could tell that after hearing the voices and the stories of the families, he was personally so affected.

Since then, we see more engagement by the Holy See to try to reach a ceasefire. At one point, His Holiness was optimistic because of the temporary ceasefire, but as you see on TV, back to war and back to more casualties of civilians and more disastrous situations. The families who had a private audience with His Holiness mentioned also strong words about what is going on in Gaza, but I cannot quote him personally as an official, because I was not there, and it was a private audience with the families.

**There was some debate over what the pope said, and whether he used the word 'genocide.' Even if you can't quote him, what was the sentiment that the families felt? What message do you think they received from the pope?**

One of them told me that truly His Holiness represents the highest stand of morality, and truly he represents our Lord on the ground. He told them that war is a defeat. In other words, war is a sin. So, he let them feel that he heard them, and he listened to their hearts and minds, and he cares much about the Palestinians, and he is aware of their consistent suffering because of the unjust situation they're in.

**You said the pope and the Vatican's engagement in pushing for a ceasefire had increased since the meeting with the families took place. How have you seen this engagement increase?**

As you know, he's in constant contact with the parish, checking on the families there and he's in constant contact with the leaders of the world. Furthermore, each Wednesday with the public audience and each Sunday with the Angelus prayers, he mentions the situation publicly, praying and requesting a truce, a ceasefire. The Holy See is also in touch with church-related organizations like Caritas, the Pontifical Mission, the Latin Patriarchate, the Apostolic delegate, the Franciscans and so on, to extend their hand to help as much as possible.

The families said to me that they felt His Holiness was well-informed of the situation there, and truly almost on a daily basis he calls the parish there in Gaza and he is worried about the dire situation there, because of the lack of pure water, food, electricity and medicine, and now diseases. He's making his voice heard, and I hope that the world leaders and mainly President Joe Biden as a Catholic president, would truly hear the voice of His Holiness and give his voice a respect. His Holiness deserves that his voice is heard by the world leaders,



not just by Biden, but also by the European leaders, because what is going on in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is a real blow for those who always advocated for human rights human values, and international humanitarian law.

I believe that the world order is currently in a real crisis due to the double-standard positions. You cannot talk about the illegality of occupation on one side, while legitimizing the occupation on the other side. If those leaders care about the future of Israel, no doubt they should recognize and defend Israel within its borders, but not defend Israel with its oppressive measures against other people. If I am a father and I have a spoiled boy, I don't continue to pamper him. Rather, I take him in the right path so I'm sure that when he grows up, he's in the right direction. Western world leaders have to take this path and not the other path. Actually, the path of spoiling the boy and making him above the rules of the house and above the rule of law will not make (him) good. Trust me, this policy is hurting more Israel and the Israelis than anyone else.

(Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu had a unique opportunity to make real peace with the Arab world if he recognized, and if the Israeli side endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative, which was endorsed by the Arab and Muslim countries. You're talking about 57 countries who were ready to have a real peace with the state of Israel, provided that the latter would pull out or deescalate toward ending the occupation based on international legitimacy. This did not happen, so also the ones to be blamed are the international community. They have seen the deterioration of the situation in the occupied territories, and no one showed any real political will to stop the escalation and change the dynamics to a positive one. The Abraham Accords are a recipe to avoid doing the real homework and to solve the Palestinian Question.

**Q: What about the October 7 attack? Do you think that was the result of pressure building up and boiling over as a result of the ongoing situation?**

Our president said clearly many times, we are against hurting any human being, all human beings are a reflection of the image of God, but I hope that the Israelis for the first time would do their homework and not run from their duties and allow the spoilers to continue spoiling and poisoning the atmosphere and start seriously dealing with the roots of the problem. The basic principle here is: 'live and let live.'

You have your state, you achieved your national aspirations, and the other side is struggling for many years for their very rights and for their national rights. The time has come for both sides to exchange the right of their birth certificates so that we give to each other the legitimate birth certificates in order to live and coexist together and to prepare the ground together for the future of our children and to put hatred and discrimination aside and work to strengthen the moderate forces, and not to allow the extremist forces to control the scene. Unfortunately, this is what is going on at this moment.

