An overview of 2015 in the Holy Land

In the 2015 the situation in Gaza continues to be problematic, and in addition is the tension in Israel of what has been called the “Intifada of knives”

In reflecting upon the events of 2015, it is important to remember Israel’s Parliamentary elections, held on March 17, which brought the victory of the Likud Party of the Premier Benjamin Netanyahu with 30 of the 120 Knesset seats in Israeli Parliament. In this regard, the regional director of the Pontifical Mission for Palestine, Sami El-Yousef, in his Eastertide letter expressed concern with respect to what he saw as “the most right-wing government in the history of the State of Israel.”

Politics and Diplomacy: The Holy See and the Meeting of Two States

In what pertained to the Holy See directly, the **global agreement between the Holy See and Palestine** was established May 13 and later sealed June 26. The text clearly recognizes “the State of Palestine.” This bilateral accord mainly touches upon the activity of the Catholic Church and its juridical recognition in the Palestinian territories – already an object of discussion for some fifteen years – and expresses the desire that, in drawing up the solution of two States, conflict between Israelis and Palestinians might be resolved.

As for relations with the State of Israel, the first meeting between **Israeli President Reuven Rivlin** (in office since July 2014), Pope Francis and collaborators, took place on September 3 in the Vatican. On this occasion it was fitting to talk about the regional socio-politics, characterized by the plethora of conflicts: “Particular attention was given to all the different Christians and other minorities.” The problems in the relations between Israel and the Holy See, and likewise the local relationships between Catholic authorities and communities, were taken into consideration “in the hope that a bilateral accord in negotiation might come to a conclusion.”

Tabgha and the Dangers of Radical Nationalism

The summer witnessed many grave incidents that led to the deaths of Israeli and Palestinian citizens, such as the car attack on four Israeli 20 year-olds returning home from a basketball game, and which in turn resulted in the death of one of the boys; or the arson committed by a few Israeli settlers on a Palestinian house near Nablus wherein a father and 18 month-old child lost their lives. Among the items on this sad list of events one must certainly also remember the attack endured by the **Church of the Multiplication of Bread and Fish in Tabgha**, victim of a harrowing fire on the night of June 18.

President Rivlin visited the Christian community in Tabgha at the end of August where he was welcomed by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Msgr. Foaud Twal. President Rivlin wished to express his support of the community and issue a formal condemnation of this gesture carried out by a group of Jewish extremists named “price tag”.

At the beginning of August, the **Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land** filed a complaint against Rabbi Bentzi Gopstein of the anti-assimilation movement known as “Lehava” (which means “flame”) that, as one reads in the expressed statement, “does not hesitate to claim that Jewish law calls for the destruction of the idolators in the land of Israel and, consequently, that churches and mosques can be set on fire.” “One cannot remain defenseless before this situation”, said Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Custos of the Holy Land, to a press agency, adding that this is “also one way of telling our people that we are not indifferent towards what is happening.”

A Hope for Christian Schools in Israel

Another piece of news directly linked to the life of Christian communities in the Holy Land pertains to the situation of Catholic schools. On May 27 the Office of Christian Schools in Israel conducted a protest in front of the Ministry of Education in Jerusalem, coming out against the discriminatory politics that for three years have been applied by the Ministry to the harm of Christian schools, which are seeing more and more reductions in State subsidies. Indeed, since September 2014 there has been a commission that after eight months of work announced its proposition that all Christian schools become part of the public system, meaning the loss of opportunity for a Christian education. Faced with this less than satisfactory option, a group of around seven hundred people met to protest to the sound of chants such as “Hands off our schools” and “Christian schools are not for sale.”

These protests continued into the new academic year in 2015 and took on the form of a strike. After lengthy meetings with the representatives of the Office of Christian Schools, the Israeli Ministry of Public Education presented a collection of proposals that were accepted. A budget of fifty million shekels was thus assigned to Christian schools for the 2015-2016 academic year, which would help cover a portion of their real debt. Therefore, after 27 days of missed classes as a form of protest, more than 30,000 students from more than 40 Christian schools in Israel returned to their school desks.

The Choice for the Holy Land: European Bishops’ Pilgrimage

In 2015, the decision of the Council of the European Bishops Conferences to hold its plenary assembly in the Holy Land from September 11 to 16 was received with joy. In the final message shared at the end of the proceedings one reads, “With this pilgrimage, the European Bishops also wish to encourage pilgrimages to the land of Jesus so as to renew faith and support the Christians in these places.” Among the discussed issues that referred to the local reality was attention and consideration of the refugees and a mandatory call for peace in the Middle East.

Intifada of Knives?

Yet, unfortunately, precisely in those days an escalation of tension began that later became a more systematic violence in the month of October. Prior to certain Jewish occasions, as happened on Tisha b'Av (July 26, a day of fasting in which one remembers the destruction of the Temple, and when the faithful gather to pray at the Western Wall) and above all on New Years (September 13) there were reported skirmishes between Palestinians and Israeli police in the Al-Aqsa compound.

