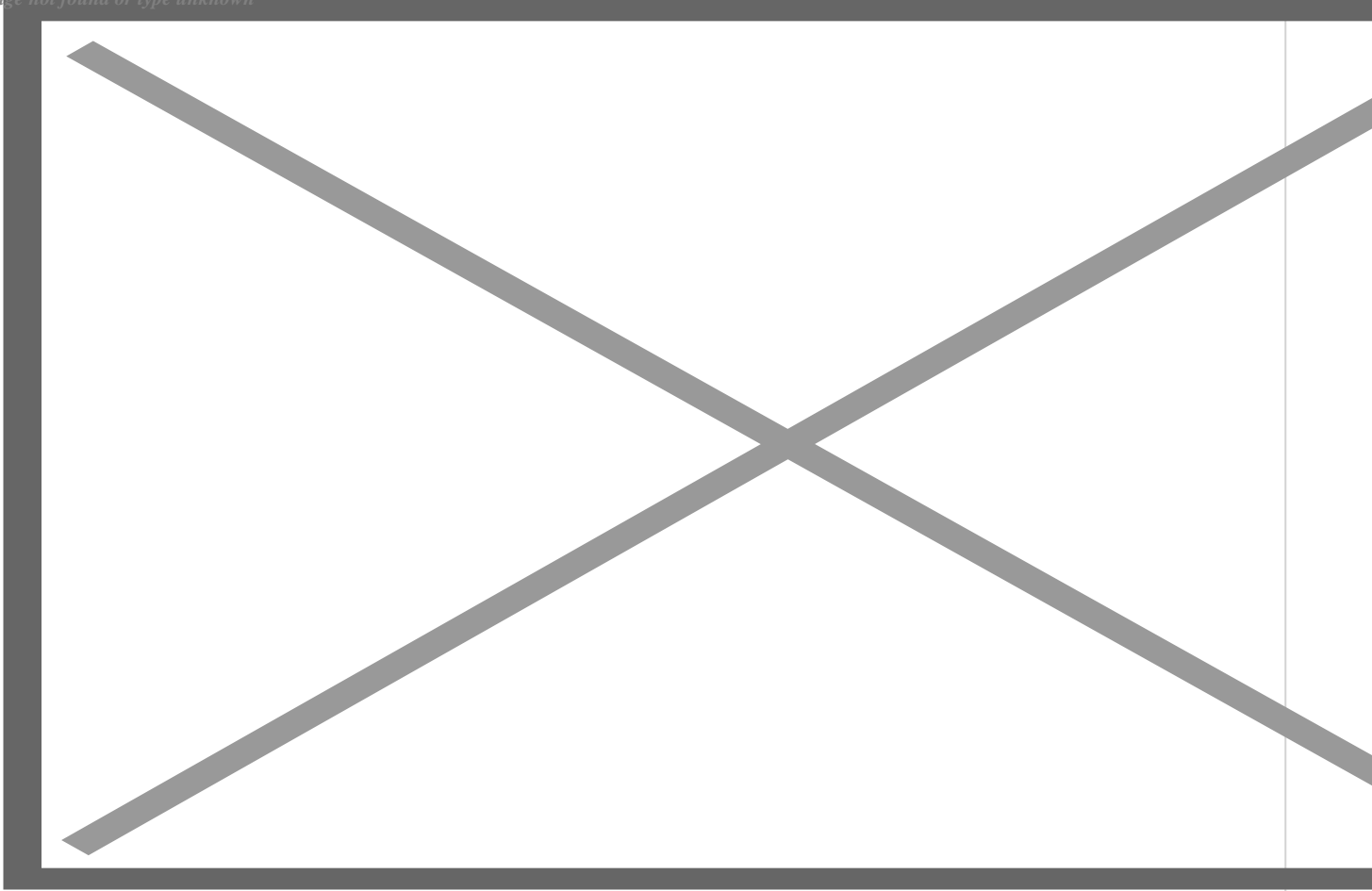


If Jesus was born today, would he be under rubble?

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A church in the occupied West Bank's historic city of Bethlehem prepared a decoration for this year's Christmas using debris instead of a Christmas tree in response to Israel's attacks on Gaza.

As U.S. leaders celebrate Christmas with their families, Palestinians will be mourning the loss of their loved ones

By Michel Moushabeck

As our hopes for an extended ceasefire are dashed and Israel's war on Gaza is now in its third month, the dire conditions that Palestinians are living under — hunger, lack of drinking water, infectious diseases, displacement, and fear of dying from the nonstop bombardment — continue to worsen as the U.S. supports Israel's relentless assault on the besieged, occupied and now largely houseless population of Gaza.

How will the children endure the harsh conditions during the coming winter months as the torrential rains flood the streets of Gaza, the temperature starts to drop and illnesses become more rampant? How will 2.3 million Gazans — 90 percent of them displaced from their homes — be able to stay warm in their makeshift shelters? Who will give the displaced refugees the needed medical attention now that so many hospitals have been bombed and/or evacuated and so many doctors and nurses have been killed, including at least 300 aid workers? Who will bring us the truth and report on the ongoing atrocities wrought on Palestinian civilians now that 92 fine journalists have perished in the past nine weeks?