Our president Mahmoud Abbas himself said many times at different forums that the political status quo is not sustainable, and the situation on the ground is deteriorating. He was complaining about the unprecedented violation of the settlers, and he was warning all the time about their illegal acts and practices and the illegal and unilateral continuation of the expansion of the settlements in the heart of the occupied territories.

Furthermore, living and tasting on a daily basis the humiliation, the oppression; negating your basic very rights, negating you as a human being, looking at you from a point of supremacy, arrogance, not dealing with you as an equal human being, would result at the end to falling to the dark spot. This situation went on for the last 75 years, generation after generation and war after war, but at the end, maybe this ugly chapter would be, with all its miseries, a waking moment, or an alert for the Israelis as well for the international community, that occupation does not make good for anyone and that the course of logic will prevail and not the logic of might.

# Palestine envoy says Vatican has role to play mediating two-state solution



By Elise Ann Allen   
Dec 13, 2023 | Senior Correspondent

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Palestinians look for survivors following Israeli airstrikes in Nasserat refugee camp, Gaza Strip, Tuesday, Oct. 31, 2023. (Credit: AP Photo.)

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*[Editor's Note: This is the second part of a two-part interview with Issa J. Kassissieh, Ambassador of Palestine to the Holy See and to the Sovereign Order of Malta.]*

ROME – As the war in Gaza drags on, Palestine's Ambassador to the Holy See offered an update on the situation on the ground and praised the Vatican's support for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, saying it is the only path to a lasting peace.

"If we talk about a durable and comprehensive peace, this is the only path," Ambassador Issa J. Kassissieh, who serves as Palestine's envoy to the Holy See and to the Sovereign Order of Malta, said of the two-state solution.

"Many don't believe in it anymore, and there is no trust on either side," he said. However, when it comes to the Holy See, "they did their duty by recognizing the State of Palestine based on the borders of '67. I believe that the Catholic world should have followed suit with His Holiness and respected his step."

Kassissieh spoke to *Crux* during a wide-ranging sit-down interview at the Palestinian Embassy to the Holy See, speaking of the current situation in Gaza, the need for a de-escalation, and Pope Francis's advocacy.

"We're living the season of Christmas and if we talk about the season of Christmas, our eyes are directed toward the Holy Land, toward the city of the birthplace of the baby Jesus, toward the Nativity church. There, we had the message of peace, the message of hope. But what is going on there is completely opposite of what should be," he said.

The situation, he said, "makes you so sad; rather than decorating and lighting the Christmas tree, you are watching destruction, and the miseries of the families there."



Kassissieh also spoke about the June 2014 prayer for peace that took place in the Vatican Gardens shortly after Pope Francis's visit to the Holy Land, attended by the late Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and the potential for a special commemoration for the tenth anniversary of the event next year to keep hope alive.

Please read below for excerpts of *Crux's* interview with Ambassador Issa Kassissieh.

***Crux:* The Vatican has always supported a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Is this solution still possible, given where things stand? If so, what role do you think the Vatican might have?**

***Kassissieh:*** If we talk about a durable and comprehensive peace, this is the only path. Many don't believe in it anymore, and there is no trust on either side. Extremists are controlling the scene, but you have our president and the Arab world, they stick to their peaceful strategy of the two-state solution based on the international resolutions and international legitimacy, including the Arab Peace Initiative, it's still on the table, we have to keep it in mind.

For the Holy See, they did their role by recognizing the State of Palestine based on the borders of '67. I believe that the Catholic world should have followed suit with His Holiness and respected his step. The Europeans have recognized the international resolutions related to the Palestinian question. As they support in principle our self-determination as our inalienable right, then recognizing the state of Palestine is a must, this is a moral obligation, a legal obligation, and a fulfillment of the two-state formula. It is mentioning here that the window of the two-state formula is closing down so quickly. People should look into the realities on the ground to understand that this opportunity is evaporating.

