

## **Intervention by His Beatitude Patriarch Fouad Twal**

### **Conference to Address Pressures Facing Holy Land Christians**

**Lambeth Place, London**

July 18-19, 2011

Your Eminence, Excellencies,  
dear friends of The Holy Land, dear lovers of peace,

I express my gratitude to Archbishop Williams and Archbishop Nichols for jointly hosting this two-day conference and for organizing this forum that will focus on the situation of our Christians in the Holy Land. I thank all of you for your presence here today. I recognize and appreciate your concern for our ‘living stones’ and your solidarity with the Churches in the Holy Land; for taking to heart our dream and desire for lasting peace; for your prayers and hopes that someday a peaceful situation can be attained; that all the people of the Holy Land can co-exist and live a normal life without fear.

### **The Current Reality**

We live in an ancient and historic land, a holy place for the followers of the world’s three great monotheistic faiths. As Christians, it is a powerful and moving experience to be where Jesus was born and grew to manhood, where he lived and taught. It is the land of his passion, agony and resurrection. We stand just steps away from the site of his crucifixion and burial and from where he rose from the dead. But it is also heart-wrenching and painful, because we are still in the midst of an ongoing modern geopolitical conflict in this very same land.

The buzz and familiar words of this land are occupation, terrorism, settlements, rocket attacks, home demolitions and security walls. All these are powerfully resonant, alarming, hotly debated, and politically-charged.

But beyond the buzz words, are the people and their lives in this Land called Holy. Two national narratives, three great religions are well-represented in this gathering. For too long, the people of this land have been mired in conflict. Many innocent people especially the youth have suffered and continue to suffer.

Sadly, the conflict seems more entrenched than ever, and more complicated. Most of the trend lines are in the wrong direction:

- more than 550.000 Israelis living in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.
- the demography of Jerusalem is changing rapidly, and a judicious and sensible balance of sacred space is being threatened,
- some groups of Israelis and Palestinians refuse to mutually recognize the right of the other to exist, and
- let us never forget the human tragedy taking place in Gaza.

And perhaps, the most complicating and alarming of all, is the fact that hope is being shattered. *“Where there is no hope, the people perish.” (Proverbs 29:18)* An entire generation of Israelis and Palestinians grew up witnessing and experiencing violence, occupation, separation, and hatred. There have been fewer and less opportunities to interact, and a heightened suspicion and apprehension on both sides persist.

- it is more and more difficult to envision a future of coexistence,
- it is easier to demonize the other,
- It is harder to forgive, and strenuous to start a constructive dialogue.

Why is this conflict not resolved? There are many reasons, and the past is replete with missed opportunities and a lack of good political determination. And

of course, much of the blame must rest with the political leadership and authorities. Yet you, dear friends, are external influential forces who bear a responsibility as well.

Ultimately, the Israelis and Palestinians who live in the Holy Land must work out their differences in a just and righteous manner, and in ways that may require painful compromises. I would point out that both sides must abandon maximalist claims to a life in the land without the other, and reconcile themselves to the belief, that we live in a world, where proximate justice is the best we can hope for.

While we can agree that it is up to Israelis and Palestinians to find a solution, we must also realize that they are not able to do this without external intervention for a number of reasons:

- it is an asymmetrical power relationship,
- the lack of trust in the political alliances existing on both sides
- the vested nature of the conflict, in which interests exist within the political power structures to continue the conflict , and
- the fusion of political, historical and religious dimensions.

The International Community does not simply have a role to play but a responsibility and self-interest, based on:

- the way in which this conflict is used and perpetuated by a variety of outside powers and interests,
- the universal nature of Jerusalem as a sacred city to billions of Jews, Christians and Muslims from around the world, and
- the way in which this conflict reverberates throughout the region and beyond.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is rather unique in Europe and America. It is a foreign policy issue, with crucial foreign policy and national security implications, but it functions more like a domestic political issue.

We understand that the only solution to the conflict is the recognition of the inherent and fundamental right to live in dignity for all people in the Holy Land – Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Christians and Muslims, which supposes a two State solution. Our desire is to help faith-based people of the world to understand that the only authentic pro-Israel position, is one that is also pro-Palestine and pro-peace. And this is as well, the only authentically pro-American and pro-European stance.

Two important issues are often absent from discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: **the human face** of the conflict (the mothers, the children, the young and elderly longing just for a normal life), and the international and the whole Middle East **interest** in resolving it.

**This is a crucial time because:**

- the possibilities for a just resolution are rapidly decreasing,
- the forces of extremism are growing and gaining followers and supporters,
- there is a regional context conducive to peace. The Arab Peace initiative remains on the table, and there is a recognition by many Arab governments that regional threats to their security come from somewhere other than Israel.
- the U.S. Administration, along with the European Union and the United Nations, all agree on the urgency to bring about an end to the conflict,
- the recent uprising Arab Spring of the young generations in the region is spreading across sooner or later, with violence or peacefully. **It is coming**, and no regime is immune from these events, not even Israel..

If **Now** is an important time to act, **what can we do?**

1. Connect, and be in communion with the Christians living in the Holy Land, share in their joys and suffering, bear their burdens with them, reflect and consider your responsibility towards your Mother Church.
  - Talk about your observations, and your reactions, your admiration your surprises, good and bad, what you have seen, the people you have met during your pilgrimages and **support the Christian institutions in the Holy Land. After all, these are the institutions that provide decent employment opportunities for our Christian youth, and these are the institutions that provide quality services in education, health and social services to the whole population**, mostly a non-Christian population. This solidifies the presence of the living stones
  
2. Inform your communities that:
  - There are historic Christian communities in the Holy Land, with antecedents in the time of Christ.
  - The Christian presence is threatened by virtual extinction, and the land of Jesus cannot become an equivalent of a spiritual Disneyland with beautiful buildings, historic sites and museums on display.
  - All people - Jews, Christians and Muslims suffer the consequences of the conflict. **Occupation** is a terrible image for any democratic State, as it is horrible for the people of the occupied areas, where hatred and aversion are fostered and nurtured. **We are aware** of the persecution and suffering of our Christians in some Muslim countries in the region, but this is not an excuse to forget the dire reality of our situation in the Holy Land.
  - The silent majority of both Israelis and Palestinians want peace and support a two-state solution.

- Encourage and persuade people to “come and see.” There is no substitute for a real and tangible experience of encountering the people, to speak with them, to eat with them and to affirm their dignity, and make them feel that they are never forgotten. Visit the Christian institutions and see the Christian witness at its best.
- The Jews of this land have a narrative that is authentic and should be respected, but so do the Muslims, and the Christians too. There is an Israeli story that must be respected, and there is also a Palestinian story to be told and respected as well.
- To remind our people that every man, woman and child who lives in the Holy Land today is created in the image of God, is endowed with inherent dignity, and is worthy of respect and esteem.
- To ignore the dignity of the other - whether the other be Christian, Muslim or Jew, is to live in violation of God’s will for us.

Once again, I express my gratitude to Archbishop Rowan for launching a “Holy Land Appeal” for funds to help alleviate suffering Christians in the Holy Land, and support development and job creation initiatives, especially in the West Bank’s community. Our heartfelt gratitude for your most noble collaboration as we all work together to uphold the dignity of every human being in the land of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

+Fouad Twal

Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem