Bethlehem

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Launch of Kairos Palestine II

A Moment of Truth: Faith in a time of Genocide

Your beatitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah, your Graces bishops of our different beloved churches, Excellencies, honored sisters and brothers,

When KAIROS PALESTINE was launched in 2009, none of us foresaw that we would be standing here, 16 years later, in the midst of what can be called the genocide of the 21st century. A genocide that has been broadcast live for the world to witness, in all its vile and despicable scenes. Thousands upon thousands martyred, many more are still unaccounted for under the rubble, hundreds of thousands wounded, disabled for life. Thousands more imprisoned under inhumane conditions, starved and tortured to death. Thousands of children killed, burned alive, their little bodies vaporized by the severity of the bombings. Families shattered, some completely wiped out, 2.2 million people displaced over and over again at the whim of the Israeli assault machine. Those who survive are killed slowly by intentional starvation, disease and the psychological trauma of the atrocities they have witnessed. For 2 years we as Palestinians, as one body from Gaza in the south to Haifa in the north, we have felt loss, helplessness and are astounded at the unprecedented aggression, the blatant disregard for the sanctity of human life, the environment and all of God's creation that has been perpetrated by Israel.

Today, we face bare harsh truths. There is no room for soft language, no place for hidden meanings. Our people do not have the luxury of time, and have already paid the price dearly, waiting for the world to react.

As we write in the introduction of the document, “Today, we renew our stand for truth and our commitment to fundamental religious, theological and moral principles. We look at our reality and take a renewed stand, responding to the voice of the Holy Spirit deep within us, listening to the call of faith in this time of Genocide. We renew our message of faith, hope and love – offering a faith-inspired vision for the time after genocide.”

Israel's extermination war has made clear many realities. The masks have fallen, and all attempts to hide behind fake facades have been dropped. And so, if the gloves are off, and the fangs are out to tear our people to shreds, then our words and our stance need to be crystal clear.

The first reality is we face is this: a genocide took and is still taking place in Gaza. Consensus by international experts, legal and human rights organizations has been clear: the crimes Israel has committed and is committing by words and deeds amount to GENOCIDE. The evidence is abundant. A hard truth for some to accept and admit.

Another harsh truth exposed by this war has been the hypocrisy of the politics of the western world, with its claim of high morals, preaching eloquent words and lecturing US on human rights and international law. But apparently, these apply to all except for our people, and double standards can be applied whenever it suits them.

We do, however, recognize and exclude from this the many organizations, popular movements, churches, leaders and individuals from all over the world,

who have stood in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, many times paying the costly price for this solidarity.

The reality of Zionism, both Jewish and Christian, has been exposed as well. The Jewish Zionist project, exposed for aiming to seize all of Palestine and emptying it of its people and its justification of violence and killing to achieve that end. Christian Zionism for adopting the colonizer's narrative. Our stance is clear, for any church, that claims to follow our Lord's teachings to do so, or even to remain silent in the face of genocide is to be complicit in it and is a betrayal to the very teachings of Christ.

The current right wing Zionist Israeli government, the most racist and unprincipled we have seen so far, means to erase us from our land. To them we, as a people, are destined for displacement, death or submission. While it carries out its atrocities in Gaza, it continues land theft, in Jerusalem and the west bank. Its efforts to Judaize Jerusalem though clear settler-colonial policies are intensifying, along with increasing assaults on Muslim and Christian holy sites, attempts to burn churches, attacks on Christian clergy and restriction of Christian religious celebrations. It gives its rabid settler militias free reign to wreak havoc in Palestinian villages and Bedouin communities, destroying livelihoods, killing with impunity and making life unbearable for our people. Checkpoints plague the west bank cutting off lifelines. Towns are terrorized by siege and house demolitions. Hundreds of men, women and even children imprisoned, held captive without trial, under administrative detention. As scandal after scandal emerges from these torture camps, the Israeli government scrambles to investigate, not the actual crimes themselves or who committed them, but the failure to cover them up.

As we write in section 1.6 of the document

“ Israel commits these crimes while invoking the events of October 7th, 2023, claiming that its actions are an act of self-defense – forgetting that the Hamas attack of that day was itself born out of decades of injustice, oppression and displacement since the Nakba of 1948, and more that 16years of an immoral, suffocating blockade on Gaza. To refer to this context- and to the right of a people under occupation to resist their occupier and oppressor- is to acknowledge that the events of October 7th occurred in a particular context. Mentioning the context does not justify the killing or capture of civilians, the violation of international law and norms or war crimes. At the same time, the claim of self-defense does not stand. For how can a colonizer defend itself against those it has colonized and expelled from their land? International law – if it still retains any moral weight- refutes that claim.”