On December 14, the World Health Organization announced that it had delivered 4,200 body bags, underscoring the critical need to safeguard civilians from the risk of infection. Additionally, the shortage of latrines in shelters has given people no choice other than open defecation. As a result, the Palestinian Ministry of Health said: "There have been significant increases or increased risk of outbreak in some communicable diseases and conditions such as diarrhea, influenza, chicken pox, meningitis, jaundice, impetigo acute respiratory infections, skin infections and hygiene-related conditions like lice and scabies."

Israeli snipers opened fire on several hundred Christian worshipers inside Gaza's The Holy Family Catholic Church, in the Zeytun area, murdering a mother and her daughter, and received strong condemnation from the Vatican. An Al Jazeera journalist shook as he described how Israeli bulldozers crushed sick and injured civilians taking shelter outside the Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza, burying some alive — abominable and beyond human comprehension.

"In no other war we can think of in this century have civilians been so trapped"

Heads of humanitarian groups say Gaza nightmare" is worst they've ever seen

I can't even begin to imagine a worse nightmare. The scenes of massive devastation are apocalyptic. The images of Palestinian civilians stripped down to their underwear, with hands strapped behind their backs, terrified, humiliated, and paraded like cattle by Israeli forces in the streets are utterly inhumane and disgusting.

You know that the world is broken when a country is given the freedom to annihilate another people as the world watches in real time. This should shake each and every one of us to the core.

While our elected officials will soon be going on their holiday recess to celebrate Christmas with their families, friends and loved ones in the warmth of their homes, Palestinian families will be huddling in cold tents or makeshift shelters shivering as they mourn the loss of loved ones. Many will still be searching with their bare hands for their children that remain missing under the rubble. It is estimated that more than 25,000 children have been orphaned since the start of the Israeli bombardment.

No one can doubt our elected officials' complicity in fueling the ongoing genocide — committed and reported on in real time — by voting to send Israel an additional \$14.3 billion in military aid, including the State Department's bypassing of Congress to approve the expedited airlifting of 14,000 tank shells to slaughter more Palestinian civilians. I hope that they will wake up and realize — if they have a grain of compassion — what they have done and the extent of the death and destruction caused by their actions. Their unwillingness to demand an immediate ceasefire and stop the carnage has enabled the killing of nearly 20,000 civilians — 8,000 of whom are children — injured more than 50,000, displaced more than 1.9 million inhabitants of Gaza, and has drawn widespread outcry worldwide.

Before October 7, nearly 500 trucks were allowed to enter Gaza daily. The food and medical supplies they carried were barely enough to sustain the besieged population suffering from a 17-year blockade. Today, very few aid trucks are allowed into Gaza. Food has become very scarce; farms have become bombed-out war zones with massive craters; and Israeli forces are flooding Gaza with seawater, rendering agriculture impossible and drinking water undrinkable. Starvation is setting in and we are told by the World Food Program that 9 out of 10 people in Gaza cannot eat every day. This horrific situation will likely get worse if aid trucks continue to be prevented from entering the enclave.

Do U.S. politicians believe that the limitless death and destruction wreaked upon the people of Gaza is a just and moral assault, or are they afraid they'll be accused of antisemitism and lose AIPAC campaign contributions if they call for a ceasefire? How many times do they need to be reminded that ethnic cleansing is a war crime?

In Israel "there is no voice calling to stop the bloodbath," Israeli journalist Gideon Levy laments in Ha'aretz. "We've never before had a war like this, a war of complete consensus, a war of total silence"

But while it appears to most of us on the outside that, as Levy said, "it is a unanimous war," it is important to point out that opposition does exist despite the Israeli government's aggressive crackdown on dissent. Protests in Israel have been largely repressed, silenced and criminalized. Numerous critics of the Israeli government have been attacked, jailed, harassed, interrogated, and warned about speech, protests, or social media posts that call for a ceasefire.

Masha Gessen, in her November 8 article for The New Yorker, outlines the various methods used by Israeli right-wing mobs and the Israeli security services to instill fear in peace activists who are opposed to Israel's genocidal policies in Gaza. She quotes Kobi Shabtai, the head of Israeli police, who announced that protests against Israeli actions in Gaza would not be tolerated. He said: "Anyone who wishes to identify with Gaza, is welcome to — I will put him on the buses that are heading there now."

Palestinian citizens of Israel, who comprise nearly 21 percent of the citizenry, have relatives in Gaza who were displaced, lost their homes, or were injured or killed in the Israeli bombardment. While there is outrage and opposition among Jewish peace activists, Israeli Arabs are the ones who suffer the most of Israel's repressive practices. According to the Adalah Legal Center, they have been targeted by employers and academic institutions, and terrorized by right-wing mobs and subjected to surveillance by Israeli intelligence. A friend in Bethlehem told me that a Palestinian flag emoji can get you fired; a watermelon — because it has the same colors as the Palestinian flag — can get you arrested; and a keffiyeh around the neck can get you beaten up. Legendary human rights lawyer, Lea Tsemel, who has represented hundreds of jailed Palestinians, said that it is unprecedented that "people were getting arrested for social media posts and even likes."

