Claudia Rammelt, Rima Nasrallah (Eds.)

Wartorn Faith

Christian reflections on the conflicts in the Middle East after 7 October 2023

Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian and German narratives

Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte

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Herausgegeben von

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Edited by

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In collaboration with
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Words of Greeting

> "The assembly hereby resolves to convene after the lunch break for the constituent meeting of the 'AK SiMO in the EMS' (Middle East Department)."

This sober sentence, recorded on October 21, 1999, in Stuttgart, marks the official beginning of "Studium im Mittleren Osten" (Studies in the Middle East), or SiMO for short. This was preceded by the remarkable initiative of the then President Dr Mary Michael to reunite old partners in Germany after the devastation of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), and to win them over for a joint international program at her institution, the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut. She found open doors at the then Evangelical Mission in Southwest Germany, now the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS), as well as among numerous university teachers from the German-speaking countries. In the fall of 2000, the first group of students was sent out.

Almost 100 students sent through EMS have participated in the program to date. Over time, around 40 students from other international partner relationships of NEST joined them in Beirut to study Protestant theology in the Middle Eastern context together with their Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, and Palestinian fellow students. Today, NEST considers SiMO to be entirely its own program.

Trust has grown, which has also proven itself in times of deep crisis – for example, in the face of frequent cancellations of entire study years as a result of the pandemic and multiple crises since 2020, as well as the enormous challenges caused by the Gaza war and its spill over into Lebanon since October 2023. This mutual trust is evidenced by the international consultation that took place in the hospitable premises of the Protestant Church in Central Germany in Erfurt at the beginning of June 2025 – exactly 25 years after the first SiMO cohort was sent out – following meetings with the leadership of the two Hessian EMS member churches in Darmstadt, Frankfurt, and Kassel. In a focused, respectful, and mutually friendly atmosphere, even conflicting views that elsewhere have long since led to disappointment and broken relationships were discussed here.

The EMS is grateful for God's abundant blessings along the way – and expresses special thanks to all those who have contributed to the success of the program over the past 25 years. A big thank you also goes to

all those who were involved in the creation of this book, as well as to the institutions without whose financial commitment none of this would have been possible – above all the scholarship department of Brot für die Welt and the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the Bank im Bistum Essen, and the Association of Friends of NEST e.V.

We will continue on this path together – also in the coming 25 years, which will certainly be no less challenging than the past ones.

Stuttgart, December 2025

Uwe Gräbe
Evangelischen Mission in Solidarität (EMS)

“Wartorn Faith”

Christian reflections on the conflicts in the Middle East after 7 October 2023
Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, and German narratives

An introduction

Claudia Rammelt

I am now almost one of the program’s oldest members – not only because I was part of the second cohort sent to Lebanon, but also because I have been involved in the advisory board, the executive committee, and the chairmanship for many years. I was also there when the association Friends of NEST was founded. I am not starting with these personal words to reveal my SiMO-biography. SiMO stands for “Studium im Mittleren Osten” (Studying in the Middle East) and refers to a study program that was launched 25 years ago. Students from Germany can spend an academic year at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in the heart of Beirut, and the program now also offers shorter-term options. In 25 years, almost 100 students have participated in the study program. This volume is the result of a partnership between NEST and SiMO, bringing together students from Germany, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria, as well as former students and program coordinators in both Lebanon and Germany. It focuses not only on thoughts but also on the emotions connected to them, emotions that are shaping people in the “East” and “West” even more since the events of 7 October 2023 then before. Across both regions, there is a growing awareness that, while history records the major events of the world, it is lived, shaped, and constructed through individuals’ experiences. When history is understood in this way, these lived experiences can be told as stories. Life is organized into familiar patterns through the interplay of events, experiences, and memories, resulting in a meaningful narrative. In this process, the known patterns shape the way narration and narratives are formed. There are always grand narratives, but above all, there are the narratives that emerge from the influences and patterns of groups, communities, and individuals who write history. Narrative theory[1] and narrative psy-

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[1] E.g. Jürgen Straub, art.: Erzähltheorie/Narration, in: Günther Mey/Katja Mruck, Handbuch Qualitative Forschung in der Psychologie, Wiesbaden 2010, 136–150.

chology[2] see this narrative identity as the basis of human existence. Their reflections not only clarify why culture should be understood as a "fabric of life"[3], but they also support the arguments presented here that history manifests itself in stories whose truth lies within them.

In this spirit, the following pages of the book invite readers into personal reflections and lived experiences after the events of October 7th. People speak about their own lives, share their thoughts, and tell their own stories. The stories not only reveal how complex history is, but also how readily it is appropriated by media and politicians from all sides. They highlight the different influences and patterns that shape various contexts. For this reason, I would like to take the liberty of introducing you to the origins of this volume and the context in which we operate. This context is linked to me and cannot be separated from me and my history. So what you are reading now is not a detached foreword, but a foreword that aims to set the tone for what you can expect to find in this little book. The history and purpose of this volume are shaped by my perspective as chair of SiMO in Germany and my association with NEST and Lebanon for more than 20 years. My background, but above all the encounters and experiences of the last two decades with the people of NEST and with the country itself, cannot and should not be concealed.

1. Clueless ignorance confronted with the realities of Lebanon

Since the regional churches in Germany did not require us as potential vicars, we could attend the study program at NEST. We went to Beirut, newly qualified and on scholarship, just two days after the events of 11 September 2001. We were participating in the SiMO program, which was running for the second time that year. The fact that we were not allowed to live on campus as an unmarried couple was not the only strange thing. Beyond the different views on cohabitation before marriage, the year encouraged us in many ways to reflect on ourselves and "others". When we held our first group chapel as German students on 9 November, we were advised not to sing *Hewenu Shalom alechem*. Until then, I had only dealt with the question of "Israel and its neighbours" in the Old Testament, but not in a contemporary context. The question of the Palestinians or Pales-

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2 E.g. Jens Brockmeier, Erzählung und kulturelles Verstehen, in: Journal für Psychologie 14 (2006), 12–34.

3 Ibid., 21.

tinian Christianity was also absent from the Protestant theology curriculum, unless one pursued a special interest in it. This lack of knowledge extended to many other areas of the SiMO program that had not played a role in my theology studies between Halle and Tübingen.

Although I had become acquainted with Eastern Orthodoxy during a stay in Thessaloniki, I had not been exposed to the diversity of Christianity in the Middle East, nor to the question of how the Christian life is shaped in a predominantly Muslim society. The richness of this experience was overwhelming, even amid the challenges of a society like Lebanon's. As a Christian or a Muslim, life in Lebanon is constrained by borders: Travel to Jerusalem was impossible, and not only when southern Lebanon was affected by the mutual shelling between Israel and Hezbollah. Even a German passport, thought to open most of the world's borders, did not help. But neither an *ikame* (Residence Permit) nor a German passport allowed travel south of the Litani River. Only a special permit made it possible to see the beauty of the south and, at the same time, the traces of violence and torture in the prison of Khiam, which was run by the South Lebanese Army with Israeli support until 2000. The sight took my breath away. No special permission was required, but an escort of insiders was necessary to understand what it means to be displaced and unwanted. The reality in the Palestinian camps was much harsher: children without documents were taken in by UNRWA schools because otherwise they would have been denied any education. Houses can only grow skywards. I would have liked to have pushed these realities aside so that my dialogue-oriented sensibilities could fully emerge. But many of these realities spoke a different language and led to different conclusions. I had to learn to understand them slowly.

2. Living with the knowledge of the unthematizable within the knowledge that must be thematised

The expulsion of the Palestinians, border demarcations and power struggles were realities that directly affected Lebanon. But in Western European societies, the Middle East conflict is often perceived as a conflict between Israel and Palestine, a conflict that takes place beyond the Lebanese border. It is the domain of all those experts who are connected to the region. I fervently hoped that it would remain that way, because the scale of 7 October was immense. How could anyone still believe in peace after these events? I did not want to imagine what would follow. At that time, I

was glad that the "Middle East experts" were responsible for that. But the events did not remain an episode limited to Israel and Palestine. The extent of human suffering made one shudder at what humans are capable of. In the weeks after 7 October, the phones never stopped ringing. The crystal ball, which no one could see into, kept us discussing whether the current students in Beirut should leave or stay. Ultimately, the travel warnings issued by the Foreign Office made it inevitable that they would have to leave Lebanon. Students who had just been sent abroad, who had begun to settle in and make their first friends, had to return with a realization: I can return from the crisis region – the other students cannot.

The conflict was no longer limited to the border, but it was primarily the voices across that border that were noticed. Church statements continued to focus on the "the Middle East conflict" even after two years of unspeakable destruction in southern Lebanon and another wave of violence in Syria. Meanwhile, the number of victims in Lebanon rose steadily, and negotiated ceasefires were not respected. Will the armed militia really be deprived of its foothold if its southern neighbour is bombed almost daily? Or is it a power-strategic, if not power-expansionist, calculation that is politically demanded but ultimately not desired? Drones continue to circle over Beirut, bombings hit the Bekaa Valley, the south and also the suburbs of Beirut – a daily reality for our partners, keeping people on tenterhooks. How could this reality have been excluded from our partnership work? The NEST president at the time, George Sabra, spoke out on behalf of the faculty in favour of addressing "the elephant in the room". The topics for the consultations, which take place every three years alternately in Beirut and Germany, were always discussed jointly. In this case, there was nothing to discuss, even though I hesitated inwardly and wondered how the topic could be appropriately addressed in Germany. Our discussions have been and are being held harsh, and the political line is very sharp. How can we talk without being one-sided? None of us wanted to negate the suffering that had been endured or trivialize the violence. We worked intensively on a program that would give the partners a public platform so that their questions and issues would be heard and they would once again be recognized as siblings who are part of Middle Eastern societies.

3. Addressing the "elephant in the room"? A necessary and successful experiment

A group of students and teachers from the NEST first visited their partners at the Centre for Ecumenism in Frankfurt, the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Ruhr-University Bochum, and the House of Churches in Kassel. The focus was on the current situation in Lebanon, but also in Syria and Palestine. The SiMO group – made of previous students and board members – then met in Erfurt from 3 to 7 June 2025, lecturers and students from the Near East School of Theology met with representatives of the German SiMO Board, the association Friends of NEST, and former NEST students. One of the aims was to review the cooperation and pose the question of its future shape with regard to the situation in Lebanon. At the same time, we turned our attention to the events in the Middle East itself. NEST students and graduates presented their experiences through posters that accompanied us during our days in Erfurt. They reflected on the situation in the West Bank, Syria and Lebanon. Four contributions deepened these impressions: the first focused on a German perspective, followed by a response from a Lebanese viewpoint. A second block began with the Lebanese perspective, which was then commented on from a German perspective. This sparked a multi-layered dialogue on interpreting the events in Israel and Palestine and their impact on neighbouring countries, resulting in a very honest and thoughtful discussion.

The fact that the German perspective differs from that of the Middle East was accepted. Germany's position toward Israel is uniquely rooted in its historical responsibility from the Holocaust. This leads to us to see anti-Semitic reactions in almost every inquiry regarding the current actions of the State of Israel. In doing so, we sometimes forget that not only 1,200 Israelis, but also thousands of Palestinians have been killed and thousands of them live in unbearable conditions. Hundreds of homes have been destroyed in southern Lebanon and other areas. Germany's *raison d'état* toward Israel can be formulated just as clearly as the scepticism and rejection of the State of Israel from many states in the Middle East. Lebanon's history with the State of Israel differs from ours. Israel is perceived more as a state of provocation and violence due to its past. It was the State of Israel that invaded during the civil war, and it was Israel that bombs the country daily in various regions. No one wanted to convince the other to abandon their perspective, which was also linked to historical and contemporary realities. No one wanted to harmonize or polarize, but

the fears and hopes associated with the situation were acknowledged and heard by both sides. Because of this, it became possible to formulate questions openly and without reservation: Do you think that theological reflection after 7 October can still look the same as before? What about decolonial perspectives in the Palestinian spectrum? The personal confession that German *raison d'état* is simply unbearable when one considers that the destruction in Lebanon was a central part of the discussion. Equally important was the despair of having to offer comfort to Palestinian and Israeli friends because of the suffering they have endured. This approach does not legitimize the status quo of violence and polemics, but instead opens up new questions, explanations, and insights. For us, it became a model of healing. Healing because no one was judged for his or her views. Healing, because mere insistence is just as unproductive as denying experiences. This guiding insight proved to be particularly necessary. Only by expressing our own positions was it possible to resume the conversation and engage in a genuine exchange. This gave us hope: we discussed – openly, honestly, and with all our feelings. And we did so with the knowledge that this exchange did not and would not necessarily lead to consensus, but could break down mutual prejudices and lead to an understanding of each other's positions.

4. A strong partnership as a catalyst – 25 years of study program

Our exchange was underpinned by a long-standing partnership. Twenty-five years of partnership gave us the strength to discuss a very hot topic. The study program "Study in the Middle East" was founded by people who were enthusiastic about the Middle East and the diversity of Christianity. They wanted young people to experience what it means to live as Christians in a Muslim neighbourhood. Pastors and university teachers such as Paul Löffler, Martin Tamcke and the Vorländer couple began to negotiate opportunities to study in a Middle Eastern context. NEST was the place where this became possible. The university has a 93-year history that has had to overcome many crises. It is the training centre for young Protestant leaders in the Middle East. Students from Syria, Lebanon, Armenia, Iran, Palestine, and Jordan studied and continue to study at NEST, which is supported by four sponsoring churches: The National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, The Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. For

25 years, the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) has been the administrative location where the German branch of the study program is administered. An advisory board with its executive committee steers and guides the organization's fortunes. The steadily growing study program has been able to expand its circle year-by-year, thanks in part to the members of the "Friends of NEST" association. We meet annually, not only to reflect on the past academic year with the students, but also to cultivate contacts as the SiMO family and exchange information about events at NEST and in the Middle East. Every three years, this annual think tank takes on a larger framework through joint consultations.

At first, we watched each other like we were in a zoo. We were still asked: Who are you? And who are you? We were not very aware of diversity when, for example, we encountered Armenian Evangelical Christians from Iran. Of course, the students could say, "You do not understand what we experienced in our childhood. We did not grow up in a civil war". This led to discussions that were both heated and lively. But we also asked: What songs do you sing? What do you believe? What does it mean to be a Christian in a country like Lebanon? What does it mean to be Protestant in Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine? Common questions were raised: What do we believe, pray and think as Christians? Music, as a shared form of expression, brought us together, as did theological questions about the nature of the Church. We learned from, with, and about one another.

The partnership grew over the years and became more colourful: experiences were shared, the Germans were challenged, but NEST also was challenged by the Germans. Everyone could contribute their own experiences here, the highs and lows of an academic year, their personal insights. The evaluation meetings repeatedly highlighted how enriching and often challenging life in the context of Beirut is. Studying together has become naturalized and it became clearer that students from the German context come with their own unique questions. "The Germans and their questions are good for us. We come out of our bubbles," Dr Rima Nasrallah said in one of our meetings. We can also add that studying at NEST was not just an excellent experience for us, not just an intellectual on, it was a life experience.

5. A joint publication as a multi-narrative approach

We are launching this publication as a sign of our mutual solidarity. It bears witness to a mature partnership, with a group of editors made up of former SiMOs and NEST managers responsible for this volume. It highlights what partners owe each other: to share their stories and thoughts, especially in special situations, and not to dismiss others' stories. The current president of NEST Martin Accad formulated this as multi-narrative approach at our meeting in Erfurt, emphasizing:

> "The proposal to adopt a multi-narrative approach especially after the events of October 7th acknowledges a difficult but necessary truth: that the post-Holocaust narrative and the decolonizing narrative surrounding Gaza are likely to contain elements that are not only different but deeply irreconcilable. Each narrative is rooted in a distinct historical trauma and moral framework, and attempts to merge them into a single, unified account often leading to unsatisfying results for all involved. Synthesizing these perspectives typically requires the dilution of their most important claims – leaving neither side truly seen or heard. Moreover, privileging one narrative over the other risks compounding pain. It may leave one community feeling silenced, invalidated, or even morally condemned. Such an approach can deepen alienation and entrench division, rather than foster the understanding and trust needed for genuine dialogue. Instead, a dual narrative approach invites a different kind of conversation – one that holds space for tension rather than trying to erase it."

The book is structured into three parts. The first part contains the contributions of the consultation. Originally conceived as statements with responses from "East" and "West", they now appear as independent articles. In this way, academic reflection and personal experience stand side by side and together open up a space for reflection. The second and third part of the volume are devoted to these life stories. They reflect on life after the events of 7 October. First ten former students of NEST from the countries of the Middle East report on their latest experiences. Then ten SiMO students and people from Germany associated with NEST and Beirut took the time to reflect on the words of the Middle Easterners and write about their reactions. In this way, personal experiences and historical events enter into a dialogue that shows how the world is shaped by experiences and influences. While the life stories from the Middle East were written before 1 June, the German-speaking ones emerged as responses to them later.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who participated in writing a "story". Beyond my gratitude, I would like to pay tribute to all those who were willing to share their life stories with readers. I would also like to thank everyone who made this publication possible financially, especially the EKD, the EMS, and the Bank im Bistum Essen.

Without Dr Egbert Schlarb's excellent design, we would not have been able to publish this volume. Many thanks for your work and your patience with all the special requests.

Thanks also to Reem Haddad, who provided linguistic guidance for the English version.

Special thanks go to the editorial team formed after the consultation. Anna-Katharina Diehl, Joscha Quade, Maxi Rink, Friederike Weltzien, Rima Nasrallah, and I worked intensively to advance the development of this volume. We discussed, evaluated, read, and commented together. Thank you for this constructive process of collaborative reflection. This publication has thus become a joint project of many.

We placed this volume in the series Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte (Studies in Oriental Church History), which was founded by the late Martin Tamcke. He was not only the long-standing chair of the study program, but also viewed encounter as a central moment of his academic work. It was important to him that partners take each other seriously in their thoughts and actions and treat each other with respect. It is precisely this respect that I wish from the reading public: not to fall into hasty judgments about others, but to allow themselves to be drawn into the thinking, living and storytelling that is woven into the "fabric of life"[4]. For me, this volume is an expression of ecumenism in action, an ecumenism that does not debate itself, but is realized through shared words and shared stories.

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4 Cf. note 3.

I. Reflections

The Significance of post-Holocaust theological Approaches after 7 October 2023 – from a German Perspective

Uwe Gräbe

1. Some questions and suggestions to get started

To be honest, we are all tired. Tired of the war, the devastation, the bombs, the massacres. Tired of the hatred. Tired of the immense war crimes and the starvation of people. Tired of our own grief. Tired even of arguing about those whom Bob Dylan referred to as the Middle Eastern "neighborhood bully" in a sarcastic song back in 1983.[1] But also tired of the proxy wars playing out here on our streets in Germany. This has to stop.

Just before 7 October 2023, the faculty of NEST proposed a theme for this consultation "Israel as a biblical and theological topic in the Middle East". This was likely their way of inviting us to *talk about the "elephant in the room":* the perception that (some) Germans probably hold theological views that, to put it mildly, are not shared in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, or Palestine. Or to put it more pointedly: While postcolonial studies are advancing across the Global South and within Western progressive circles, and theologies are increasingly being decolonized, there still appear to be some backward "reservations" in Germany, among other places, where the aggressive, colonial, and murderous actions of the modern State of Israel are apparently theologically justified. And we need to talk about this perception. So the contrast is between postcolonial (or better, decolonizing) theologies on the one hand and post-*Shoah* theologies on the other.

We are aware that such debates have the potential to hurt, and have hurt repeatedly, long before that accursed 7 October. The doors banged particularly loudly, for example, on a beautiful day in 1973 in the Lebanese mountains. At a consultation in Broumana, there was an open conflict between the Orthodox Archbishop Georges Khodr (*1923) and the Berlin Protestant theologian Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt (1928–2002). Marquardt had apparently presented his concept there, according to which Jesus, even as the Risen One, would always remain a Jew and thus

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1 www.bobdylan.com/songs/neighborhood-bully/ (13 November 2025).

part of his people, Israel. Archbishop Khodr then accused Marquardt of demanding that the Arab participants believe in a Jesus "with blue eyes and blond hair". Both were ultimately so offended that the meeting was interrupted for a while and could only be continued after mediation by other participants. This should not happen in this consultation. After all, we have been walking down the same path for 25 years now.