I believe if the Europeans and others recognized the State of Palestine, we would have been in a different (position). Our people, having high hopes at the eve of launching the Middle East Peace process, believing that they are close to reaching their national aspirations, rather they have seen other policies, illegal policies, including oppressing their national aspirations. It has reached the point that truly for the young generation, they don't believe anymore in the two-state solution. I believe the same applies on the other side. In fact, if the Europeans took such a step, they would have strengthened the moderate forces, they would have shown our people that the path of diplomatic engagement and political negotiations would get us to a positive result, a recognition.

Still, I personally, like our president, believe that it is still possible, but the Europeans should be courageous enough to come out and recognize the State of Palestine, and they should engage the Americans as well the world community, work with us for a roadmap with benchmarks and a clear timeframe to ensure that we have an endgame with an international mechanism to ensure the implementation. The endgame might take two years to rebuild confidence, trust, and to prepare the ground, but at least this time we have to be sure that at

the end of the tunnel there is a light. And lesson learned, we should avoid the mistakes of past negotiations. Ending the settlement enterprises would be the first concrete step towards de-escalation.

It's possible now to take the moral stand as His Holiness did when he made his pilgrimage visit to the Holy Land in May 2015. He came with a chopper from Amman to Bethlehem directly, and that was the first signal from His Holiness that he intended to recognize the State of Palestine. Then, he did the peace prayer in the gardens of Vatican City. We also signed the comprehensive agreement between the Holy See and the State of Palestine on June 26, 2015. So, the Holy See showed that they hold a vision, and that this vision is the right path for a durable peace. The Europeans and others should endorse this vision, but at this moment all efforts should be focused on the ceasefire.

**So, it's fair to say that you are satisfied with the Vatican's support of the two-state solution and with the pope's engagement on the current war?**

Who am I to be happy with His Holiness? He did his conscience; he fulfilled his beliefs. He moves and he formulates his decisions out of the Gospel, and the Gospel is the path for rightness, justice and self-peace, for eternity and for salvation.

**What is the current status of the Christian community in Gaza?**

You have to refer to the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter, urging the UN Security Council to act on the war in Gaza. You also have to refer to other international organizations who speak with infographics on the devastating situation in Gaza. The other day the Brazilian President Mr. Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva described the war on Gaza as a genocide. What makes me sad (is) seeing the world leaders watching this disastrous situation, the indiscriminate killing of children, women, and innocent people, but they don't act accordingly to put an end to this madness. Our people taking a shelter in the vicinity of the church describe the situation as hell. One told me that the description of hell is in the Gospel but in reality, we live hell for the last 60 days, so this must stop. Who would want to live in this hell? It is a disaster for the whole of humanity.

Let us carry the torch of hope and salvation as we are heading toward Christmas. Indeed, we're living the season of Christmas, and our eyes should be directed toward the Holy Land, toward the city of the birthplace of the baby Jesus, toward the Basilica of the Nativity church. There, we had the message of peace, the message of hope. What is going on in our area is completely opposite of what should be. It makes you sad; rather than decorating and lighting the Christmas tree, you are watching destruction, and the miseries of the families there, and the collapse of the whole system in Gaza. What is happening contradicts with the message of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Talking about Gaza and talking about the dangerous escalation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, requires everyone to say that this must stop, there should be a whole change of atmosphere towards hope. Violence breeds violence. If we don't have hope, we don't have life, and there is no life now.

And as His Holiness says: 'war is a defeat.' It is a sin. Of course, when we talk about Christians in Gaza, we should talk about Christians in the West Bank. As long as we have this separation wall, separating the Nativity church from the Holy Sepulcher church in the *Terra Sancta*, thus separating the Christian families from each other, this bitter reality doesn't give hope for the very presence of Christianity in the Holy Land, but you also have the psychological wall; not just separating families, but also separating the two peoples from each other. His Holiness Pope Francis made the point when he was visiting Bethlehem back in 2014, and he stood opposite the wall and touched it, while he prayed for bridges of compassion and forgiveness to be built and not walls. The Berlin Wall fell at one point in history, and so the case is applied here. The mentality of segregation and exclusion shouldn't prevail.