On September 9, the Israeli Prime Minister of Defense, Moshe Yaalon, prohibited the Muslim group of Murabitun, a group of civil volunteers who provide the service of surveillance of the Al-Aqsa mosque, from entering the sacred area and the conflicts seem to be tied to actions that limit the access to the area and the liberties of Muslim faithful. On this point, the concern of **Christian religious leaders** can be read in the released statement of September 21: "We condemn all attempts to undermine the **status quo** in force in the mosque of Al-Aqsa (Haram al-Sharif), in the courtyards and all nearby buildings, and in the entire city of Jerusalem. Any threat to its continuity and its integrity could lead to unintended consequences in the current political climate. Muslims have the right to free access and worship in the mosque of Al-Aqsa."

The reaction of the Israeli government first led to the decision to worsen the punishments issued the Palestinians who threw stones, and then to authorize the force of order and, as one reads in the summary of the Pontifical Mission, "even common citizens who carry a weapon to shoot and kill any Palestinian that behaves in a suspicious manner." What is worrisome, the document signed by Sami El-Yousef continues, is also the sharing of violent incidents on local networks and Facebook. The rebellion has taken on a violent character in various regions. In Gaza the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, announced his full support for that which he describes as "the intifada to liberate Jerusalem" and in October there began talk of the "intifada of knives." Those involved are young and even very young Palestinians who, armed with whatever they can find (often knives and scissors), go out and attack whatever Israeli crosses their path. As chief police inspector Micky Rosenfield said in an interview with Famiglia Cristiana, "the difficult part of this situation is that we are dealing with a bunch of lone wolves. There is no leader, no coordinator and no strategy." There is, then, no tactical influence from political leadership but a real revolt from the bottom, something to which even adolescents unite, as in the case of the 14 and 16 year-old Palestinians responsible for one of the attacks.

The situation has become tense in Jerusalem where Israelis are afraid of being attacked and Palestinians fear being accused and penalized for any manner considered to be suspicious by the forces keeping order and even passers-by. And the atmosphere is no more relaxed in the West Bank. For example, on October 25 during an incursion of Israeli soldiers at dawn around a hospital in Hebron, a relative of a man wanted by the police was killed. In various cities fighting broke out between Palestinians and Israeli police. The final count at the end of December 2015 numbered at about 20 Israeli deaths and a little more than 130 Palestinian deaths.

Cremisan: One More Wall

One item of news that in these months has particularly saddened the Palestinian population, and especially the Christian community, was the resumed work to build a wall of separation between Israel and the Palestinian Territories on August 17. This wall is in the Cremisan Valley where there are two Salesian religious houses and the land belonging to 48 Christian families, which would be confiscated. What makes it so difficult to understand this action taken by Israeli authorities is the fact that on April 2 after nine months of legal contest the final verdict of the Israeli Supreme Court

was announced regarding the construction of the wall in the Cremisan Valley, blocked on account of being “harmful for the local population and the monasteries in the valley.”

In the newspaper of the Italian Bishops Conference, Avvenire, one reads the comment given by Father Mario Cornioli, priest of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, based in Beit Jala: “It is useless for a monastery to remain here and all the people’s olives to be elsewhere, this is unacceptable and it is utterly unjust […] it is useless to save a monastery if the wall then carries off an entire valley and two mountains full of olives and the land of 58 Christian families.”

Gaza Today

We would like to close the account of this past year with a look to Gaza. After the events of this last year, the United Nations named a investigatory commission that in June 2015 published a report in which both Israel and the Palestinian factions, including Hamas, are accused of violating international law and of likely committing war crimes.

Father Raed Abusahlia, General Director of **Caritas Jerusalem**, without looking to the past, seeks to interpret the present and think of the future, inviting those who desire it to participate in an initiative of solidarity to **deliver Christmas gifts** to the poorest families in Gaza. Furthermore, Father Raed provided certain statistics pertaining to the current situation: “Unemployment has reached 60%, and poverty is at 80%. The water is salinized and electricity is only available five hours per day. In all of this are 1,300 Christians, Catholics and Orthodox, and on the whole 350 families.”

As was discussed during the meeting of the Grand Magisterium of the Order in November 2015, there are around 130 Catholics in Gaza but the Catholic community manages three schools where the clear majority of the classes is not Christian. The call to love and service means to be present where there is need, regardless of the community to which one belongs, and the community in Gaza knows this all too well and lives it out on a daily basis alongside their Muslim neighbors.

In this Holy Year of Mercy it is a beautiful notion to think of who has had and who will have the joy of passing through the holy door in Gaza. Indeed, on December 20, Patriarch Twal opened the Holy Door in the small parish of the Holy Family in Gaza. As desired by the Holy Father, the Jubilee of Mercy is an occasion to live where one is. This is a real and commanding notion for the Christians in Gaza who have difficulty in being mobile and are in particular need of the grace of Mercy – something to be received by all, but also something to give to others!

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