Anyone who deals with "post-*Shoah*", "post-Holocaust" or "post-Auschwitz" theologies (I will refrain from using the necessary terminological distinctions here)[2] in an international ecumenical context, is often confronted with a whole tangle of assumptions and associations that should be questioned and – where possible – clarified. Let us try not to solve the problems in the Middle East, but to understand each other better.

Firstly, when I look at the debates in Germany from the outside, what do I perceive? A *Protestant majority theology* since 1945 that primarily supports the State of Israel? There is hardly any evidence of this. After 1945, not much happened at first. Instead, the Vatican Council Declaration of October 1965 entitled "Nostra Aetate" (and in particular the fourth section) was a turning point: For the first time, the worldwide Catholic Church authoritatively states the rootedness of the church in the Jewish people, emphasizes that Jews as such are not responsible for the suffering and death of Jesus, opposes the theological statement that Jews are reject-

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[2] Witnesses after 1945 were faced with the dilemma of having to use familiar terms to describe something that had previously been completely unknown. *Holocaust*, something "completely burnt", was the obvious choice. The Jewish thinker and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once described Isaac, the son of Abraham, as the "first survivor of the Holocaust" in the episode of Genesis 22; cf. Christoph Münz, Der Welt ein Gedächtnis geben. Geschichtstheologisches Denken im Judentum nach Auschwitz, Gütersloh 1995, 105. However, Wiesel later regretted having made a significant contribution to the establishment of this term in the USA. For *Holocaust* comes from the biblical terminology of sacrifice in the Greek Septuagint translation. And biblically, a sacrifice always has meaning and significance within the context of the relationship between God and the believer. The mass murder of European Jewry by German hands and under German command, on the other hand, was simply senseless. On the contrary, it necessarily leads to the question of how one can still speak of God at all in view of the catastrophe. Hence the Hebrew term *Shoah* (catastrophe), a term that was later also chosen by Palestinians for their own experience of loss of land, flight and expulsion: the *Nakba*.

ed by God and condemns anti-Semitism.[3] Numerous statements from the Protestant Church in Germany from the 1970s to 1990s can also be categorized along these lines. Only years later, such developments were responded to at an authoritative, international level by two positive Jewish acknowledgments: firstly, by the document "Dabru Emet", published in the year 2000,[4] and finally with "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians"[5] on the 40th anniversary of "Nostra Aetate" in 2015, even by Orthodox rabbis.

Nevertheless, post-*Shoah* theology is not and never has been a "majority theology" in Germany. Among Protestant church leaders, it may be quite widespread today. But in academic theology and in congregations, I perceive that the phase of renewal in the Jewish-Christian relationship, which had its heyday in the 1970s to 1990s, is long gone. Postcolonial theologies in dialogue with the Global South are much more attractive than a post-*Shoah* theology, especially for young theology students.

Secondly, whenever Israel plays a role in Christian theology, as a German, I hear the question from many Middle Eastern partners: *Which Israel* are you talking about? Should not a much more precise distinction be made, for example, between biblical Israel and the modern State of Israel? Of course, you have to. No one would probably think of claiming a simple identity between ancient Germanic tribes and today's Germans. Or of the Phoenicians and today's Lebanese. History is always dynamic, full of ruptures. And yet no one would deny that there are also *continuities* between the one and the other. It often seems to me that the demand for a *distinction* concerning Israel actually intends a *separation*: The one has nothing to do with the other. I would like to counter this: The statements made in the Bible concerning Israel are not directed merely at the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the *Am Haaretz*. They are addressed to *those* poor and marginalized people who, throughout history,

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[3] Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. Nostra Aetate. Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (13 November 2025).

[4] Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity, Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies, Baltimore/MD, 10 September 2000, www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/dabru-emet (13 November 2025).

[5] International Group of Orthodox Rabbis, To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians, www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/orthodox-2015dec4 (13 November 2025).

have continued to celebrate Passover, Sukkot and Shavu'ot; who have not stopped calling out to each other around the world on Passover: "Next year in Jerusalem", and who have always received the Shabbat on Friday evening with the words: "And keep the Shabbat, O children of Israel, for generations to come for an eternal covenant." If today's Christians wish to understand themselves within this continuity, then this needs to be explained. For Jews, no further explanation is necessary.

Thirdly, is not hostility toward Jews and anti-Semitism actually a *European problem*? Why should we have to deal with it in other regions of the world that have historically been characterized by harmonious coexistence? This is, of course, a relevant question. But do not people tend to idealize their own history? Certainly, harmonious coexistence has often existed, especially in the Middle East, perhaps even more so than in Europe.

But if we look at just a few of the worst outbursts, it quickly becomes clear that violence against Jews is a *worldwide phenomenon*: the Pogrom of Alexandria, also called "The First Pogrom" or "Blutrausch (Bloodlust) von Alexandria" in 38 AD; the pogroms in Moorish Córdoba in 1011 and Fèz (present-day Morocco) in 1033; the Crusader pogroms in Speyer, Worms and Mainz in 1096; the pogrom of Deggendorf in 1338; the Safed attacks in Palestine in 1517; the Khmelnytsky pogroms of 1648–1657; the expulsion of Jews from Algiers in 1805; the Pogrom of Odessa in 1821; the "Damascus Affair" in 1840; the Kishinev Massacres in 1903 and 1905; the Pogrom of Hebron in 1921; the Farhud of Baghdad in 1941; the Pogrom of Tripoli in Libya in 1945 (with a sequel in 1948) – all before the founding of the State of Israel. And even in distant Burma, such events reverberated: When the "Burmese Road to Socialism" proved economically unsuccessful in 1967, the supposedly prosperous synagogue was unabashedly seized.[6] Sometimes it is enough to take a look at everyday life – for example, at the constant harassment of Jewish worshippers at the Western ("Wailing") Wall of the Haram ash-Sharif or Temple Mount in Jerusalem at the hands of their Muslim neighbours during the last decades of Ottoman rule[7] – to see a pattern that runs through history.

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[6] Ruth Fredman Cernea, Almost Englishmen. Baghdadi Jews in British Burma, Lanham 2007, 127.

[7] Cf. Joseph Croitoru, Al-Aqsa oder Tempelberg. Der ewige Kampf um Jerusalems Heilige Stätten, München 2021, 69–75.

Fourthly, but is this pattern not simply *another form of racism*, and is the *Shoah* therefore not merely a particularly brutal consequence of racist attitudes and mechanisms? Does anti-Semitism really have to be seen as something separate? There is probably one characteristic that clearly distinguishes anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism from all possible varieties of racism: Racism looks down on Blacks, Asians, Eastern Europeans, or Arabs, identifying them as "sub-humans", so to speak. In this way, modern Israeli racism may also look down on Palestinians. Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, on the other hand, believe that they can identify the Jews as a particularly clever, cunning, and powerful group that is striving for world domination: through financial institutions or the press, which they supposedly control, and the like; eventually, even through climate protection laws and Covid vaccinations. This conspiracy myth finds its classic expression in the worst anti-Semitic work of Tsarist Russia (late 19th century), the so-called "Protocols of the Elders of Zion". "World Jewry" is portrayed here as a plague that will ultimately exploit the entire planet; something to be *feared* – unless it is systematically eradicated. No racist would go so far as to say, "The Blacks are our misfortune." However, the sentence "The Jews are our misfortune"[8] is a classic of European anti-Semitism, as is the insane conviction that the world could only recover if the Jews were eliminated.

Incidentally, a rudimentary form of this pattern can already be found in the New Testament: at the end of the Gospel of John, the disciples lock themselves away in their upper room "for *fear of the Jews*" (John 20:19). They could have been afraid of all kinds of people in Jerusalem at the time, most of all the Romans, who were certainly also after the followers of the troublemaker they had just crucified. But how could they have been afraid of their fellow Jews of all people? The idea that Jews were responsible for all kinds of distress seems to have always existed. Christian anti-Judaism, here, clearly appears as a specific root of modern anti-Semitism.

The *Shoah* is not unique solely because of the incredibly high number of people murdered. Sure: six million – that was 40% of all Jews world-

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[8] Heinrich von Treitschke, Unsere Aussichten, in: Preußische Jahrbücher 44 (1879), 559–576, 575: „Bis in die Kreise der höchsten Bildung hinauf … ertönt es heute wie aus einem Munde: die Juden sind unser Unglück!" (Even in the highest echelons of education … today, everyone seems to be saying the same thing: the Jews are our misfortune!)

wide at the time. But in the genocide of 1904–1908, the German occupiers of what is now Namibia killed 80% of the Herero and 50% of the Nama; the Armenian genocide, with around 1.5 million murdered between 1915 and 1916 – around half of all Armenians – served as a direct model for Hitler. During the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, up to one million people were killed within 100 days, 75% of the Tutsi living there at the time. It is therefore easy to imagine a situation in which an insane dictatorship could kill even more people than those six million Jews. The *Shoah* is also not unique because of its incredible efficiency, the involvement of the entire German population and its institutions in the mass murder, or because of its inevitability for everyone who was defined as a Jew by "race". The *Shoah is singular above all because it is the* culmination *of a pattern* that has existed for two thousand years. And that is why it also poses a *theological challenge*.

2. The renewal of Christian-Jewish relations and the Jewish national movement as two responses to anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism

Both the theological renewal of Jewish-Christian relations after the *Shoah* and the Jewish national movement, called Zionism, can be understood as two distinct ways to confront the demons of two thousand years of history.

2.1 The renewal of the Christian-Jewish relations

For a theology after Auschwitz, the critical examination and admission of one's own affinity to Christian anti-Judaism and modern anti-Semitism leads to the shattering insight: there is another community beside us, which largely refers to the same Holy Scriptures, prays the same Psalms, and understands itself as the "People of God".

This community has never ceased to exist in its historical continuity. It was neither simply replaced by the church in its relationship to God, nor was it surpassed or absorbed, nor did it physically disappear, despite all attempts to destroy it. *Learning from Judaism* arises from this irritation - and with it: the astonishing discovery of how closely Judaism and Christianity are interwoven.

Anyone who places the New Testament and the rabbinical writings (such as the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash) side by side as two "contin-

uation stories" of the Hebrew Bible will not be able to overlook how much the New Testament is characterized by the *"Jewish idiom"*.

I then, for example, no longer see Jesus in contrast to the Pharisaic movement. Rather, in countless passages of the Gospels, he becomes flesh and blood in the middle of an inner-Pharisaic discussion: "You have heard that it was said" (Matthew 5:27 and others), or in the idiom of the Talmud: "Rabbi Yehuda says in the name of Rabbi Johanan", perhaps carried out in even more detail and taken to absurdity: *ileyma* – "if one would say". And then, eventually: "But I say to you" – *hachi kamar* (bT Kiddushin 29a and others) – an invitation to debate, to discuss what really counts in life.

First and foremost, life itself: *pikuach nefesh*, danger to life, overrides the Shabbat. Regardless of whether it is about healings (Mark 3:1–6 and others) or the provision of basic needs, for example, when plucking the ears of corn (Matthew 12:1–8). For Jesus, as for any decent Pharisee, whether from the school of Hillel or the school of Shammai, although the latter were somewhat stricter and therefore made wonderful debating partners for Jesus. I see him walking through the streets of Galilee and Judea, wearing his Jewish prayer shawl, the *tallit* – the *tsitsit* at the four corners recalling the commandments, whose observance brings about miracles (Luke 8:44). He addresses himself almost exclusively to his fellow Jews (Matthew 15:24), to those who are in covenant with God. Only rarely do non-Jews come into view. Hence, it is probably the greatest miracle that God finally allows people from the world of nations to be added to his covenantal purpose – through the "signs and wonders" that he performed on them (Acts 15:12).

This is how Jesus "fulfils" old promises again and again, with new life. Incidentally, this also applies to the *biblical land promises*, which naturally need to be continually reinterpreted and reformulated.

Just as all biblical authors and later Jewish sages constantly reinterpret the promises of land in their respective contexts, so too does Jesus: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). Inheriting the earth, or better, "the land", makes the old land promises dependent on an enormous ethical standard.

However, this is not said to the whole world in general, to all those who behave in a certain way, but to specific Jews. At the same time, this is a statement of faith, not an entry in the land registry or *taboo*. It is a *deeply engraved faith connection* of a specific people to a specific land.

What this means for the coexistence of different peoples in the same land or for the relationship between land and the modern state needs to be defined anew in every era, and today, with the instruments of international law at our disposal.

2.2 Jewish national movement

Just as Christians had to deal with the demons of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism "after Auschwitz", something similar had also been the starting point of Zionism as a national liberation movement of the Jewish people from as early as the late 19th century.

Now it is no secret to us in Germany that the Zionist movement is increasingly seen as a *"settler-colonial enterprise"*, particularly in the Arab world or in pro-Palestinian groups worldwide. The fronts have hardened.

Is it still possible to listen to each other at this point? Is it at least possible to identify and respect both parts of a "dual/multiple narrative" (M. Accad)?

The first pages of the Zionist basic document "The Jewish State" (1896) by Theodor Herzl[9] make it clear that the enterprise he then outlines was a response to the worldwide hatred of Jews. "We are one *people*. We are *one* people"[10], he emphasizes – only to immediately distance himself from an ethnic (or "racial") definition of this people.[11] One does not even have to be a Zionist to follow such a definition. Even an Orthodox Jewish scholar from the completely anti-Zionist *Agudat Israel* movement, who lived from 1883 to 1946, was able to say about his Frankfurt community at the beginning of the 20th century: "My community … was truly not a 'religious society' …, but it was for me the modest and yet highly significant remnant of our former national statehood".[12]

Herzl himself clearly places Zionism in the same league as other *anti-colonial liberation movements* that succeeded in forming sovereign states, "The emergence of a new sovereignty is nothing ridiculous or impossible.

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[9] Theodor Herzl, Der Judenstaat. Versuch einer modernen Lösung der Judenfrage, Berlin [4]2016.

[10] Op. cit., 10 (transl. UG).

[11] Op. cit., 12 (transl. UG).

[12] Isaac Breuer, Mein Weg. Bearbeitet und ergänzt von Prof. Dr. Matthias Morgenstern, Rabbiner Dr. Jeschaja Balog. Veröffentlicht mit Unterstützung der Irene Bollag-Herzheimer Stiftung, Mossad Jizchak Breuer, Basel 2024, 136 (transl. UG).

We have witnessed it in our day, among peoples who are not middle-class peoples like us, but poorer … peoples".[13]

As late as 1975, after the UN had equated Zionism with racism for the first time (which was revoked in 1990), it was a liberation theologian from the Global South, namely the WCC General Secretary Philip Potter, who vigorously contradicted this and declared in his speech to the UN "that Zionism is not racism, but the liberation movement of the Jewish people."[14]

Of course, the objections to the idea that the Jewish people have always had a national identity are well known. But who among those invoking the so-called "Khazar hypothesis" to reject this idea has actually read the book Kuzari (1139) by Yehuda Halevi, which gave rise to the speculation about the "invention" of the Jewish people? Who among those who identify the dangerous religious enthusiasm of Anglo-Saxon "Christian Zionism" as the decisive factor in the emergence and development of the Zionist movement has ever understood how long and laboriously a Chaim Weizmann, for example, had to go to the British government authorities before he was listened to?[15]

Is it really such a special case when two national movements refer to the same piece of land, and must one of them therefore be rejected as "fake"? Is not it at least somehow similar in some countries of the North African Maghreb: in the coexistence of Arab and non-Arab (Berber/Amazigh, Touareg, Sahrawi …) population groups – a coexistence

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[13] Herzl, Judenstaat, 22 (transl. UG). In 1895, Herzl may have had the following states in mind: Haiti 1804 from France; Argentina 1816 from Spain; Chile 1818 from Spain; Colombia 1810/1819 from Spain; Mexico 1821; Brazil 1822 from Portugal; Peru 1821; Ecuador 1822; Venezuela 1811/1821; Paraguay 1811; Uruguay 1825; Bolivia 1825; Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, all 1821 from Spain; Greece 1830 from the Ottoman Empire; Belgium 1830 from the United Netherlands; Serbia 1878; Romania 1877/78 from the Ottoman Empire; Afghanistan from Persia 1709, from British influence 1879/1880; Liberia 1847.

[14] Bertold Klappert, Auf dem Weg zu einer Partnerschaft zwischen Juden und Christen, in: Jehoschua Ahrens et al., Hin zu einer Partnerschaft zwischen Juden und Christen. Die Erklärung orthodoxer Rabbiner zum Christentum, Berlin 2017, 204–215, 207.

[15] Cf. Tom Segev, Es war einmal ein Palästina. Juden und Araber vor der Staatsgründung Israels. Aus dem Amerikanischen von Doris Gerstner, New York 1999; deutsche Ausgabe München 2005, 47–106.

that sometimes takes place in a quite unspectacular way, but is sometimes also very tense?

And does not any national liberation movement have the *potential either to end well, or to end in dictatorship and terror*? There are numerous examples of both in recent history. Of course, it is a very legitimate question as to where the Jewish national movement and the State of Israel today fall between these two poles. However, it is not an extraordinarily special case.

Even those Jewish Israelis who today are very critical of the extremist/messianic/fascist tendencies of their own government, the increasing abolition of the democratic separation of powers through the so-called "judicial reform", blatant anti-Palestinian racism and the endless killing of the Gaza war; even those who continue to advocate the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, see themselves predominantly as Zionists (with some notable and – admittedly – very outspoken exceptions). Just how strong the liberating element is in this movement can be seen, for example, when the old people talk about the early days after 1948, "Even the policemen were Jews here". – Something that was completely unheard of in previous contexts of oppression.

3. "Never again" – after 7 October 2023?

Today, the Jewish and Palestinian national movements are more irreconcilable than ever, at a point where it is almost realistic to fantasize about the annihilation of the other.

For Israel, the "never again" that was spoken after the *Shoah* predominantly means "never again to us". Anyone who is perceived as a threat to the Jewish state's very existence is then fought against ruthlessly. A universalist "never again" is often declared to be a luxury that one cannot afford.

Of course, I do not want to justify this. I would just like to raise the question of whether this is not at least understandable, given a two-thousand-year history of murderous hostility toward Jews and in view of two military groups on Israel's borders, financed by Iran or Qatar, which are not interested in the peaceful coexistence of a Jewish and a Palestinian state but aim instead at replacing one with the other.

In any case, in its staging of October 7, Hamas has done everything in its power to *bring the images of the demons of the past back to life* in the

form of murder, arson, and rape. And the staging of every hostage handover in recent months seems to have served the same purpose.

It increasingly seems as if the rulers in Israel, contrary to all their statements, are not so much interested in freeing hostages, which could have been achieved more effectively through negotiations, as the demonstrators on the streets continue to emphasize. But it is also not about a "campaign of revenge". And even the occupation of additional land seems to be a rather welcome "side effect" for the extreme right, which nowadays dominates the Israeli state institutions.

The core issue, however, seems to be simply about the drive to destroy *those perceived as a threat to the Jewish nation state's existence*, no matter how many innocent people are murdered in the process, people who were never a threat in the first place.

If the increasingly loud fantasies of a mass expulsion of Palestinians come true, then the *Palestinian people could indeed face extinction as a nation*. Extinction at the hands of the bully in the neighbourhood that Bob Dylan sings about.

Conversely, *Israel's existence is also being called into question like never before*: powers have shifted worldwide. Due to the growing importance of the Global South, Israel is increasingly seen as an isolated colonial settler enterprise on the world stage. Legally, the Jewish state has its back to the wall in the international arena.

The complete overrun on October 7, 2023, and the obvious inability to forcefully destroy a movement like Hamas have shattered the myth of Israel's military invincibility. And internally, Israel is tearing itself apart in a polarization the likes of which has never been seen before.

For the first time in 52 years, the collapse of the Jewish state appears to be a realistic possibility. Should the different parts of the international community be cheering on their own side like fan clubs at a macabre soccer match until the other is destroyed? Or are there no other, better alternatives?

I have never felt the atmosphere in Israel and in the Arab world as bleak as it is today. A constant *barrage of social media posts*: About the tens of thousands of dead in Gaza, again and again about the cynical war crimes committed by Israeli soldiers; bombed hospitals; murdered children who would have had their whole lives ahead of them, mass graves. From the opposite side: the latest findings about tortured hostages, about those who were chained to the bedstead in darkness for months and were

only nursed back to health shortly before being released for the television pictures, or about new investigation results concerning the mass rapes of October 7. Also from the latter side: "only legitimate self-defence"; there were no war crimes. From the other: the rapes never happened.[16] From one side: how good the Israeli prisoners look who are released by Hamas, and how emaciated the Palestinian prisoners who come out of Israeli prisons. From the other side: how good the Palestinian prisoners look who have now been released *en masse* from Israeli prisons, and how half-dead the Israeli hostages coming out of the Hamas tunnels.

> From one side: they must be running out of well-fed prisoners.
> From the other side: they must be running out of well-fed hostages.
>
> From one side: look how the north of Israel has been devastated.
> From the other: look how the south of Lebanon has been devastated.
>
> From some: The world has left us alone. Do not you feel guilty at all?
> From the others: The world has left us alone. Do not you feel guilty at all?
>
> From some: 7 October did not happen "in a vacuum"; look at the fifty-six years or (optionally) seventy-five years of occupation.
> From the others: The root cause of this war is far more than just the massacres of 7 October, which actually resulted from those 75 years in which the Jewish state established by a UN decision was never actually accepted and embraced in this neighbourhood.

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[16] It is worth reading the original interview with Moran Gez, which is repeatedly (and wrongly!) cited as proof that the rapes did not take place, in full in the original: אם אתה עצור של 7 באוקטובר מבחינתי אין לך זכות לחיות, www.ynet.co.il/news/article/yokra14200599 , 01.01.2025 (13.11.2025). A scientific examination of the rapes can be found here: Sexual Violence Crimes on October 7. Special Report by the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, February 2024, www.1202.org.il/centers-union/publications/reports/712-silent_cry (13.11.2025) and here: Ruth Halperin-Kaddari/Nava Ben-Or/Sharon Zagagi-Pinhas, A Quest for Justice. October 7 and Beyond. The Dinah Project, Jerusalem, June 2025, thedinahproject.org/the-book/ (13 November 2025).

> From some: We know that pattern. Covering the entire neighbourhood with war, violence, and occupation, and then playing the Jewish victim card when things go wrong.
> From the others: We know that pattern. Starting war and terror against Israel with complete hubris and then playing the Palestinian victim card when things go wrong.

Honestly, I have cried with family members of the Israeli hostages, murdered and rape victims in the "Hostages' Square" in Tel Aviv, and I have cried with relatives and friends of the Palestinian victims in Beirut, Amman, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. The tears always tasted equally salty.

Post-*Shoah* theology after 7 October 2023 – could this not mean, quite banally, *opposing any form of "victim competition"*?

1. After the *Shoah*, it was an essential insight that there is a Jewish people alongside the Christian church that refers to the same scriptures and stands in a continuity at least as solid as that of Christians. It would be impossible to extrapolate anything from this to the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians – except for the question of where my neighbour is at any given moment, who needs my compassion and solidarity, especially when this neighbour's world is falling apart. Indeed, it is possible to engage with each other's traditions and pain. Even though the *Shoah* and the *Nakba* are completely different, the aim must be to recognize each other's traumas, which have persisted for generations. Land loss and uprooting are just as real as the almost complete destruction of one's own community.
2. Engaging with each other also includes *recognizing each other's diversity*. No one faces a monolithic monster; that would be a caricature. The societies in Tel Aviv and Beirut are more similar in their diversity and dynamics than either would admit to the other. The victims of the massacres on October 7 were not militant settlers and ultra-nationalists, but mostly quite ordinary people with rather liberal political views, in some notable cases even peace activists who campaigned for Israelis and Palestinians to live side by side respectfully, sometimes even together. Similarly, the ongoing Israeli devastation in Gaza affects all segments of a very complex and refined Palestinian society, while most of the evildoers sit safely protected in their tunnels.

3. Very different parties are finally calling on their international partners to exert political pressure on one side or the other. This may be effective in some cases. However, a bully who has become a bully because he was never allowed to play in the school playground will not let go of his bullying through pressure. Of course, it may be possible to pressure him into submission. However, peaceful and fair relationships can only grow through *building trust*. And that is probably the most difficult of all exercises. It will not work with everyone, at least not with extremist, reckless rulers. However, most of the criticism you may have against those extremists can also be found (in even more radical form) in Israel itself. Hence, the challenge may be to identify as many people as possible in the other society with whom it is possible to build relationships and eventually trust. It is therefore very sad that, in Lebanon, for example, it is illegal to have any involvement with Israelis.
4. The juxtaposition of *liberation movements and settler colonialism* may make the situation seemingly clearer, but it is all too often an inaccurate simplification. Every liberation movement can develop oppressive, colonial tendencies. And some phenomena that appear "colonial" to some may actually be experienced as liberating for others.
5. The *othering* of the other – whether as an anti-Semitic caricature of an allegedly superior group or as a racist dehumanization of opponents – is a recipe for disaster. This is where any decolonization must begin – in one direction and the other.
6. Hind Rajab has *a name* – and Kfir Bibas has a name. Both would have deserved a future. Recognizing this is the first step. No matter how difficult the road ahead is.

A Middle Eastern Response to Uwe Gräbe's "The Significance of post-Holocaust theological Approaches after 7 October 2023 – from a German Perspective"

Johnny Awwad

The paper delivered by Rev. Dr Uwe Gräbe engages with the theological repercussions of the Holocaust, particularly as they have been interpreted in Germany, and reconsiders them in light of the events of 7 October 2023. It aims to bridge theological gaps and foster mutual understanding between European and Middle Eastern perspectives. Although from a Middle Eastern perspective, some sections may appear to tilt toward one side, Gräbe quickly offers a balanced approach, outlining a theology shaped not only by Auschwitz but also by the Nakba and the ongoing events following 7 October.

Uwe's opening and concluding statements carry a deeply emotional touch. He opens with the admission that "we are all tired". In this, we resonate deeply. I appreciate the vulnerability and sincerity with which he approaches this moment of historical and theological reckoning. The fatigue born from repeated cycles of violence, injustice, grief, and displacement is a common thread that binds the peoples of our region – Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Yet while European theology's post Holocaust weariness is often framed around Jewish suffering and the guilt it invokes, in the Arab world, our theological fatigue arises from generations of unresolved trauma: the *Nakba* of 1948, the dispossession of land, the fragmentation of community, the repeated denial of Palestinian nationhood, and, most recently, the ongoing bloodshed in Gaza. Gräbe must be commended for his sensitivity to both forms of weariness.

Just as Gräbe concludes with sincere tears shed alongside the friends and family members of both Israeli victims and hostages, as well as Palestinian victims – tears equally salty – I too resonate with his message. Our tears and laments must acknowledge Jewish pain, but they cannot privilege it as the sole lens through which we view the tragedy of the region.

Gräbe identifies a tension between post-Shoah theology and the decolonial theological currents emerging from the Global South. Here, we must acknowledge that theology is not neutral. Post Holocaust theology often functions to shield the modern State of Israel from theological and

political critique. In much of the Arab world, this is perceived as a theological blind spot – one that refuses to reckon with the realities of occupation and settler colonial expansion. If post Holocaust theology seeks to protect Jewish life from annihilation, then decolonial theology in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere seeks to affirm Arab life and land in the face of systematic erasure. A decolonial theology emerging from our region is rooted in experiences of dispossession, exile, and a deep longing for justice.

But must these aspirations, i.e., post-Shoah theology and decolonial theology seeking a responsible theological discourse for our time, be placed in opposition to one another? Gräbe's answer is a clear "No". For him, these two theological currents are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can coexist and mutually enrich one another. Together, they offer the potential to shape a more honest, compassionate, and justice-oriented theological vision – one that refuses to erase either Jewish or Palestinian pain and that prioritizes solidarity over supremacy. In this balanced paper, Gräbe, as an ordained minister, effectively performs a marriage of post-Shoah theology with decolonial thought, laying the groundwork and the framework for a theology that takes both Jewish and Palestinian concerns seriously. This is a bold and commendable move on Gräbe's part, one that I fully support.

Gräbe emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between ancient Israel and the modern state of Israel, while cautioning against severing the historical and theological connection entirely. For many in the Middle East, however, this connection is not just theological – it is deeply political. When biblical narratives are used to justify contemporary state actions such as land appropriation, displacement, or military occupation, the need to discern between continuity and rupture becomes not merely academic but existential. In such contexts, if the Bible is employed to justify injustice, then faith must respond with prophetic critique, just as the prophets of ancient Israel once did. The Torah's principle of "an eye for an eye" should be understood as a call for proportional justice, not as a license for excessive punishment, as seen in the recent events in Gaza.

One of the interesting points that Gräbe makes in his paper is that anti-Semitism, especially in its European forms, has historically been rooted not only in notions of racial inferiority but also in projections of dangerous superiority – the myth of Jewish power, cunning, and control. That may be true. But it is also true that Israel often relies on a narrative of ex-

ceptionality: that Jewish suffering is unique, that any criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic, and that, because of the Holocaust, Israel stands above international law. Over the past year and a half, we have repeatedly heard accusations of anti Semitism from Israeli officials in response to international criticism of Israel's actions. Such accusations have become ready-made responses. If the Shoah has taught us anything, it must be this: no people are beyond accountability, and no trauma justifies permanent occupation or the continued traumatization of others.

In the second part of his paper, Gräbe examines the intertwined histories of Judaism and Christianity, stressing that Jesus must be understood within a Jewish, particularly Pharisaic, context. He offers a compelling interpretation of Jesus reimagining biblical land promises, emphasizing their ethical rather than literal significance. He concludes – somewhat abruptly – by suggesting that the relationship between land, different peoples, and the modern state must be redefined in each era, using contemporary tools such as international law. I would have liked to see a clearer glimpse of how Gräbe envisions the intersection of theology and international law in relation to present realities, particularly in the context of the Middle East and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, especially given that Israeli officials have consistently rejected the two-state solution endorsed by the United Nations.

Gräbe's reflection on Zionism as a national liberation movement may be historically valid from a European perspective. However, from a Middle Eastern viewpoint, Zionism is often understood as a settler colonial movement. It involved the migration and settlement of a largely European Jewish population in Palestine, resulting in the displacement of its indigenous Arab inhabitants. In Arab discourse, Zionism is not viewed through Herzl's ideals or the memory of European pogroms, but as an ongoing reality marked by military checkpoints, settlement expansion, and the blockade of Gaza. Describing Zionism as settler colonialism is not meant to erase Jewish suffering, but rather to acknowledge Palestinian suffering as real and central to the historical and present narrative. Even if one accepts that Zionism began as a liberation movement, a critical question remains: should the liberation of one people come at the cost of suppressing another?

Or to put it differently, should the oppressed become the oppressors? We fully affirm the Jewish people's right to dignity, safety, and self-

determination – but not at the expense of another people's rights. Any theology of peace must critically engage with the impact of Zionism on Palestinian lives, or it risks moral incoherence and complicity in ongoing injustice.

Gräbe makes an important attempt to acknowledge the suffering on both Israeli and Palestinian sides, moving beyond "victim competition." This is fine as long as atrocities on both sides are equally condemned and not ambiguously justified as tragic yet understandable responses driven by existential fear. And if "Never Again" is to mean anything, it must be: never again for Jews, never again for Palestinians. Hind Rajab and Kfir Bibas are not symbols of opposing narratives, but children who deserved to live.

Gräbe's paper is a sincere and bold attempt to think theologically in dark times. But from the perspective of the Middle East, we must ask: can post-Shoah theology truly evolve to accommodate the concerns of decolonial theology? This is a challenging question – not only for Europeans, but also for us as Middle Easterners. Can it become a theology of mutual recognition, mutual trauma, and shared liberation? Can it acknowledge the humanity and the injustices experienced by both peoples and, truthfully, begin to speak of genuine reconciliation? Can this theology move beyond reconciliation to include a vision of return and restoration for both peoples? Can it affirm the Jewish people's right to safety, while also recognizing the Palestinian people's right to dignity, land, and nationhood? Can it serve as a tool of liberation for both peoples, rather than remain bound by political allegiances or inherited guilt? Can this theology be truly transformative – relational, decolonial, and rooted in justice – capable of confronting both the Shoah and the Nakba in ways that lead to real change? The burden now falls on Gräbe to further develop this theology, define its contours, and sharpen its content.

The Significance of Decolonizing

Theological approaches in the Middle Eastern context after 7 October 2023

Rima Nasrallah

1. Problems

There is a land south of Lebanon that I, as a Lebanese, do not know. Like many others, I have only caught glimpses of it from border towns during those rare peaceful moments in history when we could reach that far and see the tiny white houses beyond the security zone, the barbed wire, and the watchtowers. It is so close to us, and yet so far away, almost like a mythical entity. But it is a mythical entity that has profoundly shaped our daily lives for more than seventy years.

In recent years, people from across that border have invaded our country. Others have infiltrated and used our land to launch military actions. Some still live among us and have their own networks of armed forces that cannot be touched. And for the past two years, drones have been flying above us and shooting at targets at will. We, the Lebanese, have hated some of them and empathized with others, and as a result, we have killed each other and damaged our own country.

On most days, the average Lebanese Christian does not care about what is happening "down South". And maybe even, dare I say, some might want to see the "Palestinian headache finished" so that we can go on with our lives normally.

However, since the events that unfolded after 7 October 2023, we have once again been reminded of the dilemma we live in, particularly as Christians. This dilemma does not arise solely from the humanitarian tragedy unfolding before our eyes. It is a tragedy where, on one hand, 1,195 people of all ages and backgrounds were killed, 250 were taken hostage, and dozens of cases of rape and sexual assault were reported. On the other hand, a massive and relentless assault on Gaza has continued for two years, killing tens of thousands, wounding over 113,000, mutilating children, and displacing 1.9 million people while blocking all forms of aid, food, and medical supplies to those trapped inside, leading to famine and a catastrophic health crisis. To this, we must add our own Lebanese

suffering: the destruction, the displacement, and the cruel pager attacks that have deepened our collective pain.

No, the humanitarian drama is clear to anyone with eyes or ears. The city rallies around the world, campus sit-ins at American Universities, and the numerous calls on social media are proof that many can see a humanitarian tragedy.

Our dilemma, on the other hand, comes from the confluence of theology with this situation. And I will mention three components here: a certain biblical hermeneutics, a distinction between kinds of people, and a particular retelling of history. And I will expand on those in what follows.

1.1 The hermeneutical problem

As Christians, our scriptures, hymns, and prayers contain concepts and imagery that can sound offensive or even oppressive to many in the Middle East. To someone without prior biblical education, listening to our language of worship might create a troubling impression: that our God favours the Israelis over us. Deuteronomy 14:2 says, "The Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth". He has promised to give these people our Land. In Joshua 1:1–19 he says, "[3]I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. [4]Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates – all the Hittite country – to the Mediterranean Sea in the West". Deuteronomy 7:1 says, "He will drive out many nations to make room for you. He will drive out the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites." And on certain days it even seems that our God wants to destroy us, Zechariah 12:9 says, "On that day I will begin to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem".

For Middle Eastern Protestants, this becomes particularly unsettling, as the text of the Bible forms the very context of our lives. We inherited from the missionaries who introduced us to a word-centred spirituality, a deep engagement with Scripture that drew us closer to the world of the Bible than many of our Christian brothers and sisters in the region. Along with this devotion, we also inherited their hermeneutical approach.

These missionaries were captivated by the idea of the Holy Land, the promised Jerusalem, and a people they referred to as "the Jews". Even at a time when Jewish communities in Europe were being marginalized and

persecuted, the biblically imagined notion of "the Jews" was intertwined with sacred dreams and visions of a heavenly future.

Protestant theologians as early as the seventeenth century believed that the "return" of the Jews to the Holy Land was a necessary precondition for the fulfilment of biblical prophecy and the Second Coming of Christ. In 1615, the English Puritan Thomas Brightman (1562–1607) articulated this belief in his pamphlet *Shall They Return to Jerusalem Againe?*[1] In the nineteenth century, the missionary and travel writer William McClure Thomson (1806–1894) – known for his literal interpretation of the Bible – argued that the geography of the Holy Land confirmed the truth of biblical promises and prophecies, particularly those related to the Jewish people. Thomson presents the desolation of places like Tyr as evidence of the fulfilment of prophetic warnings. Soon after, figures such as Rev. William Hechler (1845–1931) and Lord Shaftesbury (1801–1885) expressed support for what they called "a Jewish restoration to Palestine". Their advocacy was grounded in a biblical hermeneutic that assumed every Jew in the world stood in direct historical continuity with the Jews of the Bible and that this particular land rightfully belonged to them by both historical inheritance and divine decree.[2] This claim extended even to Jews who were neither practicing nor part of any religious community. Bearing in mind that not all missionaries were driven by such convictions, the theologians mentioned here, along with other advocates, maintained that Christians bore a spiritual duty to facilitate this "return".

This interpretation of the Bible was further reinforced by strands of biblical scholarship that emerged from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, which appropriated concepts from contemporary anthropology and racial "science".[3] These pseudo-scientific frameworks

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1 Andrew Crome, Christian Zionism and English National Identity, 1600–1850, London 2018, 29–66.

2 The Biblical narrative is considered history that supports a political project. See Mitri Raheb, Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible, Maryknoll/NY 2023.

3 See Laura Nasrallah/Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies, Minneapolis 2009; R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World, Maryknoll/NY 1991, and The Bible and the Third World. Precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial encounters, Cambridge-New York 2001; Fernando Segovia, Decolonizing biblical studies. A view from the margins, Maryknoll/NY 2000.

were frequently employed to legitimize colonial ideologies and practices. For instance, the so-called "curse of Ham" from the book of Genesis was invoked to rationalize the enslavement of Africans. The rise of racial hierarchies and typologies fostered ideologies of white supremacy and led to the construction of the Jews as a single, unified "race". This essentialized and monolithic understanding of Jewish identity operated in two directions: on one hand, it contributed to the growth of antisemitism in the West; on the other, it later served as a conceptual basis for justifying the "restoration" of the Jews to Palestine.

For the Christians of the East – whose faith and spirituality had been profoundly shaped by the discourse and theology of American, British, and European missionaries – this inheritance became increasingly problematic with the rise of British colonial influence in the region, which started halfway through the nineteenth century and became a British mandate between 1920 and 1948. It is Britain that created the political conditions that shaped how the state of Israel eventually emerged and threatened the very existence of locals. This has confronted Christians in the East with a profound theological and existential dilemma. Facing claims to their land justified through biblical interpretation, these Christians were compelled either to reject the authority of their sacred text or to distance themselves from their ancestral homeland. Consequently, for many, the Old Testament became a source of tension and even alienation: Psalms were revised, hymns rewritten, and theological frameworks reimagined to reconcile faith with the realities of dispossession.

For decades, Western Christians – particularly within evangelical and Protestant circles – have adhered to the same theological paradigm advanced by figures such as William McClure Thomson, John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), the founder of dispensationalism,[4] and William Eugene Blackstone (1841–1935), author of *Jesus Is Coming* (1878). In more recent times, this tradition has been perpetuated by extreme evangelical leaders such as John Hagee, founder of the Christian Zionist organization

[4] Dispensationalism teaches that God engages with humanity through a series of distinct "dispensations" or historical periods, each characterized by specific divine expectations, responsibilities, and revelations. Within this framework, a clear distinction is drawn between Israel and the Church, each possessing its own covenantal promises and theological roles. Dispensationalists maintain that God's promises to ethnic and national Israel – including those concerning the land and the future kingdom – will be literally and historically fulfilled in the eschatological future.

Christians United for Israel. Central to this paradigm is the belief that the Jews constitute a single nation,[5] identical to the people described in the Bible;[6] that select promises of the Old Testament remain geographically binding; and that the return of Jews from around the world to the land between the Red Sea, Sidon, and the Euphrates is essential to the fulfilment of Christian eschatology. These theological assumptions have not only shaped religious consciousness but have also exerted profound influence on modern geopolitics. Many of these theologians contributed intentionally or not to "stripping the indigenous Palestinian people of their land, livelihood, and roots."[7] In their involvement in, for example, American politics, they have sanctioned Israeli violence and expansion, and even sponsored it[8] by buying weapons as a gift to Israel.[9]

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[5] That is a group of people united by shared characteristics like history, culture, language, and territory, who often perceive themselves as a *cohesive* unit.

[6] One has to keep in mind that, in Scripture, the term Yehudi (Jew) originally referred to a member of the tribe of Judah (Genesis 29:35; 2 Kings 16:6). Over time, as the Kingdom of Judah became the political and religious centre following the division of the united monarchy after Solomon, Yehudi expanded to denote the inhabitants or citizens of Judah. After the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, the term acquired broader religious and ethnic connotations. "Jews" came to signify those who belonged to the community of Israel – particularly the exiles who returned and remained faithful to the Torah. In texts such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, "Jews" refers to the remnant of Israel committed to preserving their identity through adherence to the law, temple worship, and separation from surrounding peoples. During the intertestamental period, the term "Jews" continued to denote the people of Judea but increasingly referred to those defined by covenantal allegiance rather than mere genealogical descent. In the time of the Maccabean Revolt, "Jew" often described those who resisted Hellenistic assimilation and remained loyal to God's law. By the New Testament period, "Jews" could refer variously to ethnic Israelites, religious authorities, inhabitants of Judea, or members of the covenant community – reflecting the term's layered historical, ethnic, and theological dimensions.

[7] Raheb, Decolonizing Palestine, 9.

[8] See also Don't Look Away, a campaign launched by Christians United for Israel (CUFI), Cathryn J. Prince, A sizeable US demographic, many Evangelicals are sending money and manpower to Israel, 12 November, 2023, The Time of Israel, https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-sizeable-us-demographic-many-evangelicals-are-sending-money-and-manpower-to-israel/ (18 November 2025).

[9] According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) The US provides Israel with $3.8bn (£2.9bn) in annual military aid under a 10-year agreement that is intended to allow its ally to maintain what it calls a "qualitative military edge" over neighbouring countries. 65.5% of arms come from the US, 29.7% from Germany and 4.7% from Italy; chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgl

For many progressive Protestants in the West, support for Israel is often rooted less in biblical prophecy or Zionist theology and more in a combination of historical responsibility, ethical reflection, and interfaith sensitivity. The Holocaust (*Shoah*) left a profound and lasting impact on post-war European theology and identity, instilling a deep sense of moral obligation toward the Jewish people and toward the preservation of Israel as a safe haven.[10] In the aftermath of the Shoah, much of Western theology explicitly rejected supersessionism,[11] and many theologians in Western Europe – such as Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, and James Dunn – affirmed the enduring covenant between God and the Jewish people. Even among those who do not interpret biblical prophecy literally, the Jewish people are still viewed as having a unique and continuing role in God's salvific history, distinct from that of the Church,[12] based on the enduring assumption that contemporary Jews stand in unbroken continuity with the Jews of Scripture. Support for Israel, understood as a religious, ethnic, and political entity, therefore often persists even amid criticism of specific policies. In the current context, particularly regarding Gaza, many theologians may condemn actions such as settlement expansion or the obstruction of humanitarian aid, yet stop short of framing Israel within colonial or apartheid paradigms.

Such critique often takes the tone of familial correction – akin to that of an elder sibling chastising a younger one whose behaviour has brought embarrassment to the family: privately admonished, yet publicly defended. The resulting dilemma for Christians in the East is that this sense of theological and moral kinship with Israel frequently takes precedence over solidarity with their fellow Eastern Christians, leaving them alienated within a theological narrative that privileges Western guilt and Western alliances.

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clefindmkaj/https://www.sipri.org/sites/ default/files/2024-03/fs_2403_at_2023.pdf (18 November 2025).

[10] The idea, here is not: "God gave this land to the Jews," but rather: "Germany's actions contributed to the necessity of Israel's existence."

[11] The idea that the Church replaced Israel in God's plan can be found very early on in – for example – Justin Martyr's "Dialogue with Trypho", and Augustine of Hippo's "The City of God against the pagans".

[12] Even if in some forms included with it.

1.2 The problem of Othering

To the hermeneutical dimension, one must also add the phenomenon of the vilification of Arabs within Western Christian thought and culture. Long before the events of 9/11, Western theological and political discourse had constructed Arabs as an inferior or threatening "Other".[13] As early as the time of the crusade wars between European Christians and the people in the Levant, a dichotomy of "Christian West vs. Muslim East" was present. Arabs were portrayed as the religious "Other" – infidels, barbaric, and enemies of Christendom.[14] During the nineteenth century, with the rise of European colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly under British and French rule, these stereotypes were further institutionalized. Colonial narratives portrayed Arab societies as stagnant, despotic, and incapable of progress, thereby justifying imperial domination under the guise of bringing "civilization" and "enlightenment".[15] After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, British and French mandate policies continued to depict Arabs as unprepared for self-governance, reinforcing paternalistic claims that they "required Western guidance".[16]

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this discourse evolved but did not disappear. U.S. and Western European narratives frequently characterized Arab resistance to Zionism as irrational,[17] violent, or fanatical, while presenting Zionism as modern, progressive, and morally justified, its actions framed as legitimate self-defence. Popular culture and mass media, particularly Hollywood and Western news outlets, further entrenched these stereotypes by conflating "Arab" with "terrorist", a dam-

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[13] Edward Said's seminal work Orientalism, New York 1978, laid the foundation for understanding how Western media and academia have historically portrayed Arabs as the "Other". This framework continues to inform critiques of contemporary media representations of Palestinians and Arabs.

[14] John Tolan, Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination, Columbia 2002.

[15] Said, Orientalism. It is important to note here that today these stereotypes and prejudices are being challenged worldwide by scholars and activists who often do not get enough credit for their efforts to change the colonial imagination.

[16] Rashid Khalidi, The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood, Boston 2006.

[17] Edward Said, The Question of Palestine, New York 1992.

aging association that continues to shape public perception and political rhetoric today.[18]

Of course, negative perceptions of Arabs[19] in the West are not monolithic or static. However, this disparity in appraisal between Jews and Arabs – one is a holy chosen people, and the other is barbaric and inferior[20] – not only allowed the West to empathize with Israel in major events but even led the Arab or Eastern Christians to question their own self-worth. This situation has even led to what some have called psychological self-loathing.[21]

This is compounded by bias in media reporting, particularly in mainstream media. For decades, media outlets such as the BBC or CNN reported on the suffering of Israelis in very different ways than they did on that of Arabs.[22] Arab casualties were reported as numbers or according to regions, for example, "15 died in Rafah today". Whereas, on the Israeli side, each victim had a name and age, a job and a family who loved them, eliciting empathy and identification on the side of viewers. It is only today, with the proliferation of social media, 'media from below', that we start seeing stories of Palestinians who are "human", who have a story.

Moreover, while groups such as Hamas and other militant organizations are widely condemned for acting on religious motivations deemed extremist or unacceptable, often framed under the concept of *jihad*, Israel's actions, when similarly informed by religious conviction, tend to elicit little discomfort and are, in many cases, actively supported or justified.

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[18] "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People" is a 2006 documentary directed by Sut Jhally and produced by the Media Education Foundation.

[19] Israeli scholar Nurit Peled-Elhanan has extensively analysed how Israeli textbooks depict Palestinians. In her book "Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology and Propaganda in Education", London 2012, she argues that Palestinians are often portrayed as "refugees, primitive farmers, and terrorists", with no depiction of them as "normal people". She contends that such representations contribute to a culture of dehumanization and racism.

[20] This racialization would lead to an Israeli regime of Apartheid. See more on this in Nahla Abdo, The Palestine Exception, Racialization and Invisibilization: From Israel (Palestine) to North America (Turtle Island), in: Critical Sociology, 49.6 (2022), 967–989; Tareq Baconi, Israel's Apartheid: A Structure of Colonial Domination Since 1948, in: Journal of Palestine Studies 51.3 (2022), 44–49.

[21] Frantz Fanon, Peau Noire, Masques Blancs, Paris 2015.

[22] This applied to Lebanese as well!

1.3 A problematic narrative

A popular justification for the creation of the State of Israel has been the claim that the land was "already empty".[23] Diana Muir Applebaum notes that the "earliest published use of the phrase appears to have been by Church of Scotland clergyman Alexander Keith in his 1843 book."[24] Since then, it has become a slogan that has led Palestinians to question their own history and struggle to prove otherwise. Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb asserts that declaring the land "without a people" allowed the colonizers, with the blessing of the church, to seize the land.[25] The Palestinians were forced to accept their fate or depopulate the land.

The complex, multi-layered history of the people inhabiting that land was almost entirely disregarded in favour of a first-century archaeological reconstruction. The diverse populations who lived there over centuries, the local traditions that took root in different regions, the religious communities that at times clashed and at other times coexisted, and the rich mosaic of languages and dialects – all were ignored in the service of the grand narrative of a "returning diaspora". And yet one asks, "Returning?" When, exactly, did they leave? Would this apply to every population displaced everywhere and at any point in history?

Palestinian Melkite priest Fr. Chacour, in a short documentary, describes how the destruction of Palestinian villages during the Nakba did not merely demolish houses. "It was self-esteem that was destroyed", he says. "It was dignity that was completely smashed. It was the entire infrastructure – educational, economic, religious, and political."[26] The result

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[23] "In 1947, the Jewish population of Palestine owned only about 5 percent of the land. In the 1948 War, Israel took over 77 percent of historic Palestine and pushed over 750,000 Palestinians off their land. Palestinian property was seized, and 86 percent of the land taken was declared state or "absentee" land for use exclusively by Israeli Jews … In violation of international law and the Geneva Convention, Israel has invested heavily in building and subsidizing Israeli colonies, transferring over 800,000 Jewish settlers into the Palestinian territory", Raheb, Decolonizing Palestine, 13.

[24] Diana Muir, A Land without a People for a People without a Land, in: Middle East Quarterly 2008, 55–62, web.archive.org/web/20080919235519/http://www.meforum.org/article/1877 (15 December 2025).

[25] See Raheb, Decolonizing Palestine, 9–15.

[26] A Man of Galilee, produced by Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, https://player.vimeo.com/video/4172952?h=dc41e486ef&autoplay=1 (16 December 2025).

was long-term damage, not only for the Palestinians but for the entire region, which continues to suffer the repercussions.

Today, we witness thousands dying, children burned alive, and the elderly starving to death. Yet many Christians around the world, even within the Church, remain reluctant to confront these realities. Engaging with Israel is not like engaging with any other nation; the issue is enveloped in a thick layer of theology intertwined with centuries of guilt.

2. Decolonizing Theologies

This disorienting narrative that has surrounded the Palestinians and the prolonged exasperating conditions under which they have been living, compelled theologians to slowly start rewriting the story and seeking new ways to deal with their theological and spiritual heritage in relation with their current situation; a situation where their living space is shrinking, the natural resources are taken away, their community fragmented, their people arrested and tortured, and they are blamed for their condition.

The first theme Palestinian Christians responded to was this false narrative that was being promoted by others about their situation and presented as fact. They had to deal with the allegation that the land was empty and their portrayal as invaders. They needed to assert their rightful ownership of their homes, orchards, and history. As a response, they felt compelled to tell their own stories, perhaps partly to reassure themselves that they were not imagining their reality, but also to make the world see who they were and what had happened to them.

Telling these stories became both a therapeutic and an analytical act. It was an assertion of identity in the face of public doubt, and a response to the dismissal of their suffering. Theologians such as Melkite archbishop Elias Chacour,[27] Anglican priest Naim Ateek, Baptist pastor Alex Awad,[28] followed later by Lutheran pastors Mitri Raheb and Munthir Isaac, began naming the realities under which they lived, the occupation of their villages, the loss of property, the daily mistreatment of their people, the limitations on their movement, etc.

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[27] He was born in 1939 in the village of Biram, located in Upper Galilee. In 1948, he and the entire village were forcibly displaced by Israeli authorities, becoming refugees within their own homeland.

[28] Alex Awad, Palestinian Memories. The Story of a Palestinian Mother and Her People, Bethlehem 2008.

But then they realized that the challenge was not only about their own story, but also about God's story: Who is God? The struggle began with their own sacred text – our sacred text – whose prevailing interpretations seemed to exclude them and even justify their suffering. I know of many theologians in Lebanon who stopped reading the Old Testament altogether, simply to avoid this deep distress.

But brave Palestinian theologians like Naim Ateek embarked on a journey of reconciliation with Scripture. Trying to find in it a message for *liberation*[29] rather than oppression. Just two years after the first intifada 1987, he published his seminal book "Justice and only Justice"[30].

By examining Biblical themes relevant to the Israel-Palestine conflict through a Palestinian Liberationist lens, he tried to challenge exclusive, nationalist, or violent interpretations. Instead, he promoted an inclusive, universal, and non-violent understanding that supports justice, peace, and reconciliation. He insisted the Old Testament must be read through the lens of Christ's incarnation and redemption,[31] and tried to redeem the Biblical narratives and read them in a more favourable light.

And yet, that was not enough. The interpretation of Scripture remained trapped within a matrix of assumptions, mostly inherited from generations of Western theologians. These assumptions dictated what was and was not considered an acceptable way to understand the Bible, the covenant, the land, and the people. Such interpretations continue to have profound implications for the dignity and daily lives of Palestinians.

Gradually, theologians such as Mitri Raheb started realizing that Palestinians are actually suffering under a form of colonialism. In accord-

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[29] Liberation Theology as we know it had originated in the 1960s in Latin America as a response to widespread poverty and social injustice, and focuses on the liberation of oppressed peoples from economic, social, and political oppression. Naim Ateek in his many writings is inspired by this strand of theology but differs from the Latin American theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, as Ateek focuses on Zionist (with its religious reading of the scripture) and colonial oppression (in its policies of dispossession and settlements) rather than economic oppression.

[30] Naim Ateek, Justice and only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation, Maryknoll/NY 1989.

[31] Cf. Naim Ateek, A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation, Maryknoll/NY 2008, 51.

ance with decolonial critique, it became clear that Palestinians are experiencing three forms of coloniality.[32]

1. A first type is a *coloniality of being*,[33] which imposes an entire way of living on the colonized, criminalizing the cultural and traditional ways of being of non-Western peoples.
2. The second type is a *coloniality of power*. Here colonialism becomes a political project and is imposed violently, through military *conquista,* genocides, and slavery, building a global system of political exploitation.
3. A third dimension of coloniality is the *coloniality of knowledge,* which extends to theological knowledge. It imposes a Eurocentric epistemic framework that dictates what is deemed legitimate, erasing or devaluing alternative knowledge systems – particularly those rooted in oral traditions and non-Western cultural patterns. This process redefined historical narratives, displacing other epistemologies and establishing a new centre of discursive authority.

The state of Israel monitors the daily life of Palestinians, settlements are mushrooming and displacing villagers, checkpoints, separation walls, control over movements, imprisonment, torture, to name only a few factors. All these point to a clear coloniality of power, even as Raheb calls it a "settler colonialism"[34] that is at play here. The disregard for Palestinians' suffering and their vilification is a coloniality of being. But what triggered indigenous theologians was the coloniality of knowledge.

As a result, theologians like Mitri Raheb began challenging the presuppositions imposed on locals by Western powers, guiding the hermeneutic process. In his book *Faith in the Face of the Empire*, Raheb ex-

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[32] Cf. Felipe Gustavo Koch Buttelli/Clint Le Bruyns, Liberation Theology and Decolonization? Contemporary Perspectives for Systematic Theology, in: Alternation Special Edition 24 (2019), 198–221.

[33] Cf. Water Mignolo/Rita Segato/Catherine E. Walsh (eds.), Aníbal Quijano, Foundational Essays on the Coloniality of Power, London 2024 (transl. from Spanish by David Frye).

[34] Settler colonialism denotes a structure in which colonization functions as an ongoing and dynamic process rather than a discrete historical episode. Within this framework, settler populations assert and institutionalize state sovereignty and legal authority over indigenous territories, with the ultimate objective of displacing, erasing, or replacing the native peoples. See more on this in Raheb, Decolonizing Palestine, 126.

plains that he decided to break free from the shackles of the Western paradigm and methodology, and to embrace a theology rooted in experience and "the field", following the drum rather than the pipe organ. He wanted to "Palestinize" the discussion and to get legitimization for his particular experience as a Palestinian Christian.[35]

To do so, he had to start by redefining and rereading history in relation to the Biblical story and to the formation of identity. He saw the biblical story as a response to the region's geopolitical history, namely the history of continuous occupation by foreign powers, culminating in the latest empire: the state of Israel. He also presents a new Palestinian narrative built with native or alternative blocks, considering the diverse Palestinian people – and not the Jewish people alone – as the important continuum from Biblical times to the present: The People of the Land.

While confronting the negative role of the Bible, he offers a new understanding of Jesus' mission. He even goes beyond theology, addressing political, economic, and social issues, and inviting both believers and non-believers into the conversation. In his latest work, "Decolonizing Palestine: the Land, the People and the Bible", Raheb addresses the coloniality of power and of people.

More theologians followed in this methodology. One can mention here Lutheran pastor Munther Isaac, who has been raising his voice through books such as "The Other Side of the Wall" and, more recently, "Christ Under the Rubble". In his last book, Isaac offers a direct response to the events in Gaza. In it, he presents a theology that recognizes the realities of Palestinian life and challenges the theological underpinnings of Israeli settler colonialism. He reads the Gospel message into the realities of Gaza and allows experience to shed light on Scripture, challenging mainstream theological interpretations.

What these theologians – and many others – have done is alert us that the real problem is theological distortion! But that the way out is also theological.

3. Theology after 7 October 2023 or Theology after Gaza?

The title of this article – as it was suggested to me – gives the impression that 7 October is the turning point that will affect how theology is done henceforth. 7 October refers to the act committed by Hamas on that one

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[35] Cf. Mitri Raheb, Faith in the Face of the Empire, Maryknoll/NY 2014, 6.

bloody day. Yet, assuming this, we implicitly overlook the 700 days of war on the people of Gaza and the genocide that took place right before our eyes.

Taking "7 October" as a reference point is implicitly taking sides and drawing a parallel or a connection between the Holocaust (in reference to "theology after the Holocaust") executed in Europe and a massacre by a militant group (Hamas), driven by a completely different motive and discourse. However, from a Middle Eastern perspective, 7 October – awful as it was – was not intended as an act against a religious community, nor was it intended as an attack against an ethnic group; it was primarily an act of aggression against the Israeli occupation and political practices. This distinction has become increasingly difficult to explain to a Western audience today. Making this distinction does not intend in any way to justify the act or condone it. It is still a horrifying act where innocent civilians were punished for the actions of their state. The distinction is made simply as a reminder that one must be very careful not to confuse the two and to avoid projecting interpretations onto 7 October. This label comes from another place and time, with a very different intention.

The events in Gaza, however, do not represent a turning point either. They are a continuation of the same policies and behaviours that began in the mid-twentieth century – carried out by the same army against the same people – policies and actions that persist in other places, such as the West Bank, albeit to a less horrific degree. The discourse and theological framework underlying what is happening in Gaza today are the same ones that have justified violence for decades: the Promised Land, the Chosen People, the Barbaric Arabs. And for many, the only perceived means of preserving Israel remains the same: to eliminate them.

In this sense, I find myself at odds with those who speak of a "theology after Gaza". In my view, Gaza has not introduced any new theological insight; it has merely reminded us that nothing has changed. The scale of destruction, the shameless treatment of innocents, and the blatant disregard for international law only make more visible the patterns we have long witnessed. The theological discourse that undergirds all this continues to grant Israel both divine legitimacy and moral immunity.

There is surely a political problem here that needs to be resolved fairly for all parties involved, so that all can live in peace and dignity, no matter who people side with emotionally. However, the greater problem, unique to this situation, is theology.

Perhaps, "7 October and Gaza" is a wakeup call for theologians to rethink how certain aspects of their theologies are facilitating and supporting the extermination and humiliation of a people, and to allow their theologies to be challenged by the realities on the ground.[36]

Today, as we stand in the completely destroyed villages along Lebanon's southern border, looking toward the direction from which the drones come, we cannot help but wonder: how can things ever change? Will we ever be able to cross this insurmountable border? Will we ever live in peace? And will the Western world ever come to see Israel as simply another nation, one whose religion and ethnicity do not grant it immunity, and whose people cannot claim total and exclusive ownership of this, or other piece of land?

… a long theological journey still awaits.

[36] An example given by Munther Isaac, Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza, Grand Rapids/MI 2025.

Consequences of the Shoah for the Positioning of Christians in Germany in the Middle East Conflict since 7 October 2023

A plea for taking sides with all those who suffer[1]

Anna-Katharina Diehl[2]

In the current debate on the situation in the Middle East since 7 October 2023, I would like to maintain my role as a listener. Because listening would certainly be more blissful than talking in this situation. Because from my privileged perspective as a person not directly affected by the war, I do not really feel that it is my place to comment on this topic. But as a Christian from Germany, I derive a responsibility from our German history and the Holocaust that is also connected to the founding of the state of Israel.

I would probably fall in the category "progressive" for Western Protestants when it comes to assessing the founding of the State of Israel.[3] As a "progressive" Western Protestant, I have always interpreted God's promise to the people of Israel to mean that their election comes with a very special responsibility to keep God's commandments. This also includes the fact that Jews are required by God to live together peacefully with people of other religions and cultures. This is because the Sabbath commandments in the Torah already demand that foreigners should not be oppressed. The reason for this is, "You know the heart of the stranger, because you too were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex 23:9), and even in Babylon, people sang: "God protects the stranger!" (Ps 146:9).

However, I would like to leave it at that, with this scant hint of my biblical interpretation of the election of Israel, as I am not an expert in this field and it is highly complex and controversial in biblical hermeneutics.

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1 This article was originally a response to Dr Rima Nasrallah.

2 The author Anna-Katharina Diehl was a SiMO student in 2010/2011 and has served as chair of the SiMO alumni association "Freunde der NEST e.V." since 2018. She works as a pastor for the Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirche Hannovers in Göttingen.

3 I am referring here to the categories mentioned by Nasrallah in her article cf. pp. 47, 49.

I would rather continue with a recent story from my hometown. In Harsum, my father, as a long-standing member of the local Protestant church and the Social Democratic Party on the local council, had campaigned for the dedication of stumbling stones (in German: Stolpersteine). A few months ago, the campaign succeeded. The Stolpersteine are a project by the artist Gunter Demnig that began in 1992. Small memorial plaques laid in the ground, known as Stolpersteine, are intended to commemorate the fate of people who were persecuted, murdered, deported, expelled, or driven to suicide during the Holocaust in Germany during the National Socialist era. Six million Jews were systematically murdered in concentration and extermination camps during this period by my German ancestors. Germany thus joins the long line of countries that have persecuted and wanted to exterminate Jews for centuries.

The proponents of a fundamental hatred of Jews have not diminished in recent months. Jews are being threatened and killed all over the world, as the recent murder of two employees of the Israeli embassy in Washington demonstrates.

We Christians from Germany must therefore never forget this dark part of our history, today more than ever. It makes us responsible for ensuring that such things never happen again. The Stolpersteine remind us of our responsibility. They are a call to respect human dignity.

To date, 116,000 Stolpersteine have been laid in over 1,860 municipalities in 31 European countries, most of them in Germany. This makes the art memorial the largest decentralized memorial in the world.

The German government's behaviour toward Israel must be understood against the backdrop of our German history. The German government sees itself as having a responsibility toward the Jewish People. It follows that it stands closely by Israel's side. Israel's right to exist and its security are part of the German reason of state.

However, since the war in Gaza started, there have been changes in political circumstances which, in my opinion, require us to rethink Germany's political relationship with Israel, something that is already being done in various political circles, even if, in my view, far too late and not consistently enough.

Since Israel suffered the worst terrorist attack in its history on 7 October 2023 by the terrorist organization Hamas on the Jewish holiday of *Simchat Torah*, in which around 1,200 civilians were murdered, and 251

other innocent people were taken hostage, there has been no peace in the Middle East conflict.

As chair of the SiMO alumni association "Freunde der NEST e.V.", a circle of German alumni who studied at the Near East School of Theology, I spoke with the other associates about how this conflict had affected Lebanon as well. We were horrified to see how the violence in Lebanon took on a new dimension in September last year, when thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies detonated on 17 and 18 September, and the Israeli army carried out airstrikes against Hezbollah a few days later. At least 558 people were killed, and more than 1,800 were injured in Lebanon on the first day of the air strikes alone, according to the Lebanese Ministry of Health. We saw in news reports how the Israeli ground offensive in southern Lebanon was then launched at the beginning of October, forcing around 900,000 people to take refuge in other parts of the country. As a result, after two long months, a fragile ceasefire was finally reached that still does not guarantee peace for Lebanon.

I cannot imagine the fear, anger, despair, and perhaps even hatred that such a life situation can trigger. I only know that these reactions are human and that they cannot be easily overcome.

I am just an observer from Germany, but I have had and still have feelings of frustration and anger about the situation in Lebanon until today. What about those who are physically affected by the war? Those whom I got to know in the Middle East over all these years are always on my mind.

During those days of the Israeli ground offensive, it was comforting to see the great solidarity and generosity of former SiMO students, which enabled our association to collect 5,000 € in donations for the care of those in need and for NEST within a short period of time, even though we all knew that our contribution was only a drop in the ocean. On the other hand, it is frustrating for me to see how quickly media attention moved on and how few people in Germany seemed to care about the fate of the people in Lebanon.

The war in Gaza overshadows everything else and still does.

Israel has been waging war against Hamas in the sealed-off coastal strip of Gaza for more than a year and a half, and there is no end in sight. It is now internationally recognized that Israel has destroyed all of Gaza's infrastructure and is currently denying the people any humanitarian aid,

leaving them to starve to death amid blocked and unauthorized aid supplies.

These are war crimes! Over 50,000 Palestinians have now been killed, and there is no end to the killing in sight. Israel has been openly talking about its plans to occupy the Gaza Strip for several weeks now. It can hardly be denied that parts of the Israeli government are pursuing the goal of ethnic cleansing.

How peace between Israel and its neighbouring states can ever be restored in view of the crimes being committed right now is beyond me.

It is difficult for me to witness how this conflict is affecting the lives of so many people in the Middle East from various religious backgrounds, whom I still remember from my time studying there. Due to my personal connections, it is simply impossible for me to remain silent about the current war situation and the role that Western governments play in it.

I am concerned that Western democracies are currently experiencing a shift to the right, which is increasingly jeopardizing liberal democratic societies and therefore human rights.

Developments are grave in the USA, where the fascist Donald Trump has been in power since November last year and wants to utilize the specific possibilities of data analysis and AI technology to eliminate the rule of law and replace it with a lean, automation-based apparatus. I am certain that he is trying to exploit the Middle East conflict for his own interests and that the safety of the people there is of little importance to him.

And the shift to the right has not stopped at Israel either; on the contrary, it made the Gaza catastrophe possible in the first place. In the shadow of the war, a controversial judicial reform law was passed by Netanyahu's right-wing, religious government in March 2025. Legal experts have repeatedly warned that the judicial reorganization promoted by the right-wing religious government is endangering democracy in the country. Meanwhile, violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank is also on the rise. The relatives of the hostages are hardly being listened to by their government. And under Trump's administration, the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine has receded into the distance. Instead, Israel is being openly encouraged by America to annex the Gaza Strip.

For me, this shows us how dangerous the global shift to the right is for world peace. Societies are being divided by hatred and discord as social

media channels are flooded with "propaganda", democratic legal systems are being attacked and destroyed, and administrative structures are being dismantled, allowing the law of the strongest to prevail.

But what can we Christians in Germany do these days? How can we contribute to justice and peace in this world, which we are also obliged to contribute to because of the Shoah? How can we behave and position ourselves in the face of current political developments? In the following, I would like to outline some options for us Christians in Germany.

In view of the war crimes and the occupation of the Gaza Strip, we must call on our German government to urgently stop supporting the ultra-right, anti-democratic Netanyahu government and instead threaten to impose sanctions. Because the Gaza war is not a conflict between equals, but a militarily far superior state is waging war against a terrorist organization, but above all at the expense of a trapped, disenfranchised civilian population. This violence is systematic. And Germany has trivialized, relativized, and ignored this for a long time. Further arms deliveries to Israel are completely unacceptable under these circumstances.

Holocaust survivor Margot Friedländer, who recently died on 9 May 2025 at the age of 103, used to say, "There is no Jewish blood, no Muslim blood, and no Christian blood. There is only human blood".

If we take this statement seriously, then our responsibility as Christians is to stand up for human dignity and to stand alongside all those who suffer and are disenfranchised, regardless of their religion, origin, or culture. This responsibility implies that we protect persecuted Jews in Germany. But it also implies that we must put a stop to our political friend Israel when it massively disregards international law in Gaza. It implies that we must demand that Israel respect human rights, which have been trampled on for years.

As Christians in Germany, we cannot and must not stand idly by while Israel is about to commit mass murder with the involvement of our federal government. I am convinced that the lesson from the *Shoah* "Never again is now!" applies to all people. Accordingly, we must publicly address injustice as such and call on our politicians to put an immediate end to Israel's actions.

I am convinced that we, as representatives of the churches in Germany, must place concrete suffering at the centre of our theology if we want to preach the Gospel credibly. Be it the suffering that our ancestors inflicted in the form of the Holocaust, be it the suffering that Israeli hostag-

es were and are subjected to through torture by Hamas, or be it the suffering that the Israeli Netanyahu government inflicts on civilians in Gaza. We must stand alongside all those who suffer innocently!

To remain theologically articulate and capable of action, we can draw on our biblical traditions. The Psalms, the Lamentations, and the Book of Job deal with experiences of suffering. They use a language of prayer that accuses God of seeming to be absent. Jesus himself turned to suffering people in the form of marginalized settlers, the sick, and the poor, and preached the Gospel to them. The healing stories tell of how he turned to people in need and alleviated their suffering. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he makes it clear that passing by a wounded person is out of the question. And in his discourse on the Last Judgment, he admonishes us: "Whatever you did not do for one of these least ones (brothers and sisters), you did not do for me." Ultimately, Jesus' own innocent suffering and death on the cross are at the heart of the New Testament, upon which our entire Christian faith is built.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are committed to our biblical tradition and, by extension, to Judeo-Christian ethics. In my opinion, this also means that we stand up for all those affected, make their suffering visible and their voices heard, speak out for an end to violence, create safe spaces for exchange, and try to break the cycle of violence in our society.

As the "Freunde der NEST e.V." association, we also see it as our task to draw attention in Germany to the situation of you Christians in the Middle East. Unfortunately, your situation here is repeatedly overlooked. At the church congress in Hanover a few weeks ago, we were dismayed to discover that our workshop with Sally Azar, the first ordained woman in the Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, was the only one addressing the topic of Palestine and the current situation of Christians in the Middle East.

The consultation for the program Studies in the Middle East, held in June 2025, encouraged us to publish this book. It revealed how important it is to encounter one another and discuss what we hear, observe, and experience, both physically and mentally, in our countries and their different realities. Therefore, the German-Lebanese study program Studies in the Middle East (SiMO) should be promoted even more. We are brothers and sisters in faith, and we will continue to support each other, as it says in Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens and you will fulfil the law of Christ."

II. Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian Narrations

Delineating the Context

Rima Nasrallah/Joscha Quade

At the outset, it is important to remind readers of the contexts in which these reflections are made and the regions to which they speak: Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Germany.

Lebanon

Several experiences shared here come from NEST graduates or students who work in and are connected to the Lebanese Protestant Churches, such as the Presbyterian Church, the Armenian Evangelical Church, and the National Evangelical Church of Beirut. All of them have experienced Lebanon's turbulent history over the past decade, if not more. Lebanon, a country battered by wars and violence and shaken by the Syrian war next door, has experienced dramatic events since at least 2019. A popular uprising against political corruption was followed by a major economic collapse and hyperinflation. These crises unfolded as COVID-19 paralyzed the world. On 4 August 2020, an atomic-sized explosion took place at the commercial port of Beirut, creating a traumatic scar in the city and a country that remains unhealed until today. When the events of October 7, 2023, occurred, Lebanon and the Lebanese had hardly recovered from the effects of the previous years.

The very next day, 8 October 2023, Hezbollah and other militant groups in the south of Lebanon launched rockets and artillery toward northern Israel, in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza. This marked the start of a new Lebanon-Israel front. Since that day, daily cross-border strikes have caused casualties, displacement, and destruction in southern Lebanon. These strikes caused widespread destruction, damaging homes, villages, schools, and health-care infrastructure. The border village of Alma el Shaab, whose pastor, Rev. Rabih Taleb, shares his experience here, was almost entirely destroyed. The village of Majayoun, where Farah Bou Kheir lives with his family, keenly felt all the violence from close by.

However, it is in 2024 that the conflict reached Beirut and drone attacks started taking place regularly in the southern suburb, Dahiya, targeting senior officials of Hezbollah and terrorizing the community. On 17 September, Israeli intelligence detonated thousands of pagers used by

Hezbollah members and their families, killing around a dozen people and injuring more than 2,700. The next day, a second wave of walkie-talkie detonations caused additional casualties. On 27 September 2024, an air-strike by Israel Defence Forces (IDF) dropped multiple bunker-busting bombs, killing Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. This was followed by an Israeli ground invasion of southern Lebanon and massive drone-operated attacks throughout the country, destroying entire neighbourhoods.

By then, hundreds of thousands of people had been displaced from southern Lebanon, including the southern suburb of Beirut and multiple parts of the Bekaa. Many of those roamed the streets of Beirut looking for shelter. The neighbourhood around the Near East School of Theology was packed with displaced families for weeks as heavy bombing and attacks paralyzed the country and spread fear.

On 26 November 2024, a ceasefire agreement was signed. However, it was repeatedly breached throughout 2025,[1] despite the election of a new president earlier in the year and the formation of a new government tasked with its implementation. Though exact numbers are hard to find, it is estimated that at least 4,300 people were killed and 17,500 wounded in Lebanon due to Israeli attacks since October 2023. The multiple attacks have caused the displacement of more than 1.2 million residents.[2]

Syria

Three NEST contributors to this volume wrote from Syria, where the war that had ravaged the country since 2011 had altered demographics, devastated the economy, and exhausted the population. And while the war on Gaza escalated, Syria faced protests and growing unrest.

By the end of 2023, Syria was deeply fragmented and exhausted after more than a decade of civil war. The regime retained authoritarian control over Damascus, parts of Homs, and the coastal regions, relying on heavy security repression, arbitrary detention, and widespread human rights abuses. Large areas in the north and east remained under the authority of

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1 The time of the writing of this text.

2 Cf. Hugo Bachega, Israel kills top Hezbollah official in first attack on Beirut in 23 November 2025 www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn81j54xjx1o, and Reuters, Israeli attacks have killed 4,047 people in Lebanon, Lebanese minister says, November 2024, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-attacks-have-killed-4047-people-lebanon-lebanese-minister-says-2024-12-04/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (5 December 2025).

opposition groups, Kurdish-led administrations, tribal forces, or local councils. Economically, the country was on the brink of total collapse: fuel shortages, food insecurity, water system failures, mass unemployment, and widespread poverty left millions dependent on humanitarian aid. Infrastructure was devastated, and basic services were unreliable or absent. Minorities – including Alawites, Christians, Druze, and others – lived in a climate of fear and uncertainty, shaped by wartime sectarian tensions, displacement, and the erosion of institutional protection.

However, a shocking and unexpected turn of events stunned Syrians in December 2024.[3] A rapid and coordinated offensive by opposition forces broke through government defences in Homs and swept south toward Damascus, precipitating the sudden collapse of the state's military and security apparatus. Five decades of Assad family rule unravelled in a few days. A period of political transition started in Syria, reshaping not only internal governance but also the geopolitical realities. Though Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's interim president, pledged to build an inclusive society that respects all religious sects, the reality on the ground remained starkly different. In March 2025, retaliatory attacks targeted Alawite communities in Syria's western coastal region near Latakia, where Rev. Kherallah Atallah is a pastor and where Petra Antoun lives and serves; both are contributors to this volume. These attacks resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Alawite civilians. Christian communities in Syria have also faced renewed threats during the ongoing political transition. In 2024, a Christmas tree was burned in Suqaylabiyah by Islamist fighters, and later an attack on a church in Hama city was carried out by unidentified gunmen. Violence culminating in a suicide bomb attack on the Prophet Elijah Orthodox Church in Damascus in June 2025, killing 25 people and injuring 63 during Sunday mass.[4]

In the Al Jazira governorate, in the North East of Syria, where Rev. Mathilde Sabbagh resides and serves, the situation has been highly volatile and intolerable for years. The region had witnessed turbulent, violent

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[3] For more on this see Widyane Hamdach, The Fall of Bashar al-Assad: Winners, Losers, and Challenges Ahead, May 2025, https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2025/05/07/the-fall-of-bashar-al-assad-winners-losers-and-challenges-ahead/ (5 December 2025). https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2025/05/07/the-fall-of-bashar-al-assad-winners-losers-and-challenges-ahead/ (5 December 2025).

[4] Cf. David Gritten, Suicide bombing at Damascus church kills 25, Syrian authorities say, 22 June 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c307n9p43z9o (5 December 2025).

events throughout and came under the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, isolating it from the rest of the country. Since 2023, Turkey has repeatedly carried out airstrikes, drone attacks, and shelling targeting SDF positions, oil infrastructure, electricity stations, and grain silos. These strikes have damaged essential services, killed or injured civilians, and disrupted fuel and electricity supplies. In addition, ISIS activity remained present; though ISIS was defeated territorially in 2019, sleeper cells remained active. The city came under full control of the Kurdish forces on 6/7 December 2024, after the fall of the Assad Regime.

The Al Jazira population has suffered, and continues to suffer, from harsh economic conditions. Despite being Syria's main wheat and oil-producing region, it continues to experience fuel shortages, electricity outages, severe water scarcity, and high food prices.

The West Bank, Palestine

Two contributors are from the West Bank in Palestine, in particular from the Episcopal Church, and serve in a region that has experienced a sharp escalation following the Gaza war. Besides living with the daily cycle of checkpoints, humiliations, and fear, after October 7, residents of the West Bank were subjected to widespread raids and arrests. Contributors to this book explained that the Israeli army enters multiple times a week, arrests and kills people, often harming bystanders who are not even the target. An estimated 21,000 Palestinians have been arrested since the start of the Gaza war.[5] Around 1,000 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank during this period, making it the deadliest period since 2005.[6] The United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted a rapid increase in settler attacks and home demolitions. In October

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[5] Cf. Middle East Monitor, Israel detained 21,000 Palestinians in occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem since start of Gaza genocide in www.middleeastmonitor.com/20251203-israel-detained-21000-palestinians-in-occupied-west-bank-east-jerusalem-since-start-of-gaza-genocide/ (5 December 2025).

[6] According to the United Nations, OHCHR, 1001 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank between 7 October 2023 and 21 October 2025. See report: www.un.org/unispal/document/ohchr-press-release-17oct25/ (5 December 2025).

2025 alone, it recorded "more than 260 attacks resulting in casualties, property damage or both"[7].

Nablus, in particular, where Rev. Jameel Khadir serves and the hometown of Saba Kerry, continues to be seen as one of the West Bank's more volatile urban centres.[8] Residents face economic hardship, uncertainty, and restrictions on mobility, reflecting broader West Bank trends: limited access to work and blocked access to education, trade, and services whenever security operations or closures are imposed. Notably, attacks and vandalism often occur during the olive harvest season, which is a "key economic, social and cultural event". According to the UN OCHA, "more than 60 per cent of the affected communities were concentrated in the Nablus, Ramallah, and Hebron governorates," where "property damage, such as the destruction of trees, crop theft, and vandalism of agricultural tools" and "a growing proportion of incidents led to casualties"[9]. Overall, the West Bank faces an increasing fragmentation of Palestinian society and territory.