Actually, we cannot talk about Christianity in the world without giving the utmost attention to the cradle of Christianity in the Holy Land. If we talk about the future of Palestinian Christians, then we cannot but allow for the families to grow without any hurdles. The issue of no reunification for the families, and the revoking of the residential identity cards, is a serious hurdle for a real future for the very presence of Christianity. The numbers of Christians are dwindling rapidly. We can't talk about Christianity without preserving the living stones. The political instability is one of the main reasons for the decreasing number of the Palestinian Christians.

I believe His Holiness Pope Francis also requested this during his visit in 2014 from the Israeli authorities, to allow for the reunification of families so that we preserve the mosaic of the Holy City under the current political status quo. I don't think that His Holiness's request was fulfilled, but I take this opportunity to urge the Holy See and His Holiness to give their utmost attention to the Holy Land. His Holiness spoke the other day about the need for a special status to Jerusalem with an internationally guaranteed mechanism. It is our hope that we see words would transfer to deeds, to protect the cradle of Christianity and to work diligently with the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches of Jerusalem.

Within this context, the Holy See should take note of the many appeals issued by the heads of church in the last two years. Anyhow, the elevation to the dignity of Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa signaled that the Holy See is giving attention to the Holy City of Jerusalem.

**You mentioned the need for de-escalation. In terms of the current conflict, there was a brief truce, but fighting began again. What will it take for a lasting ceasefire and de-escalation to occur?**

To stick to the words of His Holiness: a ceasefire, humanitarian aid, the release of hostages, and keep in mind also, from the Palestinian side, there are political prisoners, there are people held in administrative detention that were arrested without any charges, and dozens of bodies held in the Israeli mortuary refrigerators. So, it is all about heartbreaking stories and miseries. But at the end, there should be a courageous leader to take the region out of this circuit of violence and hatred and bloodshed, to a different stand. President Abbas extended his hand to peace. Pope Francis praised him as a man of peace.

So, the de-escalation would start really from a permanent ceasefire, humanitarian aid, and a credible process of intervention by the international community. Enough of bloodshed. There should be a real effort to shift our region to a different direction, to allow our youngsters to compete with others on IT, and on smart technology and to have a viable economic development, to have prosperity, to have a normal life. People would ask the families in Gaza and in the West Bank, what do they want in the end? For sure parents want to get bread on the table for their family and they want to feel secure, and to be respected and to feel that they are not humiliated, but that they have dignity, and that dignity is respected. In other words, an end of occupation is the path to self-salvage for all.

I personally spent most of my career focusing on the peace process, I am one of those who was engaged in negotiations. Believe me, we have tens of thousands of documents and policy papers related to the final status files, including state-to-state relations, but actually what we are in need of is a political will to strike a deal. We don't need any more negotiations. The parameters for peace are there. We need a leader convinced of peace and ready to strike a deal to take the region from hell to heaven. Prime Minister (Yitzhak) Rabin was the one, but unfortunately, he was assassinated. Prime Minister (Ehud) Olmert was also there to make peace but was assassinated politically.

**Can you speak briefly about the peace prayer event that took place with President Peres, President Abbas, and Pope Francis at the Vatican in 2014? Are there any plans for a commemoration of the tenth anniversary next year?**

His Holiness had this peace prayer at the vicinity of the Vatican City. It was immediately after his pilgrimage visit to the Holy Land, and there we had President Peres, President Abbas and the entourage. It was a very special moment for peace and justice in the Middle East.

Now, next year, will commemorate 10 years of the planting of the olive tree, and I'm sure that His Holiness will continue the path of coordinating and working for justice and peace in the Holy Land, and I'm sure with the commemoration of 10 years of having this peace prayer and of planting the seeds of peace via the olive tree in Vatican City, that next year, His Holiness will give a signal, will share something so that he makes the point that this is the only path and that the two sides should come together and engage constructively to end this conflict.