

The war on Iraq and its effect on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict A Palestinian Christian Perspective

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The eyes of the world looked to New York this week, where the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations Security Council providing the evidence and thus the excuse for a war against Iraq. While many in the world wonder what economical impact this war might have on the stock markets, Palestinians have much more than economical fears.

The Palestinians do not fear for the life of Saddam. While some might see him as a hero who can stand up in the face of “the powers of this world”, many Palestinians view him as a subcontractor to these same super powers; picked up, paid and equipped to do the dirty job of fighting the Islamic Revolution of Iran after 1979, whose contract was terminated and have thus now to leave. For the Palestinian, Saddam is not the issue. The issue is something much more existential.

The overwhelming majority of Palestinians oppose a possible war against Iraq for very rational, genuine reasons:

Palestinians are first and foremost afraid that Israel will exploit the world’s preoccupation with war on Iraq and the sole media focus on that part of the world, to carry out its dirtiest fantasies with the Palestinians: The first measure expected from the Israeli Military Government is that a 24 hour curfew will be imposed for the duration of the war. 2.5 million Palestinians will be put under house arrest for months. Over 1.5 million children will be prevented from going to school. Employees will be unable to go to their work and sick people will be unable to receive medical care. The same scenario happened during the gulf war in 1991.

Yet the present Israeli ambitions are much more frightening: A majority re-elected Sharon, and he and his defense minister, Mofaz, are eager to reoccupy the whole Gaza Strip and to launch massive military operations in all of its refugee camps and heavily populated areas. A war on Iraq will put Israel in the blind spot to do these operations away from the eyes of the world. A re-occupation of the Gaza Strip will mean the total cancellation of what remains from the 1993 Oslo Agreement. A war will even bring Israel into its biggest temptation, fulfilling the desires of right wing Zionists, by using this war as a unique opportunity to “transfer” large numbers of the Palestinian population forcefully out of the West Bank and Gaza, something called in other contexts “ethnic cleansing.” Let’s face it: If a pre-emptive war against Iraq is possible in the 21st. century, then an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Israel is not out of range of to-day’s political “possibilities.”

As Christians we must commit ourselves to be the voice of those silenced. Therefore, we will continue to accompany and thus to closely monitor the human rights situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, we will continue to expose the practices of all military occupational powers to the world. Let it be clearly known that violence committed against civilian populations will not be tolerated.

Palestinians are troubled by a war on Iraq because it will only strengthen the fundamentalist forces in the region:

Palestinians are afraid that a war will only strengthen the war mongers within Israel who exploit the September 11 terrorist attack to market them-selves as the “experts” in the field of war against terrorism. They advertise their services, as well as their products, as the specialists for communities feeling more and more insecure, fearful and terrorized. Yet a careful look shows a different picture. With all its military power, U.S. backing, and military expertise, Israel failed to bring either security or peace to its citizens. The seeds of war and military occupation will never bring peace. As Christians we stick to the Biblical truth that the fruit of justice shall be peace.

Islamic fundamentalists, who have a Western-phobia, as well as fundamentalist Christians, who have a Muslim-phobia, will use this war to widen the gap between the Arab-Islamic world and the USA. Images of a modern crusade will be strengthened and widely circulated. The context of war provides an ideal environment for terrorist groups. Theories underlining the clash of civilizations will spread more and more. Those who hate America, on the one side, and those who hate the Muslim world, on the other side, will increase also. The price of this mutual hate will be paid mainly by Christians living as minorities in the Muslim World, or to some degree by Muslims living as minorities in the Western World. The only winner in this scenario is the right-wing Zionist lobby, who has a clear interest in widening this gap in an attempt to keep its strategic competitive edge.

As Christians we are called to break these stereotypes of each other. We know that there are many voices in the Arab-Islamic world (Turkey, Kuwait, Qatar, and others) who for their own reasons favor a war. On the other hand we recognize a strong and vocal opposition to war in many Churches in the U.S. and in Western Europe. We admire the witness of Israeli Jews from the peace camp who refuse to serve in the occupied territory. We acknowledge that the divisions to overcome are not only between, but also within each of the civilizations and religions.

The scenarios for the aftermath of a war are also of concern to Palestinians: It is expected that once the dust of battle has settled down in Iraq, a new pulse in the Israeli Palestinian Question will be felt. This was true in 1993. The gulf war opened the way for the Oslo agreement. Yet this time the starting point for Palestinians will be much worse: Not only are the Arab countries weaker than in 1993, and not only is the newly elected Israeli government more radical, but also the Palestinian leadership is more isolated. Palestinian leadership, in 2003, in addition to being isolated, is highly opportunistic and lacks credibility. Therefore, they will probably be tempted to agree to accept the terms of reference to a new Middle Eastern “Versailles” agreement, and to enter into another peace process, that has more process and less peace. In such a process managing the conflict becomes the main interest rather than solving it. Such a second process might help the Palestinian leadership out of its isolation, and it may also give many Arab and western countries a “good feeling” of doing something about “it,” but it will not bring peace closer. When it fails, the ordinary people among the Palestinians, as well as among the Israeli, will feel its heat.

As Christians we hold to the vision that peace is not what the winner dictates to the losers, nor is it a unilateral decree of the powerful. Peace is the result of addressing the underlying causes of the conflict in a comprehensive, creative and real manner, thus reaching a win-win situation. Peace is a holistic vision, an ongoing struggle where each step counts, a dynamic process in which each movement important and accumulation is needed.

Palestinians are worried that a war will bring more misery, poverty and stagnation into a worldwide fragile economic situation. It’s amazing how “good” the powers of this world are when it comes to

launching a war. Suddenly, coalitions are created, the sacrifice of human lives (in other contexts called homicide) is tolerated, and funds are made available. The second gulf war in 1991 had a cost of over \$360 billion (U.S.). On the other hand, only \$5 billion (U.S.) was made available by the super powers to invest in the peace process of 1993. Millions of new refugees are expected to be added to the other millions of displaced people in the Middle East as a result of this war.

Palestinians are asking themselves, "Aren't the same destructive powers which we find in Saddam's actions also at work in many of the superpowers?" Most of them lack a sense of genuine concern for human lives, and real stewardship of our planet and its resources. The only resource they seem to be interested in is oil.

As Christians we believe that God has entrusted to us the earth with all of its resources. A wise stewardship is what God is expecting from us. We commit ourselves not to waste the entrusted resources in wars, but to invest them for the cause of peacemaking and peacekeeping, for sanctifying human dignity as well as for the integrity of creation.

"My colleagues, we have an obligation to our citizens, we have an obligation to this body to see that our resolutions are complied with." This was the conclusion of Secretary Powell in his address to the UN Security Council on February 5. We wonder how the same countries and the same council have been dealing with their obligation towards the Palestinian People. We would like to see Powell presenting the satellite pictures of the illegal yet expanding Israeli colonies in the West Bank and Gaza. We ask ourselves why is it that the same country and the same council is tolerating total non-compliance by Israel with its many resolutions in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel is even refusing to allow UN inspectors into the West Bank and Gaza. A double standard is very obvious here. Iraq is oily, Israel holy. The burden of proof lies on the shoulder of the UN to prove its integrity, credibility and evenhandedness.