As it attempts to exploit the self-defense excuse, Israel has systematically sought to destroy all agencies lending support to Palestinians and ensuring our people’s survival in our land, from civil society organizations to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) accusing them all of terrorism, targeting their funding and undermining their work. All in an attempt to displace more Palestinians and erase one of its biggest headaches – the Palestinian refugees and their right of return to their land.

These past 2 years have been heavy on our hearts and minds, and the ramifications on our internal Palestinian society have been heavier. Another harsh truth: Our house is in disarray. Political rivalry, lack of confidence in leadership, scarcity of new young leaders, limited prospects, absence of the rule of law, the re-emergence of tribalism, favoritism and corruption have weakened us further. In a strategy aimed at distracting us from the bigger picture and thinking as a nation,

daily new restrictions from Israel force our people to attempt to survive day by day, making ends meet. Emigration is at an all-time high, skilled professional, young families from all faiths. This is not voluntary emigration. It is the result of oppression and persecution. we affirm, in section 1.17, “that we as Palestinians of all faiths, are the indigenous people of this land and that our existence today faces an unprecedented threat”

Palestinians within the state of Israel do not fare any better. They face undisguised racism and discrimination, often criminalized and punished for daring to stand in solidarity with Gaza. Infrastructure and development of their communities is neglected with a significant rise in organized crime that Israel deliberately allows to go unchecked.

We, as Christian Palestinians, in Palestine and in the diaspora, reside under the same challenges as our nation. And while we are afflicted by the same torments, we stand together, as communities and churches with the Heads of churches, supporting each other despite pressures and intimidation, to raise our voices for the world and the Global church to hear our cry. We especially recognize the churches in Gaza, who have sheltered the displaced from all faiths beyond their capacities, who have fed the hungry to the last morsel of sustenance they had, and who refused to abandon their community when given the chance. Our Christian sisters and brothers in Gaza along with our Muslim sisters and brothers have bled, mourned loved ones and witnessed the destruction of their homes and sanctuaries. Some have been martyred as well in the bombings of the churches. We keep them in our prayers and in our hearts.

Of course, it is clear to see that what has been unfolding in the past 2 years has not been planned for Palestine alone. The grand plan for the so-called “new middle east” has been set in motion, with major geopolitical changes taking place,

perhaps even before the events of October 2023. We all know that the policies and violations by Israel in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, the entire region aim at economic gains and military domination. A rogue state, running rampant in the region, supported by its allies, operating with impunity, leaving in its trail disaster after disaster. The aftermath of those machinations has destabilized the countries in the region and given rise to extremist and terrorist groups that have consistently targeted minorities including middle eastern Christians. While we condemn these groups, we stand in solidarity with all victims of sectarian and religious terrorism.

Israel, along with its accomplices, continue to design and construct so-called "normalization accords" with several Arab countries, to pacify us and the world, giving them biblical names in a repulsive subterfuge to exploit religion to their political and economic agendas. But they miss one fundamental fact: without a true and just peace with the Palestinians themselves, all their scheming will be for naught. Gaza has proven that, spoken truth to tyranny and might, and although it has paid a very dear price, its people have set an example of what perseverance and steadfastness can achieve.

And so dear friends, yes, the realities are harsh. And yes, we are angry, furious even. Jesus himself got angry at the temple as we read in Mathew 21:12-13. He got angry because the house of the lord was to be a house of prayer, but was turned into a den of thieves. How angry do you think He is now that the land of the Lord has been turned into a place of death and desolation.

But from this anguish and pain comes this moment of truth for us. As we write in section 2.1 We raise this cry, first to ourselves, to the sons and daughters of our churches and congregations, and to our entire people in the homeland and the diaspora. It is a cry of steadfastness. This is a time for solidarity and mutual support. A time to take clear and courageous positions built upon principles of

faith and national belonging. We affirm that what has been built upon falsehood and historical injustice can never yield peace or sustainability. True solutions begin with dismantling oppressive, racist systems. Only then can we speak of a new horizon that we dream of and long for- one in which we remain in our land, together with all who dwell in it, on the basis of justice, equality and equal rights, free of supremacy and domination.

We Palestinian Christians feel the weight of history upon our shoulders, and we are determined to preserve the Christian witness in this Holy Land. We are the sons and daughters of the first church, descendants of the apostles and the saints of the first Christian centuries, those who cultivated this land, built its cities and villages and drank from its waters. We do not live on the margins of this land. We are woven into its fabric. We carry its history and heritage. Its very soil knows us as its own. Many empires have passed over this land and disappeared in the dust of history, yet the bells of our churches continue to ring- bearing witness to the truth and proclaiming the resurrection every day.

On the national level, we call for a comprehensive re-evaluation of our reality, keeping in mind the lessons learned and moving forward with a clear vision for our future while emphasizing the essentiality of the independence of Palestinian decision-making.

This is a time for resistance embodied in costly steadfastness on our land. Our grandmothers and grandfathers did it in 48. Our parents did it in 67, we did it in 87, &2000, and have done it from 2023 till 2025 and we will continue to do it for all the 20s to come.

