



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

1311 BYRON STREET
POST OFFICE BOX 230
WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA 26003

January 2, 2024

Israel-Hamas War: a Second Look

International Cooperation Needed for Peace in the Middle East

Early in the Israel-Hamas War (October 17, 2023) I analyzed the conflict according to the traditional norms of the Catholic just war theory: 1.) a defensive war in response to armed aggression 2.) undertaken as the last resort 3.) with a reasonable prospect of success 4.) and likely not to cause worse evils than the one it wants to eliminate (this last criterion sometimes referred to as proportionality). I claim no infallibility for my analysis but it seemed clear to me that Israel was justified in attacking Hamas in Gaza in response to the brutal rape, murder and dismemberment of many hundreds of Israeli citizens.

As we begin the new year, I am still convinced that Israel has the right to so weaken Hamas that it can no longer pose a threat to the safety of the Israeli people. But, as I said in October, Israel's conduct of the war, including, to date, a fierce ground offensive, continued missile strikes and a sharp limitation on humanitarian aid to Gazan civilians, could backfire and cause worse evils than the one it sought to remove.

Sadly, it appears that this is happening. The toll in Gaza, mostly of non-combatants and including many women and children as confirmed by independent witnesses, is staggering: more than twenty thousand dead and thousands more injured. Some humanitarian aid is allowed but far less than people need to eat and drink and hospitals need to treat the injured. Israel is losing support from its usual allies – even the United States is pressuring Israel to tone down its military offensive – and the prospects for a peaceful relationship with Palestinians and other Arabs is fading fast as hatred of Jews and resentment at Israel's conduct of the war builds among the neighboring peoples. Antisemitism is also rising in the United States and elsewhere.

How can Israeli forces crush Hamas while avoiding massive harm to civilians? It begins to look impossible. Since, as of this writing, Hamas is still sending missiles into Israel and is continuing to attack Israeli soldiers within Gaza, Hamas has not yet been defeated militarily. With its strategy of mingling with civilians, hiding in tunnels and holding hostages as a bargaining chip, Hamas may be able to fight for a long time. Israel, on the other hand, by forcing more and more Gazans into smaller and smaller spaces, only increases the likelihood of greater civilian casualties. (The charge of genocide is false. If killing Palestinians were Israel's aim, it could start with the more than one million living within Israel. The dead and injured Gazan civilians are the massive "collateral damage" of Israel's vigorous pursuit of Hamas terrorists.)

The Israeli government is under increasing pressure from within Israel to make deals for the release of Israeli hostages but shows no sign yet of budging. I have seen no indication that Gazan civilians are demanding that Hamas stop fighting – there would likely be repercussions if they did. Egypt, which refuses to open its borders to fleeing Gazans, has offered a peace plan but so far the two hostile parties have not accepted it. Who will govern Gaza and who will pay for it to be rebuilt? There are international actors, especially Iran and its allies, who seek to use the conflict to further their own interests.

Israel's initial response to Hamas' October 7 attack was just; its current conduct of the war is causing greater evils than the one it seeks to eliminate. It should allow far more humanitarian aid into Gaza under strict controls and agree to stop fighting if the United Nations will send in a peace-keeping force to prevent Hamas from attacking Israel again. An international conference should also be convened to work out a solution of the whole Palestinian situation, the security of Israel and a just peace in the Middle East. May God enlighten and strengthen local and international leaders and their peoples to discover the path forward.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark E. Brennan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning of the first letter.

+Mark E. Brennan
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston