

Open Letter
President Joe Biden
The United States of America

Mr. President,

As an elderly Palestinian of the Catholic faith, my spirits are dampened.

I have grown up in a Catholic family that has experienced the Palestinian refugee crisis following the Arab Israeli War of 1948. My refugee parents, living together with 4 children in one congested room, in contrast to the small independent house they had in Qatamon prior to 1948, insisted on the best private education for my siblings and me in Catholic schools, part of the private educational scene in Palestine prior to 1948 and after.

Because of a good education and upbringing, I was able to pursue university education in the USA, on a scholarship from the US Embassy in Amman, Jordan. This opportunity enabled me to carry on the legacy of my parents, Zachary and Marguerite, and to offer our children, my wife Mary's and mine, the possibility of a good education here and abroad.

I taught at the Catholic University of Bethlehem for a quarter of a century, and I came to appreciate how Palestinian college students are earnest in achieving a good education themselves. My Ph.D. advisor, the late Murray Milner, Jr. from the University of Virginia, who hailed from Texas, visited the Bethlehem University campus back in the eighties and he remarked that, except for the way the Palestinian co-eds were attired, you would think that you were on any US college campus.

I have worked with the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches for the last twenty-two years. I touched the pain of Palestinians and others displaced and refugees across the Middle East. In my refugee work, some of the outstanding partners are Churches in the USA; Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, the Disciples of Christ (the Christian Church), the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church, to name some. These churches and their members have been touching the pain of Palestinians since 1948, and their solidarity has uplifted the spirits and healed the bodies of thousands of Palestinian refugees throughout the years.

In 2006 I was privileged to be elected a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council on the quota reserved for Christians from the City of Jerusalem.

And yet, Mr. President, despite all these life accomplishments and the contributions that the US education and American church support have given us, my spirits remain dampened.

My Palestinian compatriots and I have always been hoping for a fair hearing from the successive American Administrations. We have been dealt with unjustly and we expected, with the ideals that your

great country calls for—justice, democracy, and equal rights—that there would be insistence on these same values when dealing with our rights so long denied.

We are left with no optimism that a fair, just, and lasting solution to our predicament will come out of US policies on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Strategy and power, rather than the values of fairness and justice, appear paramount in determining political positions. At times, we Palestinians question whether the USA applies double standards in its dealings with different countries, occupations and conflict situations.

I am not discounting, Sir, that the conditions of Palestinian life and their improvement are an essential area of concern, as has been stressed repeatedly by American Administrations. But allow me, Mr. President, to quote the biblical verse: “One does not live by bread alone”(Matthew: 4:4). The spirit yearns for the kind of words and actions that would tend to the wounds of my people.

The ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, the expansion of illegal settlements, the intermittent martial confrontations in the Gaza Strip, the daily killings of Palestinian youngsters, the expropriation of vast stretches of land that dislodge thousands of Palestinians out of their natural habitats and the continuing intimidation and harassment of Palestinian children and farmers by settlers, protected by the Israeli army, all point to a situation of no exit. Not even the Church and its properties are immune from the acts of settler groups, as happened in Jaffa Gate with properties belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem.

Mr. President,

The other day a young Palestinian footballer on Palestine television said in plain Arabic: “We are a people that want to live, like other peoples. We want to enjoy playing football and to have a taste of the good life.” Likewise, Palestinian workers who get up as early as three in the morning each day to make it through crowded checkpoints to arrive at their work by seven would tell you that they labor because they love their families, and they want their children to have opportunities that they themselves did not have.

We aspire for freedom from occupation and to be able to live like other nations in our own state. We also cherish a vision for Jerusalem, as the Heads of Churches stated in a November 1994 statement:

“We invite each party to go beyond all exclusivist visions or actions, and without discrimination, to consider the religious and national aspirations of others in order to give back to Jerusalem its true universal character and to make of the city a holy place of reconciliation for humankind.”

With the dampened spirits that weigh upon the hearts of my Palestinian compatriots and my own heart as you visit with us these coming days, the least of our expectations is that you listen to Palestinian voices who yearn for peace and justice. The hurt we feel inside us should be healed if a future of peace is to reign at some point in the future in this troubled land.

Dr. Bernard Sabella – Jerusalem – July 7th, 2022