To hold on to faith and hope is resistance.

To pray is resistance.

To safeguard the Holy places is resistance.

To preserve social peace is resistance.

We reaffirm the right of all colonized peoples to resist their colonizers, and we remain committed to the principle of creative resistance. Embodied in the work of popular Palestinian movements, civil society organizations, as well as legal and human rights initiatives. We recognize the effective means of resistance grounded in love – a love that can bring about change and renew hope. We also recognize and value the work of the global movements of resistance, advocacy and popular pressure, that hold governments and international bodies accountable through nonviolent creative resistance such as boycotts and sanctions until Isreal complies with International Law.

To the Palestinian Woman: grandmother, mother, sister and daughter we write in section 2.8 – the unbending backbone of our society, partner in the struggle, holding together home, land, memory and future all at once. Her presence is foundational to society as a whole, her contributions manifold in national, social, economic and spiritual life. The Palestinian Woman cannot be reduced to the category of "women and children", faceless victims, stripped of agency and will. Her voice, creativity and leadership are indispensable forces. There can be no true liberation without her full participation at every level of decision-making and nation-building.

To our young women and men, the treasure of hope, and by whose steadfastness and faith the future is born. You are burdened with fear and sorrow, but you are not weak. Yes, we are tired, but we are not defeated. They can take away our land, they can take away our homes, our food, our freedom, but they can never take away who we are. We do not call you to naive optimism but to hope as

a living act of resistance. Your voices matter. Express yourselves. Write. Sing. Create. Organize. Resist through your humanity in a world that seeks to strip it from you. Dare to love, to dream and to shape a free and radiant future.

To our people in the diaspora who were forcibly displaced we say: you may be geographically far from Palestine, but Palestine lives within you. Your voices have the power to shift realities, and your work strengthens our steadfastness. We will not lose our dream of reunification, nor will we abandon our right of return.

To our spiritual leaders and church institutions, we extend our support, knowing the tremendous work they continue to do, holding their congregations and communities together in the darkest and most difficult times.

In the third section of the document, we address the global church in a call to repentance and action.

We are thankful for churches and Christians around the world who have recognized the injustice that has befallen us and the genocidal war in Gaza. Your solidarity strengthens us, and in your voices, we see a sign of the Holy Spirit and the presence of moral conscience in humanity. We encourage you to continue your invaluable work until justice and peace have prevailed

For those who deny the genocide committed against our people in Gaza, denying the very humanity of Palestinians while defending the perpetrator. We ask them: how can one speak of Christian fellowship or communion while denying, supporting, justifying or remaining silent before genocide, which is a structural sin against God and humanity. It stands in direct opposition to the great commandment of love, the summary of the whole law. With love in our hearts and prayer for the holy spirit to guide them, we call them for honest reflection and repentance.

In remaining true to speaking decisively, we challenge the false logic of "neutral" or "balanced" peace along with all forms of ecclesial diplomacy that do not speak truth to power as a way of evading moral and spiritual responsibility.

We reject the oppression and injustice produced by the theology of racism, colonialism and ethnic supremacy embodied in Christian Zionism, which has produced apartheid, ethnic cleansing and genocide of indigenous people. And whose teachings are alien to the core of Christian faith and ethics.

We condemn all who exploit and support the charge of ANTISEMITISM to silence the Palestinian voice of truth. The misuse of the term distorts and obscures the reality of genuine antisemitism, which we strongly condemn alongside all forms of racism, exclusion and prejudice including Islamophobia.

We reiterate our appeal to the churches of the world, to pressure governments to hold Israel accountable, by boycott, sanctions and the ban of arms exports until it complies to international Law, ends its oppression and adheres to principles of justice and peace.

As we call our sisters and brothers around the world for costly solidarity, we must recognize the growing number of Jewish voices that oppose the war and confront Zionism from moral, faith-based and human conviction. we call on the churches of the world to amplify prophetic Jewish voices that call for justice and truth and to distinguish between dialogue with Jews and dialogue with Zionism.

We renew our appeal to Christians around the world: Come and visit the Christians of the Holy land. Witness and respond to what you see.

In the fourth and final section of the document, we present the faith that guides us in the time of genocide and after it.

We write “The genocidal war has sought to strip us of our hope and faith in God’s goodness and in life upon our land. Yet we declare our adherence to our faith in a Holy and Just God, and in our God-give right to live with dignity on our land and the land of our ancestors. This is our hope. This is our steadfastness. This is our resistance.

We long to live free in our homeland as daughters and sons of God, without barriers, walls, oppression or apartheid. Our hope is for a civil democratic sovereign state grounded in a culture of pluralism, free of war and death, and where peace and justice are the law.

We are, as the Apostle Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians: " hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed”

We believe that the final word belongs not to death, but to life. Not to darkness, but to light. Not to oppression but to truth.