Germany

Immediately after the attack of October 7, videos showing people celebrating and distributing baklava in the streets of Berlin sparked public outcry. In the weeks that followed, town halls and other official buildings all over Germany flew both the Israeli and German flags as a gesture of solidarity. Politicians emphasized their solidarity with Israel. Expressing critical opinions could lead to professional consequences. The Under Secretary Marjam Samadzade was fired by her minister after sharing a post critical of Israel's military actions in Gaza in October 2023. Pro-Palestinian demonstrations were subject to strict conditions and closely monitored by the police. The use of the Arabic language was partially banned at demonstrations. The police was tasked with identifying slogans classi-

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[7] OCHA, Humanitarian Situation Update #337|West Bank, 6 November 2025, www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-337-west-bank (5 December 2025).

[8] For more on violence in Nablus see France 24, Israel army launches operation in West Bank's Nablus www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250827-israel-army-launches-operation-in-west-bank-s-nablus (5.12.2025).

[9] See OCHA, Humanitarian Situation Update #330 | West Bank, 9 October 2025, www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-330-west-bank (5 December 2025).

fied as anti-Semitic. In particular, there was a debate as to whether the phrase "From the river to sea, Palestine will be free" or even parts of it should be considered anti-Semitic. Police officers took action against this statement. The legal clarification is not yet complete; judgments vary. Some demonstrations turned violent and the police's actions have also been criticized as disproportionately violent. Student protests at Berlin's universities received widespread media and political attention. On 2 February 2024, the Jewish student Lahav Shapira was brutally beaten in Berlin. The perpetrator was sentenced to prison. The court considered antisemitism to be the motive for the crime. All over the country, the number of anti-Semitic incidents has risen significantly since 7 October, threatening the security of Jews and Jewish institutions in Germany German politicians connected the problem of antisemitism with the rhetoric against immigration by speaking of the "imported antisemitism" of migrants.

German cultural life was affected by the conflict. Statements by intellectuals and artists were often scandalized, for example, the words of Yuval Abraham and Basel Adra (No Other Land) at the "Berlinale" film festival award ceremony in February 2024. Jewish Israeli Abraham was accused of antisemitism for using the term "apartheid" to describe the situation in the occupied West Bank.

Former Chancellor Angela Merkel's words from 2008 on the "German *raison d'état*"[10] were widely received and interpreted as the obligation of Germany to support Israel with military goods. One year after October 7, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in parliament, "We have supplied weapons, and we will continue to supply weapons [to Israel]." Only in August 2025, permits for exports of weapons that could possibly be used in Gaza were temporarily halted.

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[10] On March 18, 2008, Angela Merkel said in the Israeli Parliament, "At this point, I would like to state explicitly that every German government and every German chancellor before me has been committed to Germany's special historical responsibility for Israel's security. This historical responsibility is part of my country's raison d'état. This means that, for me as German chancellor, Israel's security is never negotiable. And if that is the case, then these words must not remain empty words in times of crisis. Together with its partners, Germany is committed to a diplomatic solution. If Iran does not back down, the federal government will continue to strongly advocate for sanctions." The whole speech in German: www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-dr-angela-merkel-796170 (13 December 2025).

Much effort was spent on debates on the right wording for the developments. Among others, the use of the term "genocide" was highly controversial. The German government rejected South Africa's lawsuit against Israel at the ICJ as "lacking any basis". After the coalition's break-up in November 2024 and the subsequent elections in February 2025, the designated new chancellor, Friedrich Merz, told the public that he would find a way to ensure that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, charged by the ICC, could visit Germany without being arrested. On the other hand, the new government has promised to tighten border controls and increase deportations, even to countries with governments that Germany has not recognized. For example, Berlin is negotiating with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Reflection on the Events after 7 October 2023

George Al Sahili[1]

I write the following reflection with mixed feelings. While I do have a lot to say concerning my experience in Lebanon during the war, the horrible news from Gaza and the situation in Lebanon humbles me and makes me feel inclined to remain silent. Nevertheless, I choose to speak. It should be noted, though, that the war that took place in Lebanon between September and November was the only war I have consciously witnessed in my life. It offered me a chance to reflect theologically, particularly on the nature of humanity and the peace of God.

When I woke up on 7 October, everyone was talking about what had happened. At first, it all seemed merely political. After all, not a day goes by without us hearing some new development from the political world here and there. From that moment until summer, everything seemed distant. The situation in Gaza just seemed like another version of the same story we used to talk about cruelty, injustice, and the evil in the world. Gaza became a powerful example of the human condition. We simply added Gaza to our prayers. Being an Armenian myself and having grown up hearing about the atrocities against the Armenians throughout history until now, with the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, also made this news less and less shocking.

Things continued to feel distant until August 2024, when the Israeli army started breaking the sound barrier over Lebanese territory. At the time, my church was planning camps for children and teenagers. The moment we started thinking about cancelling the camps was when the conflict stopped feeling far away. In the end, we did not cancel the camps, despite the sound barrier being broken several times during the camp. Children and teenagers were very afraid. Parents started calling, asking about the well-being of their children. Leaders became increasingly less motivated about the camps. Peace began to leave the hearts of the Lebanese people.

Having never witnessed war first-hand, I found myself imagining the possibility of it erupting, especially since a loved one was due to travel to

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[1] George Al Sahili, NEST graduate M.Div. 2025, assistant pastor, Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, Lebanon.

Europe at the end of August. People were talking about the possibility of the Beirut airport being bombed. I started to worry. It was not so much for the safety of my loved ones, but rather for how the disruption of everyday life was stealing my peace.

In September, my last year as a M.Div. student at NEST began. With life already semi-paralyzed, I had hoped to have a year without any disruptions. But that, of course, was not to be. As soon as the Israeli army started bombing the southern suburb of Beirut, international residents were asked to leave. Hence, many professors and students left the seminary, and we had to transition to online learning. Life slowed down. The look on people's faces was very alarming. I saw the news on almost every television I encountered. Thousands were displaced from their homes and were searching for new shelters. We were officially at war. I had naively equated war with physical danger. I quickly learned that war is much more than that. Neither my family members nor I were in danger physically, but the relentless bombardment between Israel and Hezbollah was shaping our mood, our decisions, and our mental health.

In late November, when the ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel was announced, we could see the change in people's faces. People started being hopeful. They started smiling again. It was very pleasant to see people returning to their homes and beginning to rebuild. I may not be able to describe the whole concept of war in a few words or even sentences, but I can describe its effects: War disrupts equilibrium. That became very clear to me.

Looking back at what the world, Lebanon, and I witnessed, I reflect on several things. As I organize my thoughts, I find that I can speak to both the human condition and to God, and to His peace for us.

I am a person who thinks theoretically, but I have lately realized the powerful impact of practical examples. It has been a few years since I reached a certain conclusion about human beings. Humans are often selfish and tend to prioritize their own interests, even if it means depriving others of their rights. This is why new stories that continually prove this fact do not shock me. Nevertheless, those examples provide me with new food for thought and enough resources for further reflection. The Israeli government and Hezbollah fighters were ready to do anything to secure themselves and achieve their goals, even at the expense of human dignity. Israel was willing to bomb hospitals and let children starve to death. However, this selfishness was not limited to the fighters. When families

were displaced in Lebanon, many owners of empty houses increased their rent by staggering amounts. Many traders tried to exploit the displaced families. Such thoughts prompt me to reflect on myself and others I know. Are we also selfish? Is the fact that we do not have the authority to make big decisions the only reason we think we are different? When have we put aside our own goals and objectives for others, and actually tried to embody the self-giving character of our God in Christ Jesus?

On the other hand, I was also reminded of something I have long believed: that human beings, created in the image of God, are capable of feeling the pain of others and sharing in their suffering. This consultation program, for which I am writing this reflection, is itself proof that there are people who are concerned about what has happened and what is still happening. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to serve with my church and seminary in preparing food packages for displaced families. Many NGOs took action to provide food, shelter, and comfort to those affected by the war. Mental health sessions were being offered in schools, churches, and other community settings.

It is not a matter of which aspect is the right one. In a world where the kingdom is announced but not yet fully established, I accept imperfection in all its forms, with my inability to give a clear answer being one of them.

Another focus of my reflection is peace and the role of God in it. As stated above, the month of October almost resembled the lockdown imposed on us during the COVID-19 pandemic, except that this time it was human beings, rather than a virus, that created the situation. COVID-19 seemed to take away the human being's peace, but this war was about human beings depriving their fellow neighbour of the peace they deserve. And, so, the question remained: where is God when it hurts? Where is God when all of the people are starving and dying? The image of God being present under the rubble, as presented by the Palestinian theologian Munther Isaac, offered new perspectives on God's relationship to our sufferings. God suffers with us. This need not answer our questions related to theodicy. However, it certainly helps us move from perceiving God as an emotionless being who may or may not want to help us, to accepting him as a loving being who cares for us and is in sorrow with us, even if action is not part of the current plan. This can also comfort us regarding our questions about evil, because God's suffering with us reminds us of a

plan He has, and that fills us with hope. This hope becomes the source of a peace independent from nature or man.

To sum up all of this in one sentence, this terrible experience was an opportunity for me to create practical platforms for the theories I had in mind concerning humanity and God, as well as the peace that comes from Him through the hope He instils in us. The stories we hear and the experiences we live indeed sadden us, tire us, and even break us. However, as we look forward to the culmination of the Kingdom of God, we stand firm, shaken but not shocked, trying our best to reflect through our beings the very image of God who loves, understands, and cares.

Fig. 1 A building, targeted by the IDF, viewed from the highway from the airport towards the city centre

Fig. 2 Seconds after a bombing by the IDF somewhere in the southern suburb of Beirut

Morning Coffee

A reflection on reconciliation

Petra Antoun[1]

Each morning, as I cradle a warm cup of coffee between my hands, I am reminded that peace often begins with the smallest of gestures. In many cultures, especially in our Arab heritage, coffee is more than just a drink. It is a silent offering of goodwill, a symbol of openness, and a quiet invitation to draw closer, even when conflict lingers in the background.

Coffee has long been a part of the reconciliation process. Around the warmth of a shared cup, people have gathered not only to talk but to listen, to air grievances, clarify misunderstandings, and restore what was broken. It's in these moments that a simple ritual becomes sacred: a space where respect takes root, and reconciliation begins to unfold.

Arabic coffee, in particular, speaks deeply to this process. Brewed slowly, poured gently in small portions, and shared in silence or soft conversation, it teaches us that reconciliation, too, is slow work. It cannot be rushed. It demands presence, patience, and humility. Like the careful brewing of the coffee, reconciliation requires attentiveness and care. One cup at a time, we create room for trust to be rebuilt.

What strikes me most is how this ritual treats everyone the same. Regardless of status, age, or background, every person is served coffee with the same gesture of honour. In that moment, the playing field is levelled. We are reminded of our shared humanity, our common roots. The barriers between us grow a little thinner.

Historically, even among rival tribes or feuding families, the serving and receiving of coffee could mark a turning point. It was a sign, a deeply symbolic one, that the host was extending peace, and the guest accepted it by drinking the coffee. In this way, coffee became not just a social custom, but a sacred exchange.

So when I take my first sip each morning, I remember: reconciliation does not always begin with grand speeches or formal apologies. Sometimes, it starts with a small, steaming cup offered in silence, received with

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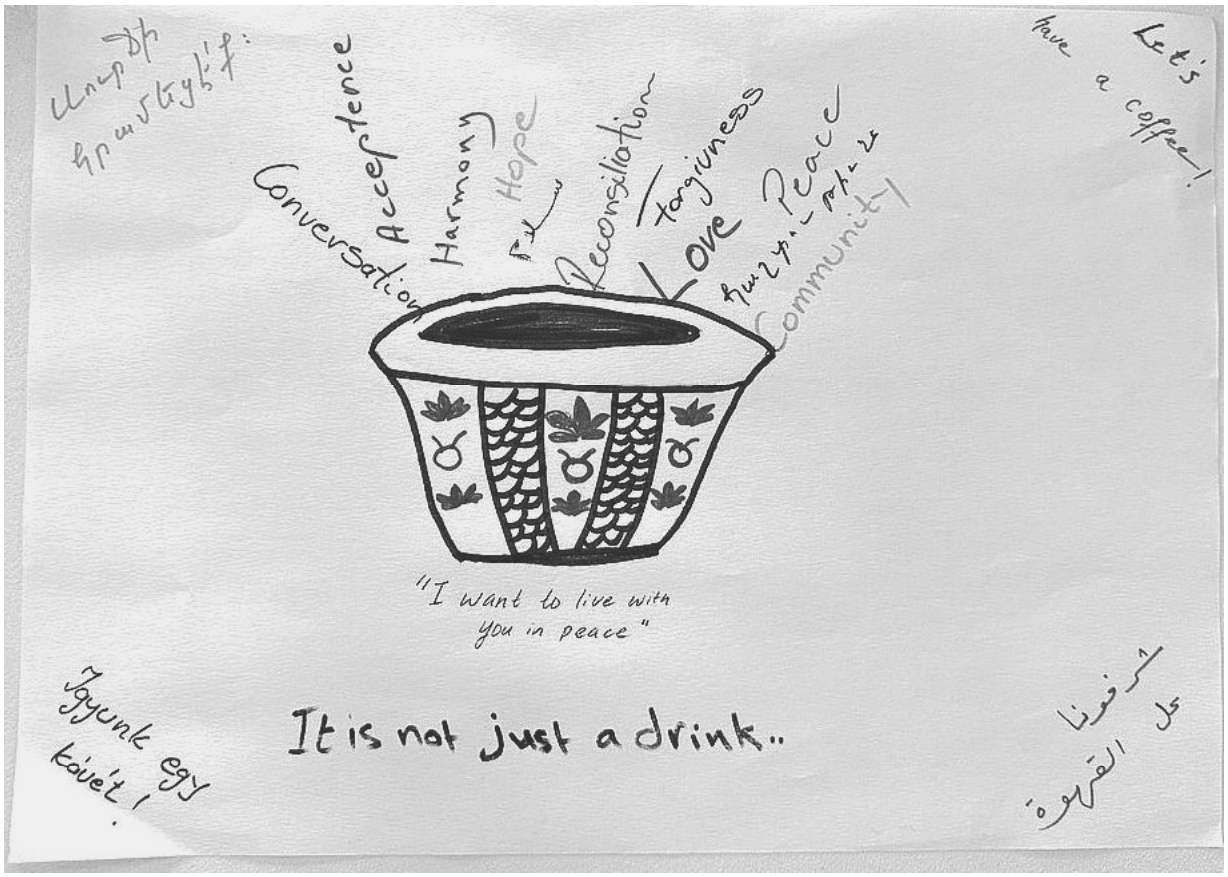
[1] Petra Antoun, NEST online diploma student, Partnership Advisor for Syria for the Mennonite Central Committee, Damascus, Syria.

grace. A cup that carries within it centuries of tradition, quiet dignity, and the enduring hope that peace is always possible.



More than a drink, Coffee is a sacred gesture of hospitality and reconciliation. It invites us to slow down, to listen, to honour our shared humanity, and to allow peace to begin, one cup at a time.

Salam

Kherallah Atallah[1]

Salam (سلام) is not only the Arabic word for "peace", but also the common daily greeting used by all Syrians – Muslims and Christians alike. It is a poignant irony that, although the word *Salam* is spoken countless times each day, it describes a reality that we Syrians have not truly experienced for decades, perhaps even centuries, due to the many layers of conflict – political, historical, social, religious, and sectarian.

Over the past fourteen years, we have endured a brutal conflict that has left millions displaced, hundreds of thousands dead or wounded, and much of our country's infrastructure in ruins. No one has been spared the suffering caused by the war, which has touched every aspect of life and driven living conditions ever further backward.

Last December marked the overthrow of the Assad regime, which had ruled the country with an iron fist for more than five decades. This event brought immense joy to Syrians after years of dictatorship, corruption, and poor governance. However, it also created a power vacuum that allowed undisciplined groups and unlawful forces to carry out acts of revenge, plunging the country into chaos. Incidents of looting, kidnapping, arbitrary detention, and killings have since become increasingly common.

At the same time, our nation is not isolated from the turmoil unfolding in Gaza and Lebanon, where thousands have been killed in the ongoing asymmetric wars.

Unfortunately, in the current Syrian context – shaped by both local and regional conflicts – the concept of *Salam* (سلام) has become narrowly associated with mere safety and survival. This is largely due to the absence of the rule of law, the ambiguity of the political and social landscape, the uncertainty of the future, the ongoing economic deterioration, and the weakness of effective state authority.

Being a member of the Protestant community in Syria, a minority within a minority, presents additional challenges related to religious rights, social participation, and political representation.

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[1] Kherallah Atallah, NEST graduate M.Div. 2020, Pastor at the Presbyterian Church of Latakia, Syria.

In the face of challenges, upheavals, and brutal wars, one cannot avoid confronting deep existential questions: Why am I here? What must I do? What can I do? How can I find meaning – if any? What is the best witness I can bear?

What sustains me through these difficult times is the Christian understanding of *peace*. This peace is not simply the absence of conflict, but the presence of wholeness, prosperity, and harmony. It speaks not only of ceasing to fight but also of binding together what has been torn apart. Christian peace extends beyond the absence of strife to a sense of well-being that embraces every aspect of life: administration, economy, security, education, culture, and health.

In the complex reality I live in, I am convinced that the most profound need, and the most accurate answer to many of our complicated questions, is this kind of peace – *Salam* (سلام) – that transcends safety and the mere absence of war.

Peace, in fact, has become the defining mark of the Christian remnant in Syria. In its Christian sense, peace is synonymous with living in love and striving to uphold the rights and dignity of others, while working for the well-being of all. This is what gives meaning to my presence here. I am not called merely to enjoy the fruits of a ceasefire or the end of war, but to participate in building a state of *peace* in which what was divided and separated is brought together again.

Today, in a time when the rule of law is absent, state power is fragile, and society is torn by sectarian, regional, tribal, and ideological divisions, holding fast to the way of *Salam* (سلام) is not optional – it is essential. Peace is the only path not just to survive, but to overcome the bloody past and begin our country's renewal. For, as Scripture says, "the meek shall inherit the earth" (Psalm 37:11).

For Syrian Christians, upholding peace is not merely a means of survival; it is the very essence of our calling and witness in this land. Choosing *Salam* (سلام) represents a third way – between violence and revenge on one side, and submission and surrender on the other. The Christian attitude of peace is neither passive nor weak; it is a courageous decision that reaches beyond personal safety to seek the tranquility, security, and flourishing of others.

As a Syrian Protestant pastor, I always remind my congregation – and everyone I meet – that true peace cannot be built upon, nor does it come from, any particular law or political system. It comes only from Jesus

Christ, who is our model in love, struggle, and sacrifice for the *peace* – the well-being – of all people.

In today's Syrian context, speaking of peace in terms of prosperity, well-being, and completeness may seem unrealistic, or even a luxury. Yet peace cannot be separated from hope. In the Christian understanding, peace and hope are deeply intertwined, for Christian hope is not grounded in statistics, facts, or present realities. Instead, it creates its own reality – transforming the daily greeting of *Salam* (سلام) from a mere word into living actions and deeds.

Christmas Service 2025 at the Presbyterian Church in Latakia, Syria

One Thing remains: The Cross

Farah Bou Kheir[1]

Since 2019, Lebanon has been grappling with a severe, prolonged, and compounded crisis. It began with nationwide protests known as the *Thawra* and was further intensified by a series of overlapping shocks. The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, followed by the devastating explosion at Beirut Port in August of the same year, significantly weakened the country's socio-economic fabric and public infrastructure. These events, combined with ongoing political paralysis, a banking crisis that led to hyperinflation and currency devaluation, as well as widespread institutional collapse, plunged large segments of the population into poverty and deepened humanitarian needs across the country.

The situation deteriorated further in late 2023 with the escalation of the Israel-Gaza conflict. This led to successive waves of displacement, particularly from southern Lebanon. Many Lebanese citizens and non-Lebanese residents, including Syrian and Palestinian refugees, were forced to flee their homes. By 2024, internal displacement had affected towns across the South and the Bekaa region. By September 2024, a total of 346,209 internally displaced persons were in urgent need of shelter and food.[2]

Yet, one thing remains: The cross at the peak still standing, still visible, and still proclaiming.

