



Statement for the 2018 World Week for Peace in Israel and Palestine: "Youth and Children: Raising Hope and Making Change"

On the occasion of the **2018 World Week for Peace in Israel and Palestine** (16-23 September) and in recognition of the International Day of Peace (21 September) and the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Pax Christi International strongly reaffirms its commitment to advocate for a just and sustainable peace to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that recognises and protects the dignity and human rights of every woman, man and child.

We believe that this year's theme, "Youth and Children: Raising Hope and Making Change", could not be more important or timely as the well-being and rights of children and young people continue to be threatened by the violence and chaos caused by 70 years of conflict, 51 years of occupation and the on-going blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Today, statistics indicate that the situation for Palestinian children is especially dire:

- Nearly half of all young Palestinian children suffer from chronic malnutrition¹ making them more vulnerable to infections, disease, long-lasting physiological impairments and diminished success in school.
- Approximately 500-700 Palestinian children are arrested, detained and prosecuted in the Israeli military court system each year.² Under military law, minors as young as 12 can be arrested. The trauma and interruption of their daily lives can cause irreparable damage.
- A recent report indicates that by age 15, nearly 25% of Palestinian boys and 7% of girls have dropped out of school.³ Education can easily become a daunting goal when confronted by obstacles such as checkpoints, roving road closures, settler harassment, night-time military house raids, and home and school demolitions.
- Youth unemployment among Palestinians is approaching 50%⁴ with less than 1% of any Palestinian youth in decision-making positions.⁵ As a young person's access to education, job training, employment and decision-making opportunities diminish, so too does hope for their future.

¹ ABC News, 'Surveys: Palestinian Kids Face Malnutrition', 4 August 2018, online available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=130192&page=1>

² Defence for Children International Palestine, 'Number of Palestinian Children (12-17) in Israeli Military Detention', 1 July 2018, online available at: https://www.dci-palestine.org/children_in_israeli_detention.

³ UNICEF, 'State of Palestine: Out-of-school children', July 2018, online available at <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/state-palestine-out-school-children>

⁴ Defence for Children International Palestine, 'Number of Palestinian Children (12-17) in Israeli Military Detention', 1 July 2018, online available at: https://www.dci-palestine.org/children_in_israeli_detention.

⁵ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, press release on the occasion of International Youth Day, 12 August 2018,; online available at: <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3215>

The disintegrating situation of children and young people in the Gaza Strip demands our particular attention at this critical time. The eleven-year Israeli blockade of Gaza, its complete control of all movement of people and goods, and the current political realities have created a humanitarian crisis that worsens by the day. Children and young people are consistently denied many of their rights. They are deprived of access to clean water, reliable electricity and critical medical care. School days are truncated due to diminishing resources and employment prospects are minimal.

During protests, such as the Great March of Return, children and youth have been injured or killed at an alarming rate. Children under the age of ten have already lived through three brutal military incursions, their childhood stolen by the death and destruction they have witnessed. Their reality is taking a frightening toll with 95% of young people reporting deep psychological distress.⁶

In light of these deeply disturbing truths, Pax Christi International is gravely concerned by the recent decision of the United States to no longer fund the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The agency is the source of essential humanitarian aid providing food, medical care, education and emergency assistance to over half of the population in the Gaza Strip.

We are equally troubled by the recent announcement by the United States that they will not release their pledged support to six hospitals in East Jerusalem, including the primary medical centre for Palestinians needing cancer and kidney care. This will have a devastating impact on the healthcare of an already vulnerable population.

Yet to view Palestinian children and youth merely as victims would be to do them a grave disservice. Instead we choose to acknowledge and support their strength, resilience and the crucial contributions they make in creating pressure for justice and peace through nonviolent actions.⁷ We reiterate principles enumerated in UN Security Council resolution 2250⁸, that they should be empowered in gaining skills and afforded opportunities to engage in peacebuilding and conflict resolution and that they be part of decision-making at all levels.

In this spirit, Pax Christi International echoes what the Co-ordination of Episcopal Conferences in support of the Church of the Holy Land recognised in their 2018 communique⁹: “The young people of the Holy Land have been consistently failed by both their own leaders and the international community ... We share the hope of the young people we met in the Holy Land and recognise their essential role in promoting peace.”

⁶ Save the children, ‘Generation of children in Gaza on the brink of a mental health crisis, new research shows’, 1 June 2018, online available at: <https://www.savethechildren.net/article/generation-children-gaza-brink-mental-health-crisis-new-research-shows>.

⁷ An example is Youth Against Settlements, a nonviolent direct action group, which seeks to end the building and expanding of illegal Israeli settlements through non-violent popular struggle and civil resistance.

⁸ UN, Press release on resolution 2250, SC/12149, 9 December 2015, online available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12149.doc.htm>

⁹ Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, ‘Final press release of the Holy Land Coordination 2018’, 18 January 2018, online available at: <https://www.lpj.org/release-holy-land-coordination/>.

Indeed, there are many extraordinary young people who refuse to accept the status-quo. Instead they creatively and insistently seek ways to peacefully demand that their dignity and human rights be upheld. Through participation in nonviolent actions they challenge the injustices that shape their daily lives. In pursuing their education, regardless of the many hurdles imposed on them, they steadfastly believe in, and prepare for, better days. These are the actions that characterise most Palestinian youth. We believe they must be loudly applauded and continually encouraged.

What the future holds for the children and young people of Palestine and Israel depends, in large part, upon how we, the international community, choose to respond to their current circumstances: how we step forward to secure their inalienable right to grow-up in freedom, safety and dignity; and most especially, how we embolden a spirit of hope that peace is not an elusive childish dream.

Towards this end, Pax Christi International renews its call for an end to the occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the blockade of Gaza which we consider to be the nexus of the many injustices and dangers threatening children and young people in Israel and Palestine. We ask that the international community assert its influence in protecting the most precious and vulnerable of resources – the children and youth – by committing to:

- **Uphold and act in compliance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, other human rights instruments and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);**
- **Increase the resources necessary to safeguard the well-being and potential of all children and youth;**
- **Ensure that the basic needs of clean water, nutritious food, safe housing, reliable electricity and appropriate sanitation are guaranteed;**
- **Ensure that healthcare including mental health and specialised services are consistently accessible;**
- **Support policies that promote quality primary and secondary education including activities that encourage a culture of respect, nonviolence and peaceful coexistence;**
- **Protect and defend the unique rights of Palestinian children and youth living under military rule of law with a specialised juvenile justice system;**
- **Enable young adults to be adequately prepared to enter the labour force by offering a variety of training and apprenticeships, including technical and vocational skills;**
- **Encourage opportunities for entrepreneurship and the pursuit of advanced degrees;**
- **Promote the meaningful participation of young people in the decision-making process.**

The 2018 World Week for Peace in Israel and Palestine offers the international community another chance to reawaken a spirit of optimism and hope for concrete changes in the lives of its children and youth. Together we must ensure that the bright future we all hope for our children is made possible by our resolute commitment and actions on their behalf.