

Palestine's Vatican envoy urges Gaza ceasefire for Ramadan, Easter

By [Elise Ann Allen](https://twitter.com/eliseannallen) (<https://twitter.com/eliseannallen>)



Feb 28, 2024 | Senior Correspondent



Palestinians walk by the buildings destroyed in the Israeli bombardment on al-Zahra, on the outskirts of Gaza City. (Credit: Ali Mahmoud/AP.)

ROME – Palestinian Ambassador to the Holy See, Issa Kassissieh, on Monday met with a top Vatican official about the ongoing war in Gaza, stressing the need for immediate humanitarian assistance and calling for a ceasefire ahead of the holiest days on the Christian and Muslim calendars.

“There is a real crisis in Gaza with regard to the famine and (there is) no food, no water, no medicines, no hospitals, no schools...the children, the mothers, and the elderly are the ones who are highly paying the price,” he said, and thanked Pope Francis for his repeated prayers and calls for a ceasefire.

As the Muslim holy month Ramadan and the Christian feast of Easter approach, “we hope that by this day there will be a ceasefire, so that especially the people in Gaza would see at the end of the tunnel a glimpse of hope, if there was any hope,” he told *Crux*.

Kassissieh also urged Israel to pay heed to the appeals of the international community and “even their allies,” saying they should remember that “they’re

living in the Middle East, among Arab and Muslim worlds, so extremism won't get any results for anyone."

The current situation, he said, requires "good leadership, and it needs wisdom, wisdom amidst this difficult situation we're all in."

Kassissieh on Feb. 26 met with British Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States, to discuss the ongoing war in Gaza and other issues of regional importance.

He thanked Gallagher for the pope's appeals for peace in Gaza and for statements made by other senior Vatican officials on the war, and for the "relentless" efforts of the Holy See to push for a lasting peace in the Holy Land.

Among the recent statements made on Gaza are remarks by Vatican Secretary of State Italian Cardinal Pietro Parolin, who described Israel's retaliation against an Oct. 7, 2023, surprise attack by Hamas as disproportionate, drawing fire from Israel's embassy to the Holy See, which called Parolin's comment "regrettable."

The conversation between Kassissieh and Gallagher also touched on the special status of Jerusalem and the need to ensure access to holy sites, such as the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, as both Ramadan and Easter approach, to ensure that Jerusalem remains the spiritual heart of the monotheistic religions.

In his capacity as dean of the Arab ambassadors to the Holy See, Kassissieh delivered a letter to Gallagher on behalf of the League of Arab States Accredited to the Holy See detailing current regional developments and stressing the importance of supporting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), at a time when the organization is responsible for the bulk of the humanitarian response in the Gaza Strip, providing a lifeline to millions of Palestinian refugees throughout the region.

In his interview with *Crux*, Kassissieh noted that the International Court of Justice in January urged Israel to prevent a potential genocide in Gaza, and echoed Pope Francis's repeated condemnation of war "as a defeat" for all involved.

Regarding the humanitarian situation in Gaza, Kassissieh said he told Gallagher that at the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, trucks full of humanitarian aid are blocked while inside Gaza, “you have famine and the situation is completely chaotic, and the health system is completely collapsing.”

“There is no place for the people to go, while outside we have more than 2,000 lorries full of medical aid and food and structures, and they cannot get in. So, the irony is, in the same place, inside you have this famine, and outside you have all the lorries waiting to come in,” he said.

Kassissieh said there ought to be a stronger will by the international community, and the Western world in particular, to ensure that the people of Gaza have access to humanitarian aid.

“Everyone is watching the TV, and they see it in the eyes of the children, the suffering. Our children have enough suffering, the trauma they’re in is unthinkable,” he said, saying, “the catastrophe we’re in needs years and years to heal.”

“Gaza has become a graveyard for our children. So, we need to have the world leaders shake up their conscience, as is the case with the Holy Father,” he said, voicing hope that “with God’s will, this carnage would stop.”

Kassissieh praised the church’s network of charitable organizations and institutions such as the Pontifical Missions and Caritas, as well as efforts by the Latin Patriarchate to help those in need, and he lauded the pope for being in constant contact with the pastor of Gaza’s Holy Family Catholic parish, which is currently sheltering around 600 people amid calls for evacuation.

“They’re living in horror; they hear bombardments and the voice of the military machines, and nowadays this voice is higher than the voice of the bells, and the Holy See wants to see immediate ceasefire and to give hope for the people,” he said.

Also discussed in the meeting with Gallagher were restrictions on holy sites in Jerusalem ahead of Ramadan and Easter, which Kassissieh said is “a recipe for more deterioration and for more anger.”

“We expect that Israel under the Geneva Convention would facilitate, but not complicate,” he said, saying access to the holy sites “is a basic right for the faithful, to reach their holy shrines and pray without any restrictions.”

Kassissieh said he asked Gallagher to help ensure Christians in Bethlehem, Ramallah and other parts of the West Bank can enter Jerusalem without restrictions and “practice their belief and celebrate Easter,” as having free and secure access to their places of worship is their longtime right, he said, saying restrictions “would create more anger, more frustration, more hatred,” which must be avoided for everyone’s sake.

The needs and ambitions of everyone should be respected, “or else the future would be so gloomy,” he said, saying, “there should be someone there like His Holiness to keep the hope and to keep the light on, the candle on, not to push things to more deterioration.”

In terms of the Holy See’s role in the current conflict, Kassissieh said he urged the church to continue “their constructive efforts with their partners, with the world leaders, to ensure a ceasefire and humanitarian aid,” and to help develop a roadmap with an endgame, including a clear timeframe to reach a two-state solution.

Kassissieh insisted that other states ought to follow the Holy See’s decision and recognize the State of Palestine based on the 1967 borders, which he said is the only way to achieve a comprehensive peace.

He also said the Holy See’s advocacy for maintaining the “historic and legal” status quo of Jerusalem and its holy sites is important, and that its status must be internationally guaranteed given the special importance of Jerusalem for monotheistic religions.

The special relationship between Pope Francis and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was also highlighted during the conversation.

Regarding the status of Jerusalem, Kassissieh said “This, I think, needs to be more developed and mainly with the local church, with the patriarchs and heads of churches in Jerusalem, so that they would have a united vision for the future

of Jerusalem.”

“Here there is a crucial role for the Holy See,” he said, saying church discussion in this regard must be based on the United Nations’ resolutions related to the Palestinian question.

Kassissieh also spoke of rising discrimination against Christians in the Holy Land, saying, “the Christian presence in East Jerusalem is not at its best. There are many incidents taking place now by the extremist settlers.”

He said that he and Gallagher agreed on the need to “maintain the beauty of the mosaic of the Old City of Jerusalem, and to ensure that the Christian heritage is preserved in this area.”

Gallagher’s message to the people of Palestine, he said, was to remind them of the pope’s repeated prayers and calls for a ceasefire, and to assure them that the Holy See is aware of their suffering.

The need to hold elections in Palestine was also discussed, Kassissieh said, saying he agreed with Gallagher on this point, but cautioned that “no one can talk about the timeline for elections within a political roadmap before we have a ceasefire and a serious humanitarian intervention.”

Follow Elise Ann Allen on X: [@eliseannallen](https://twitter.com/eliseannallen) (<https://twitter.com/eliseannallen>)