This image from Yaroun, a village in southern Lebanon, is etched in my memory. The Saint George Church, once a sacred refuge, was partially destroyed during the latest wave of conflict. Its roof was shattered, its walls were fractured, and the sanctuary was open to the sky. Yet one thing remained untouched, the cross above. Weathered, exposed, but firm, it stood as a silent witness, proclaiming truths that buildings alone cannot tell. That cross has become more than a structure; it is a theological anchor in a time when everything else feels adrift.

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[1] Farah Bou Kheir, Program Manager at TearFund, NEST graduate M.Div. 2022, from Jezzine, South Lebanon.

[2] International Organization for Migration. Lebanon: Mobility Snapshot, Round 49, 30 September 2024. Displacement Tracking Matrix. https://dtm.iom.int/reports/lebanon-mobility-snapshot-round-49-30-09-2024 (22 May 2025).

This cross reminds us that the Church is never defined by the condition of its buildings or by surrounding circumstances, but by the strength of its conviction and the endurance of its calling. Even when external expressions of worship are disrupted, the essence of the Church – communion with God and with one another – perseveres. The cross in Yaroun stands as a silent homily to this truth, lifting our eyes from the devastation below to the eternal promise above.

In an intensely volatile context, when emigration continues to rise, congregations are shrinking, and institutions are weakening, the cross remains, still visible amid the collapse. We return to it again and again, not out of sentimentality, but as a witness to enduring truth. From that symbol, four theological lessons have emerged, shaping my understanding and anchoring my hope.

The first is this: we are living stones. The words of 1 Peter 2:5 have taken on flesh: "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house." In Yaroun, Palm Sunday and Easter services were not canceled. The faithful gathered in the ruins, not to mourn the past, but to celebrate the triumphant entry and, one week later, the risen Lord. Children waved branches among the debris, and hymns rose from a floor exposed to the sky. What was left of the church building became a new kind of sanctuary, one marked not by arches and icons, but by faith, resilience, and presence.

The resilience of the Church lies not in architecture, but in identity. We are built not on stone, but on the cornerstone, Christ Himself. This is not a poetic metaphor. It is a daily conviction for believers living under fire, where gatherings take place not in pews, but in shelters. These living stones continue to carry one another, pray for one another, and serve one another. In this way, the Church remains present, even when the buildings do not.

The theology of presence has become our grounding reality. To remain, to stay near suffering, to weep with the grieving, and to simply be, these actions have become expressions of God's heart. Churches have become safe havens, not because they are fortified structures, but because they are inhabited by people living out sacrificial love. Their doors may have been blasted open, but their embrace has grown even wider.

The second lesson is this: pain shapes faith. Lamentations chapter 1 opens with a haunting cry, "How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!" Its words feel painfully close to home. The Lebanese Church

has not been spared grief. There is trauma, loss, and weariness. We have buried children. We have watched neighbours flee. We have lost homes, work, and safety. And still, we gather. And still, we sing.

Pain, when lifted before God, does not deform us; it deepens us. We learn to lament, not as weakness, but as worship. The cross, after all, was never clean. The path to resurrection goes through the tomb. Our scars are not shameful. They are signs of healing. We do not pretend that the suffering did not happen; we proclaim that it did not have the final word. This pain has also brought clarity. Many of us now see faith not as a protective shield from hardship, but as the very thing that enables us to endure it. Pain is the stepping-stone to glory.

The third lesson is this: the gospel shapes our vision. In times of violence and political division, it is tempting to define ourselves by alliances or resistances. But the gospel invites another way. It says: Forgive. It says: Love your enemies. These words are difficult, not in theory, but in flesh. How does one love when grieving? How does one forgive when justice feels suspended?

The ongoing instability has taught us to let go of false securities, both economic and political, and even institutional. Instead, we lean into a deeper, less visible strength: the hope of Christ in us. This is not mere survival. It is the redefinition of witness: a Church that bleeds with its people but also believes with them. We are learning that endurance is not passive; it is a prophetic stance, a refusal to let despair write the final word.

I do not have simple answers. But I do know this: being shaped by Christ means we cannot mirror the world's bitterness. We must invite Christ to transform hate into prayer and distance into empathy. This is not passive surrender. It is a declaration that evil does not get the last word; grace does. In a society where vengeance often seems like the only language, the Church must continue speaking boldly the language of mercy.

This leads to the fourth and final lesson: the mission continues. Romans 8:35–37 reminds us that nothing – not famine, persecution, danger, or sword – can separate us from the love of Christ. The Church in Lebanon knows this truth not only from the pulpit, but from the ground. Even when systems fail and institutions falter, our calling holds fast. We are called to be salt and light, to weep with those who weep, to rebuild ruins, and to sow seeds of reconciliation in fields riddled with mistrust and fatigue.

In conversations with church leaders and humanitarian partners, I have sensed a hunger for theology that is both rooted and responsive. We need words that can hold our lament and lead us into action. We are seeking spiritual formation that equips pastors not only to preach, but also to plan, prepare, and safeguard. Crisis reveals what we truly believe. And through this lens, the cross, still visible, continues to stand.

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 capture our testimony, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair." The Church is being refined, not erased. This is not the end of Christendom. It is the beginning of a humbled, rooted, resilient faith that dares to show up in rubble and declare, "He is risen".

This hope does not deny reality. It confronts it with eyes wide open. The promise of Christ is not that we will avoid suffering, but that He has entered into it and transformed it. Every act of kindness, every tear wept in intercession, every protest against injustice becomes part of a greater redemption story. The cross at the peak does not shout; it stands. Its silent endurance speaks louder than sermons.

Luke 19:40 reminds us that "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out". In Lebanon, the stones have cried out, both metaphorically and literally. Churches without roofs still hold services. Walls bearing shrapnel still hold icons. These broken places have become altars. Their message is clear: the gospel is not confined to what is whole. It thrives among the broken.

This world remains marred by violence, displacement, and division. Yet, it is also, miraculously, full of light. Christ has sanctified the ground with His blood. He has walked into our tombs and turned them into gardens. This is not a theory. This is what we are witnessing in Lebanon and in every place where the Church dares to remain.

Even now, as churches operate with limited resources, we remain steadfast in our identity. We are not only recipients of hope; we are its bearers. The Lebanese Church is wounded but worshipping, diminished in size but not in spirit. We continue to baptize, to disciple, to gather around tables, and to send out peacemakers. We do so not because it is easy, but because it is true.

Let us not be discouraged. Let us rise like the cross over the ruins. Let us build again, not just sanctuaries, but solidarity. Let us bear one another's burdens, speak peace into storms, and believe again that grace is stronger than grief.

The Melkite Greek Catholic Church of St. George in Yaroun, South Lebanon, stands in ruins following the recent Israel-Gaza conflict. The town is located directly along the demarcation line between Lebanon and Israel.

The cross is not only what remains after destruction. It is the bridge from pain to glory. It stands not as a reminder of death, but as the promise of resurrection. Through it, suffering is not wiped out; it is transformed. And from it, we go, bearing hope, sharing love, and building the kingdom of God on earth.

We return to this truth, not with platitudes, but with praise: one thing remains. The cross at the peak: still standing, still visible, and still proclaiming.

May the cross at Yaroun remind every believer, whether in Lebanon or elsewhere, that Christian witness was never meant to be convenient. It was always meant to be costly, because grace was costly first.

A Trip to South Lebanon

Maria Dal Bzdigian[1]

On Thursday, 1 May 2025, I was part of a solidarity visit to South Lebanon to show support to the youth and families in border villages.

During our visit, the devastation caused by the war was heart breaking, impossible to ignore. Everywhere we went, we saw destroyed villages, collapsed homes, bombed roads, and buildings reduced to rubble. Military approval and escorts were required at every step, as some areas remained dangerous or restricted.

In one village, a bombing occurred while we were there, a chilling reminder that for those living in the South, war is not a memory but a daily reality. Churches were not spared either. One had been bombed five times, and now only three walls remain.

Amid this destruction, we encountered families who had stayed – not because they had a choice, but because they had nowhere else to go. Some lived in partially collapsed houses, while others had the means to leave yet chose to remain because this was their home.

What amazed us was their warmth and hospitality. They welcomed us with open arms, offered drinks, and shared their stories with honesty and grace. They spoke of fear, exhaustion, and profound loss. Some expressed the pain of seeing people come merely to take photos, offering no real help. Yet they also spoke of those who stood with them – people who provided financial support, encouragement, and solidarity. These small gestures made a meaningful difference.

They spoke with raw honesty about their fear, their exhaustion, their loss, and how overwhelmed they felt. Some told us how painful it was when people came just to take photos and leave without offering real support. Yet they also shared stories about the people who had come to truly help those who brought financial support, encouragement, and stood in solidarity with them. These small gestures of care made a meaningful difference.

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[1] Maria Dal Bzdigian, NEST student, Diploma in Theological Studies, Project Coordinator and Administrative Assistant at MECC, from the Armenian Evangelical Church-Nor Marash.

This trip was part of the itinerary proposed by the Brothers of Taizé. Moved by the pain and suffering of young people in Lebanon, they suggested holding a meeting there to offer encouragement and support – and specifically asked to visit the South, the region most affected.

The ecumenical organizing committee wrestled with the idea. On one hand, the need for encouragement was undeniable; on the other, there were serious safety concerns. On the day of the visit, representatives from all the Lebanese Churches – Maronite, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, Syriac, Greek Catholic, and Armenian Evangelical – gathered in Beirut and travelled together to the South, under army escort and with the necessary permissions.

What we witnessed was profoundly moving. We saw the scars of war and heard first hand testimonies from those living through it. What stood out most was the spirit of the people, especially the youth. They were radiant, brilliant, kind, and full of life. They told us about the roles they have taken on in their communities, the activities they organize, and the challenges they face. Despite everything, they held onto hope and passed it on to us.

Each time we arrived in a new village, they welcomed us with a song of the Resurrection. It was a gesture of grace that defied despair.

What gives me hope is the strength and tenderness of the people we met, especially the young. Amid so much destruction, they still carry light. Their courage to press on, their deep love for the land, and their determination to serve their communities reminded me that even in the darkest times, hope lives on.

They were not bitter. They spoke of healing, rebuilding, and staying rooted in love and faith. That kind of spirit is powerful. It lifts you up.

Hope also came through our shared presence. We did not gather simply to observe, but to listen, to walk alongside, and to show that care and solidarity can become strength.

The South is breath taking in its nature, its history, and its people. It holds a piece of my heart. Once you have walked its paths and listened to its people, you never really leave it behind. Seeing it wounded and worn was overwhelming, but I believe in its beauty and in its future. I carry the hope that this land will not only rise again, but will flourish with peace, dignity, and life.

Please pray that the people of the South may stand again on their feet. Pray for reconstruction, not just of buildings, but of lives and communi-

ties. Pray for peace, that they may live without fear and without war. And please pray that we will find ways to support them not only financially but also emotionally and spiritually, and that we continue to show up, listen, and accompany them on this long journey of healing and rebuilding.

Fig. 1 Amid the rubble in southern Lebanon, the smallest remnants of life tell the loudest story of loss. A crushed car, broken homes, and silence.

Fig. 2 Only a door remained from a house next to the Church

Fig. 3+4 Saint George Church of Yaroun

All pictures made on 1 May 2025 in Yaroun, located in the Qada'a of Bint Jbeil near the Lebanese-Israeli border by

Reflection from the Margins

Saba Kerry[1]

I had just begun my first year at NEST. It had only been a month and a half since I arrived in Lebanon from Palestine to begin my theological education. I was full of excitement, carrying with me dreams, questions, and a deep sense of calling. It felt like a new beginning. Then the events following 7 October 2023 began to unfold.

At first, I was still hoping. Hoping the violence would not last long. Hoping the harm would be minimal. But each hour, it escalated. The news became darker. The statistics became unbearable. Moreover, behind each number was a name, a family, a story. A life that would never be the same.

What carried me through those early days was the community around me. At NEST, we listened to one another, we prayed together, we checked on each other, and we grieved together. The strength we found was not from having answers, but from standing beside each other when there was none. There was a sacredness in the shared silence, in the questions that did not resolve. And one of the hardest questions kept echoing: *Why does God allow this?*

In those moments, the silence of God was not theoretical. It was heavy and aching. It prompted me to delve deeper into the question of divine presence in a world steeped in injustice. It moved me toward a theology that does not shy away from suffering, but dares to enter it.

By November 2024, NEST had moved online, and I returned home to Nablus in the West Bank. I was not sure what I would find there or if I would be able to return to Lebanon. However, going home was stressful too. There were constant military raids in cities, checkpoints that closed without warning, and a pervasive fear that hung like a fog. Humiliation was woven into the daily routine, an ever-present reality of occupation. The streets were empty. Shops were shuttered. People whispered about leaving. Immigration was no longer a choice, but a necessity for survival, as people spoke of giving up, of futures stolen. My friends and family

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[1] Saba Kerry, NEST student M.Div., from the Episcopal Church in Nablus, West Bank, Palestine.

were asking hard questions about the future. Questions no one could answer.

Yet, even there, I found a renewed sense of purpose. I sat with a congregation member in her simple Nablus home, her hands trembling as she told me her sister had been trying to get out of Gaza, but was unable, and that all contact had suddenly vanished. We prayed together in the hush of candlelight, her fear and mine intertwined in every whispered, "Lord, have mercy." I stood alongside a young father at a checkpoint, sharing the indignity of enduring endless ID checks and invasive searches as he attempted to reach his office in the city. I listened to a teacher in Ramallah who could barely speak through tears, mourning the way her students' laughter had been replaced by hushed conversations about bombing in Gaza, people under the rubble, and arrests.[2] In those moments, the silent prayers, the shared tears, the simple holding of space revealed that that presence itself is a form of ministry. To bear witness without rushing to fix; to offer compassion without an agenda; to share another's burden simply by being there: that, more than anything, moved me. To be there for someone. For my people. For humans.

At that same time, the war had extended its reach. In Lebanon, the south was under attack. People from the southern villages and the Dahyeh areas of Beirut began fleeing their homes. I saw them carry more than their belongings. They carried memories, dreams, and stories. Many of them would never return to their homes. And even if they did, those homes were reduced to rubble, scarred by destruction and loss.

This entire year for me has been a process of deep unlearning. An unlearning of naive hopes that things would "go back to normal", that suffering would be brief, or that justice would come quickly. It has been a confrontation with the painful truth that sometimes, to the world, Palestinian lives seem to matter less. One incident stays with me: when six foreign aid workers were killed by an Israeli airstrike in Gaza by mistake, the global outcry was immediate – and rightly so. But at the same time, more than 60,000 Palestinians have been killed, the vast majority civilians. The silence surrounding them is loud. Why does it take a different passport to be mourned?

Yet, even in that grief, we were not alone. We saw churches, organizations, and friends abroad raise their voices and send prayers. We felt

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[2] E.g. Kelly Latimore, Christ under the Rubble, https://stcroixchurch.ca/tag/st-croix-church/ (22 December 2025).

heard. That mattered. It grounded us. It reminded us that solidarity is still possible. That human hearts still beat with compassion.

In this darkness, I began to understand the Gospel anew, not as an escape from suffering, but as God's radical entrance into it. The cross is not a symbol of resignation, but of profound solidarity. As on the cross we see the crucified Son and the mourning Father. God does not stand above human pain, untouched. God suffers ***with*** us. In Jesus, God is not only present among the crucified, but ***is*** crucified.[3]

This changes everything. It means that the silence we often experience in tragedy is not God's absence, but God's mysterious, aching presence. The cross is where abandonment meets the deepest communion. It is the heart of the Gospel: that God has entered our world, borne the wounds of injustice and violence, and still holds open the promise of life. In this crucified Christ, we are not alone.

God is still crucified – ***today***, alongside the crucified of history: those buried under rubble, taken as hostages from their homes and families, displaced and stripped of dignity, mourning, waiting, and asking ***why***. Yet the cross is not the end. We long for resurrection. We long for the reign of God to break into our shattered world. The Gospel tells us that suffering does not have the final word – love does. That one day, as Revelation promises, the sea will be no more, death will be no more, and every tear will be wiped away. We hope for the day when justice flows like a river, and peace will be more than a fragile truce – it will be a true home. We believe that the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and that joy, equality, and love shall reign.

This hope is not escapism; it is fuel, and a call to act. It sustains us in the waiting. It compels us to live differently, to carry one another, to mourn honestly, and to yearn with open hands for the world God promises and seeks.

Lastly, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to every friend who has sat with me in this darkness, to every prayer offered in solidarity, and to every act of compassion, no matter how small, that reminded me that we are not alone. I am grateful to my professors and peers at NEST who held space for my questions and my grief, to the EMS, and the SiMO

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[3] E.g. Mohammad Hamza El Farra, www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=18051951 5143271653&set=a.322989911492191&type=3&rdid=nmJ3pxKJnBglG9ob&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2F1HB3RM9AU2%2F# (22 December 2025).

team for creating this space of solidarity and dialogue, and to every individual and church around the world whose voices and letters have carried our story forward. Above all, I praise God, who sustains us in the valley of the shadow and keeps the door open to resurrection.

What I long to say to people abroad, in Germany and elsewhere, is: Do not look away. Do not let your compassion be selective. Let justice be justice for all. Let your grief hold all who suffer. We do not ask for pity; we ask to be seen. To be viewed as equals. As one of your own. As collaborates in humanity. As fellow human beings, bearing the image of God. Do not excuse the structures that destroy us. Confront the systems that sustain occupation and apartheid, even when they are close to home, politically, theologically, or economically. Demand human rights and accountability for all. Let us all follow the prophetic call: to love mercy, to seek justice, and to walk humbly with God, not only for some, but also for all. Without favouritism. Without conditions. Let your voices join ours, not as saviours, but as friends, and companions, on the long and painful road toward healing, dignity, and peace.[4]

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[4] E.g. Sliman Mansour, From the River to the Sea, https://newswav.com/article/land-as-memory-the-palestinian-artists-reclaiming-landscape-through-art-A2511_JhasBu (22 December 2025).

Resurrection amid Ruins

A witness from Nablus: "Christ is risen!"

Jamil Maher Khader[1]

These words echo across our churches each Easter, proclaimed with trembling voices and defiant hope. This year, in Nablus, those words took on a different weight, not hollow but heavy, carried through a fog of pain and fear. Since 7 October 2023, we in Nablus have lived under constant tension. The city, already fatigued by years of instability, has borne new wounds. Israeli incursions, road closures, and the suffocating economic stranglehold have brought daily life to a near halt. There have been nights filled with gunfire, days when children could not go to school, and weeks when even bread and medicine were hard to come by.

And yet, in our churches, candles are still lit.

One Sunday morning, not long ago, I woke early and set out to enter Nablus to lead the worship service. But at the checkpoint, I was stopped. The Israeli soldiers refused to let me pass. No explanation, no negotiation. Just a refusal. I stood there, holding my Bible and my notes, ready to preach hope to a people who desperately needed it. But that day, the gate stayed shut. I had to call and inform the congregation that I would be unable to attend. That service was cancelled.

But we did not surrender to despair.

Instead, the next morning, a Monday, we gathered. The church doors opened. The bells rang. We sang the Sunday hymns on a weekday. We turned Monday into a moment of resurrection. It was a small act of resistance, but a profound act of faith. In a world that tells us when to speak, when to move, and when to worship, we insist on the freedom Christ gives us: the freedom to gather, to pray, and to hope.

Life in Nablus has become increasingly fragmented. Before 7 October, it would take us about an hour and a half to drive from Nablus to Nazareth, an arduous journey even then, but manageable. My daughter receives care at a clinic in Nazareth, and this trip was part of our routine. However, after the war began, the nearest checkpoint, the one we had always used, was suddenly closed to us. The route we once travelled with

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effort has now become a struggle. We were forced to take a detour that turned the journey into a seven-hour ordeal – each direction. A trip for healing became a test of endurance, marked by hours of waiting, scrutiny, reroutes, and the emotional toll of uncertainty. No parent should have to navigate military barricades for their child to see a doctor.

These are the stories that do not appear in headlines: the quiet erosion of daily life, the slow violence of isolation, the deep emotional fatigue. Even so, we live. And we believe. And we continue.