In the days and months ahead we shall see increased opposition in Israel, especially in the wake of reports that Israeli forces shot and killed three Israeli hostages even though they were holding white flags and were shirtless to show that they have not strapped themselves with suicide bombs. This tragic incident compelled protesters to set up tents outside the Israel's Ministry of Defense in order to pressure the Netanyahu government to step up its negotiations for the hostage release. It is worth noting here that if those killed were Palestinians, it would not be newsworthy in U.S. or Israeli corporate media.

As Americans celebrate the holiday season and enjoy a merry Christmas with their families, and children in the U.S. and Europe are busy rehearsing nativity or Christmas plays at school, it will not be merry at all in Palestine, the birthplace of Christ. In the Holy Land, where Palestinian baby Jesus was born in a manger and where Christ's message of love, compassion and caring for the oppressed was heard for the first time, Palestinians live their lives in daily fear under the gun of Israeli soldiers and armed settlers. According to UNRWA, the United Nations refugee authority, 271 Palestinians, including 69 minors, have been killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank this year — a record since the Second Intifada.

In the West Bank town of Jenin, residents have emptied the streets and children hide indoors as Israeli tanks and snipers raid the city. The Jenin Refugee Camp has been targeted with drones and repeatedly invaded with armored bulldozers that tear up streets. Since October 7, 58 Palestinians have been killed in Jenin alone. Last week, Israeli soldiers stormed Jenin's Freedom Theatre, a renowned cultural institution, ransacking the place, knocking down walls, destroying theater and office equipment, confiscating computers and assaulting theater staff. They later beat up, handcuffed, blindfolded and abducted Mustafa Sheta, the Freedom Theatre's general manager, and Ahmed Tobasi, the theater's artistic director, from their homes. Zoe Lafferty, the theatre's associate director, described the attack to the Middle East Eye as a form of "cultural genocide."

In any given year, around Christmastime, the Church of Nativity receives hundreds of thousands of visitors and worshipers. This year, Bethlehem — home to more than a quarter of a million Palestinians — is besieged like other towns in the West Bank. It is shrouded in darkness, sadness, tears and agony. Since October 7, a large number of people were rounded up in Bethlehem and put in jail without being charged under Israel's "administrative detention" policy.

The Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem declared the cancellation of Christmas celebrations in a solemn announcement on November 10. The Church of Nativity has canceled its Christmas festivities, put away its Christmas decorations, and instead of the church's normal nativity scene, it placed baby Jesus on top of a pile of rubble inside the church.

Munther Isaac, the church's pastor, explained his decision in his Sunday sermon in Arabic and said: This is precisely the meaning of Christmas. This year due to the death, destruction, and rubble in our land, this is how we welcome 'the King of Glory' ... Christmas is the presence of baby Jesus with those who suffer ... If Christ were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble. I invite you to see the image of Jesus in every child killed and pulled from under the rubble ... Yes, Christmas celebrations are canceled this year, but Christmas itself is not, and will not be canceled, for our hope cannot be canceled. Jesus' birth is our hope; Jesus is our hope.

U.S. Ensures UN Fails to Stop the Genocide

On December 8, the UN secretary-general invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter to trigger a vote for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Many lives could have been saved had the U.S. not used its veto power and cast the single "no" vote. The U.S.'s veto of the ceasefire resolution — despite the fact that the vast majority of the people in the U.S. support a ceasefire — shows the people of this country and the world at large that the Biden administration's allegiance is not to public opinion or international law, but to the apartheid state of Israel.

Four days after the Security Council vote, the UN General Assembly held an "emergency special session" under the "Uniting for Peace" resolution. This session is applicable when the Security Council fails to exercise its primary responsibility for international peace and security due to the veto of a permanent member. During the special session, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire. The result was 153 votes in favor, 23 abstentions and 10 votes against. The negative votes were cast by the U.S., Israel, two EU countries (Austria and Czech Republic), Guatemala, Liberia, Micronesia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea and Paraguay.

While this "binding" vote shows that the U.S. and Israel are isolated and that most countries in the world want an immediate ceasefire, we know from past UN resolutions that Israel is unlikely to comply, having previously ignored more than 40 UN resolutions since its establishment.

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with Israeli leaders last Thursday and delivered President Joe Biden's message: Israel should switch to more precise tactics in about three weeks. But Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeated over the weekend that Israel will need to continue the "high-intensity" phase for more than another two months in order to achieve its goal of "eradicating Hamas."

During his visit to Tel Aviv on Monday, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said, “ Hamas is determined to doom both Israelis and Palestinians to an unending cycle of suffering and strife.” He added: “ So make no mistake: Hamas should never again be able to project terror from Gaza into the sovereign state of Israel. And we will continue to work together for a safer, more secure future for Israel, and a brighter future for the Palestinians.”

With a fresh supply of U.S.-made bombs and ammunition, the U.S.-backed Israeli war on the Palestinians of Gaza appears to have no end in sight.

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