What gives me strength? In all honesty, there are days when I do not feel strong. But I return again and again to the cross, to the God who does not explain suffering away but enters into it. The cross is not a symbol of escape, but of divine solidarity. And the empty tomb, even if unseen, is the promise that suffering is never the final word.

Art has also helped me. A painting that has stayed with me is one by Palestinian artist Sulei-man Mansour, "The Camel of Hardship" which depicts a bent-over figure carrying Je-rusalem on his back.[2]

This image speaks to our lives in Nablus. We carry a weight too heavy, yet we walk. Not because we are strong, but because Christ walks with us.

Fig. 1 Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Rafidia/Nablus

[2] See www.wikiart.org/en/sliman-mansour/jamal-al-mahamel-iii-the-camel-carrier-of-hardships-iii-2005 (11 November 2025).

To my friends in Germany and elsewhere: We do not ask for pity. We ask for prayer. We ask for partnership in truth and justice. And we ask that you see in us not victims, but witnesses – witnesses to a faith that refuses to die, to a resurrection that continues to break through stones of despair.

This is a testimony. From the streets of Nablus, from the heart of occupied Palestine, I say again with trembling but unshaken faith:

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Fig. 2
St. Philip Episcopal Church, Nablus

Reflections from a Pastor in Al-Hassakeh/Northeast Syria

Mathilde Sabbagh[1]

The most devastating realities are those that leave scars on individuals, societies, and even faith communities. When the Middle East is mentioned, so too are conflicts, wars, and violence, and this is a sad truth. It breaks our hearts to recount the stories of our torn societies.

I live in Syria, but I was not there during the brutal war that struck Lebanon in the last quarter of 2024. Yet, not living in Lebanon does not mean being untouched by its violence. I am connected to Lebanon on three levels: as a church member, a theology student, and a neighbour; as a pastor, a student, and as someone from a neighbouring country. Lebanon has always been a second home to me, and it is painful to see both my homes caught in ongoing cycles of injustice.

I minister in the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Al-Hassakeh in the northeast of Syria, where the region remains outside the control of both the old and new Syrian governments. I minister in a church in an area where over one million people have lived without water since 2019 because of the actions of the Turkish leadership, and where electricity has been forgotten since 2011. I minister in a church where there is no access to education, healthcare, or any form of social activity. On top of all this, whatever happens in a neighbouring country deepens the pain of the already traumatized community. That pain grew even heavier when members of our churches in southern Lebanon were forced to flee their homes in search of safety. Yet I must admit, I did not expect the conflict in Lebanon to affect my twin daughters, who were only five years old when it all began, and were trying to understand the reason behind that violence. It was a serious challenge for us as a family to explain to our children what had happened and why. It is difficult to discuss politics with children because to them, life is either good or bad, true or false. Children form their opinions on basic values, not politics, on goodness, not on the sides in a conflict. My children are used to hardships in life and know what violence means. Nevertheless, the idea of people killing others

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[1] Mathilde Sabbagh, NEST graduate M.Div. 2016, Pastor of the Presbyterian Church Al Hassakeh, Syria.

simply because they do not want them to live was something they could not comprehend.

At that moment, I understood that war, even when not personally experienced, could leave scars on those who live far from it. War is a societal trauma, and short clips on social media or television are enough to awaken fear, anxiety, and even hatred in children, bringing existential questions to the surface, such as, who is my enemy? This is especially true if the children are Syrians, for anything that happens in Lebanon or Palestine feels deeply personal and affecting.

After years of living in this torn Middle East, and witnessing countless pacts being made, I cannot help but see the scars on the hearts of people, young and old, male or female, who seek to live in peace, and who are searching for an everyday normal life without being forced to accommodate violence and wars. Questions like the ones our children asked continue to arise: Who is my neighbour? Is my neighbour an enemy? How can we, as Christians, build bridges of peace? And what is our role as churches during this chaotic situation? Are we actually capable of playing a bridging role?

In reply to this last question, I always share with my congregation this message:

It is not new in the Middle East to embrace diverse thoughts, beliefs, and religions in one space, nor is it new to attempt to define what religion is and what religious life entails. According to 1 Corinthians 13, Paul defines true religion. He describes various ways people have measured religion: Some emphasized speaking in tongues, others focused on revealing hidden truths of life, while others equated religion with acts of charity toward the poor and needy, and still others believed that faith had to manifest itself through miracles, or otherwise, it was not genuine faith. Finally, there were those who measured religion by the willingness to make extreme sacrifices, even to the point of self-destruction, or what we might now call suicidal acts in the name of God.

However, Paul the Apostle rejected all these definitions and measures. He defined religion and faith on only one basis: Love.

And love here in the text is not an abstract concept that floats in the air, but something expressed through thoughts, actions, words, and deeds. Religion and religious life should be able to build bridges only through love: Loving God, loving yourself, loving your country, and loving your neighbour. The biblical call is clear: Imitate Jesus; otherwise, you will be

driven by streams of violence, hatred, and anger, destroying what little remains of our torn society. Our only hope is to radiate that love of Jesus, poured into us through God the Holy Spirit.

And this is a challenging mission to human nature: to love when being hated, to embrace when rejected, to remain welcome when refused or looked down upon, to think nationally while considered a minority of remnant. It is especially challenging for communities that have not known the luxury of living in peace for centuries to live in love and share it. In societies shaped by hatred and survival instincts, choosing to love and share is a profound challenge. Love is often seen as weakness, while war is equated with strength, leaving little space for a religion of love. However, Paul presents a different worldview and calling: we love not because we are weak, but because we are strong. Only the strong can build bridges, open discussions, welcome others, work tirelessly for a stable society, and seek opportunities without losing their identity or nationality.

Our mission as churches is continuously challenged by societies weakened by war, yet at the same time encouraged by God's word.

> *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body, for we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.*
> *2 Cor 4:7–11*

May God's peace and reconciliation be poured out in the hearts of all nations.

Traumatised generations in the Near East. A case that seems to have to end.

On Rubble and Restoration

A theological reflection from South Lebanon

George Shammas[1]

Over the past year, Lebanon has endured yet another cycle of violence. The South Lebanon war, which began in October 2023 and intensified dramatically in September 2024, left deep scars on the land, on its people, and on our collective spirit. As someone committed to both theological reflection and practical ministry, I found myself navigating the blurred line between devastation and hope, word and action, lament and testimony.

From the moment the conflict intensified, we at the Compassion Protestant Society[2] mobilized to respond to the growing humanitarian crisis. Displacement spread rapidly as entire villages in southern Lebanon were evacuated. People arrived at our centres with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Families were torn apart, homes destroyed, and futures thrown into uncertainty. As a team, we worked to offer dignity and care in the midst of chaos. We distributed essential items – mattresses, blankets, pillows, hygiene, and dignity kits – and prepared hot meals to nourish bodies and communicate a more profound message: you are not forgotten. More importantly, we listened. Through psychosocial support sessions in three locations, we provided safe spaces for people to share, cry, process, and begin to heal.

Yet even as we served, a persistent heartbreak followed us. It was the heartbreak of hearing stories of homes lost, of children paralyzed by fear, of communities scattered without warning or reason. Most devastating was the realization that many of those displaced had no political or military affiliations. They were ordinary civilians, being punished by the full force of destruction.

In the village of Yaroun, I heard first hand testimonies from residents who had been forced to flee and later watched from a distance as their

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[1] George Shammas, NEST graduate BTh 2022, licensed Preacher National Evangelical Synod in Syria and Lebanon and Operational Support at the Compassion Protestant Society (CPS), Lebanon.

[2] Compassion Protestant Society (CPS) is the diaconal arm of the National Evangelical Synod in Syria and Lebanon (NESSL), see https://compassionps.org/.

homes were slowly destroyed. They were powerless to intervene. Powerless to protect what was theirs. One man told me, "We stood in the next village and watched our roof collapse. First the kitchen, then the rooms, then the walls." It was not only the structure that was falling, but memory, identity, and history were collapsing with it.

That moment struck me like a Biblical echo. I was reminded of the people of Biblical Israel, driven from their cities, watching Jerusalem being destroyed. I thought of Jeremiah lamenting, yet still proclaiming hope. In the ashes of ruin, Jeremiah dared to say, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases." It was this paradox of suffering and faith, of lament and testimony that I carried with me into the Christian villages we later visited with an ecumenical delegation of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant leaders, along with the Taizé brothers from France[3].

We went to Alma Chaab, Yaroun, and Tbnin, all villages that had been heavily impacted. We walked among the rubble. But these were not just ruins of buildings; they were ruins of memory, of belonging, of peace. And yet we prayed. We prayed with the people, not merely for them. We stood on the very ground where loss had taken root, and together we dared to testify to the goodness of God. Like Jeremiah, we trusted that restoration begins not with bricks, but with breath, carried by the stubborn, defiant hope that God is still present, even when all evidence seems to say otherwise.

For me, this experience has become a theological marker, a lived reminder that the gospel is not only proclaimed from pulpits but from the posture of solidarity. Theology is not distant reflection; it is incarnational. It steps into the wounds of history and bears witness to the possibility of healing, however slow or uncertain.

In South Lebanon, I saw a glimpse of what the Church is called to be: a community that holds the tension between devastation and hope, that serves with hands and weeps with hearts, and that prays not only for deliverance but for the courage to remain present in the aftermath. Our faith, after all, is not rooted in the absence of suffering, but in the presence of Christ *within* suffering.

Bearing witness to the quiet, persistent work of God amid the ruins of war and the resilience of those who continue to believe in peace has be-

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[3] Three brothers from the Taizé Community came to Lebanon in May 2025 on a solidarity visit to encourage the youths and to visit the towns in the South of Lebanon.

come central to my calling. It is here, in the ashes, that I find the Church most alive. Not triumphant, but faithful. Not loud, but present.

May we, as followers of Christ in the Middle East, continue to serve, to pray, and to speak with boldness, not because the road is easy, but because we follow the One who walks with us through every valley.

Fig. 1
Yaroun, a village in South Lebanon

Fig. 2
Tibnin, a village in South Lebanon

Fig. 3 Volunteers from the Compassion Protestant Society (CPS) distributing hot meals in one of the shelters in the Dhour Chouir area

What do I say to my Congregation in Alma Al-Shaab about the Events in Gaza and Palestine?

Rabih Taleb[1]

Alma Al-Shaab is a beautiful southern Lebanese village located along the border in the western sector, facing the settlements of Hanita and Shlomi. So, when we talk about the events in Gaza and Palestine, we are in fact also talking about the experience of pain, destruction, and displacement that we are living through in Alma Al-Shaab and South Lebanon.

What do I say to my suffering and displaced congregation?

The events in Gaza began on October 7, without warning or expectation. On Sunday, October 8, we were still in Alma Al-Shaab. The war began in Lebanon in the Shebaa Farms, located in the eastern sector, far from Alma Al-Shaab, which is situated in the western sector.

The sermon I preached that day, which I had written before the events began in Palestine, was titled "Where is God?" It was based on the biblical text from Isaiah 1:21–31, "How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers!"

This verse caught my attention, and I felt it was not only speaking about Jerusalem at that time, but also about our own country. Our experience is similar. How did the faithful village become a harlot? How did we reach this state? Why are we suffering? Where is God in our agony?

Whenever a believer experiences pain, they ask the same questions. And I heard these very same questions from some members of my church: Why us? What have we done to God? We have not yet forgotten the July War 2006 and all the destruction and displacement it brought, and now we are going through the same experience again.

When we, as believers, reach the point of asking these questions, we often take one of two positions:

> *The first position:* God is punishing us for our sins, and we are suffering because we sinned and deserve punishment.
> *The second position:* For believers who are uncomfortable with the image of a violent God, they cling to the image of a merciful God and

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[1] Rabih Taleb, NEST graduate M.Div. 2015, Pastor of the Presbyterian Church Alma el Chaab, Lebanon.

say that God "allowed" it to happen, or, in human language, turned a blind eye to the suffering.

Personally, I find neither position comforting. Both clothe God in our human garments, making Him either the cause or the conspirator.

What I try to say to my congregation is that we must distinguish between the true image of God and the image of God, as we humans perceive Him, or rather, as we would like to see Him.

In the Bible, there is a strong overlap between the two images. We read verses about the merciful and compassionate God, as well as other verses about the God who avenges our enemies and fulfils our desires.

But the Christian measure for discovering God's true stance is the image of Jesus Christ crucified. This scene revealed to us the depth of God's love for humanity. If we keep that image in mind as we look at what is happening in Gaza and the South, we will realize that God does not desire the killing that is taking place. He is neither the cause, nor the one blessing it, nor even the one allowing it.

Where is God then? He is with us in our pain and suffering, and that is precisely what Christ did when He became incarnate. He was on the front lines with the oppressed, the rejected, and the suffering.

In our harsh trials, we feel God's presence with us to strengthen and comfort us. However, He does not stop there; He is also at work.

Even though He is not responsible for the chaos we create, He works as He did in the story of creation in Genesis 1, *Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light …*

This is our hope today: in a God who comforts and strengthens, but who also works to bring about a new beginning for us in our region, where the land is truly formless and empty. Amen.

Church of Aalma El Chaeb/Tyre District, South Lebanon. Smoke was rising from a nearby house, struck by Israeli shelling at the start of the war between Hezbollah and Israel. At that time, most of the town's residents fled, leaving only about 30 people behind. One of the women who remained captured this image.

III. German Narrations

Logbook of Simultaneities

Holding heaven open and contradictions together

Ann-Kathrin Knittel[1]

7 October 2023. Brief and stark. A date that burns itself into memory like a scar.

On 8 October 2023, a Sunday, I stand in the pulpit. This year, that Sunday falls on Simchat Torah – a day of celebration and joy – and yet it is a day of mourning. The appointed sermon text: the Ten Commandments. "You shall not kill." So simple, so concise, something you can count on your ten fingers. And yet, so difficult to follow when conflicts are so complicated. On this very day, massacres are happening, and it is clear: bombs will fall, civilians will die. While friends in Israel no longer leave their shelters, I accompany my daughter to sleep. The simultaneity tears me apart: there, nights of bombing; here, evening rituals.

On 30 April 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in one of his prison letters: "I keep observing here that there are so few people who can hold many things within themselves at once." Maybe that is exactly the challenge of these days: to endure fear and hope, grief and joy, birth and death simultaneously.

On 10 October 2023, a friend wrote to me from Tel Aviv, "Since Saturday we woke up into our worst nightmare. Hundreds of Israelis were slaughtered, butchered in their beds, burned alive. Two hundred and sixty bodies of people who partied in a festival were found scattered in the forest. We are shocked. Terrified. Our hearts are broken."

While he weeps, I go to the gynaecologist because I am pregnant with our second daughter. How can one carry both inside at the same time? Bonhoeffer says, "In a sense, we harbour both God and the whole world within us. We weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice." There is nothing left for me but to take this seriously: to harbour God and the world within me, even if it almost tears me apart.

On 24 October 2023, a Lebanese friend was scheduled to give a lecture at my parish on "When crisis follows crisis … faith and trust in God

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[1] Dr Ann-Kathrin Knittel lives in Hemsbach and participated in the SiMO program in 2011/12. She is a pastor and recently working as Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Heidelberg.

during difficult times". For weeks, I have looked forward to this reunion after eight years, but the long and swift shadow of war has already reached Lebanon. The lecture title takes on a tragic meaning: tensions escalate, and he must return immediately to Beirut on the last available flight before we can meet. On October 24, instead, the first Israeli hostages are released. That evening, instead of the lecture, we gather to pray for peace. We pray with words from Psalm 46:

> *Come and see what the LORD has done, you who wreak such destruction on earth. God makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.*

We pray those words, and yet I know: the psalm as a whole is, of course, a partisan one, not yet envisioning some great universal peace, but the prayer of a people biblical Israel – addressed to its God, who has become the God of us all. And so he is the God in whom I place my hope, the one who will bring an end to wars everywhere, not so that one group may find rest, but so that God's entire creation may finally catch its breath.

Almost a year later, on 25 September 2024, bombs also fall on Beirut. "I feel that I will vomit my heart out. I am very anxious. My children can't sleep; they vomit when they hear the detonations", writes a friend from Lebanon. That evening, I am not upset that one daughter takes 1.5 hours to fall asleep and the other wakes every hour during the night, but I thank God for their unbroken liveliness, and that what robs them of sleep is only curiosity, not fear of air raids.

This timeline could go on. But as it stands, wars last longer than I can remember in detail. I live a full life: Our second daughter is born. My grandfather dies, and I bury him. I start a new job. We celebrate birthdays, get annoyed with delayed trains, and take vacations. I go shopping, write emails, give lectures, and organize baptisms. Life keeps moving. Life breaks through, even as the world lies in shards.

At the same time, tensions are rising here in Germany. Between pro-Palestinian protests, anti-Semitic attacks on Jews, and declarations of support for the State of Israel, the situation is becoming more fragile. I often hear heated arguments both privately and publicly. Depending on whom I am talking to, I sometimes feel I am going too far or not far enough. "I keep observing here that there are so few people who can hold

many things within themselves at once." And yet: simultaneities everywhere you look.

That also applies to my friends in Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon. I see their pictures on Instagram: people dancing, celebrating, loving, and laughing. My friends in Lebanon send photos from parties where the music is louder than the worries. My friends in Israel tell me that, despite everything, they recited the New Year's blessing. And I – I hold my children in my arms while scrolling through news that leaves me breathless. Again, I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in his letter of 30 April 1944, wrote, "Life is not pushed back into a single dimension, but remains multidimensional – polyphonic." That is harder to live than it sounds. But maybe that is precisely what faith is: the endurance of polyphony, the refusal to let life become one-dimensional. Maybe that is the only way not to break: to hold contradictions together. Heaven and hell in one breathe. Birth and burial, laughter and lament, peace and war.

Perhaps these irreconcilable divides point us to the One who unites what cannot be united: God and human, Creator of the world and our brother and sister in suffering, the Eternal One and the One who can change His mind.

Maybe this is our light and our cross as Christians in our very different contexts: to see the tensions and yet hold them together, to feel the pain and celebrate the hope, to pray for the one and not forget the other. And in all this: to keep heaven open.

Shalom
they say
a thousand times
there
where there is not only unrest
but war

Habibi
they say too
a thousand times
where there is so much love
that it breeds hate

Shalom
they say
a thousand times
every day
where it is spelled out
what it means –
retaliation
How many eyes is one leg?

Habibi
they say
a thousand times
every day
where one must ask:
Am I worth it?
How many ears is one arm?

Shalom habibi
ah,
if only it were possible
stitch by stitch
to close the wounds
with patience
stitch by stitch
wound by wound
eye for eye
arm for arm
hold it all together
ah,
habibi
shalom[2]

[2] Poem by A.-K. Knittel.

The Story of a reversed Culture Shock and beyond

Antonia Kura[1]

I studied in Beirut at NEST during the 2022/2023 academic year. Not long after returning to Berlin and before I had fully realized I was back in Germany, the Hamas massacre occurred on October 7, followed by the wars in Gaza and South Lebanon. The reactions and debates from the German public, the Protestant Church Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (EKBO), and the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), of which the EKBO is a member, made me feel so alienated that it took me a long time to find a way to cope with living in Germany again.

On 16 October 2023, the academic year began at my university in Berlin. During the convocation of the theological faculty that day, the massacre of October 7, the rocket attacks on Israeli territory in the following days, and the suffering and death of Israelis were mentioned. We were asked to observe a minute of silence for "the 1400 victims [full stop]". It felt like a slap to the face and left me, along with a few others in the audience, in shock. Sure, addressing Hamas's assault on October 7 and the resulting death and suffering was important, especially since the faculty has close ties to Israeli academics and institutions. But what about other victims of the war that followed? What about the suffering and death of so many others? By the time the speech was given, 2,808 people had been reported killed in Gaza, 60 in the West Bank, and several people in Lebanon (I could not find the exact number) – including Reuters' journalist Issa Abdallah, a friend of friends in Beirut. A friend of mine had already lost an entire branch of his family, who were celebrating his cousin's wedding in Gaza on the day they were killed. None of these people were mentioned, not a single word was spoken, and there was no room to grieve for them. For me, this is a clear example of how public and church reactions in Berlin and Germany remained limited and insufficient for many months afterward.

Especially during the first year, after 7 October, and even afterward, it sometimes felt like I was living on a different planet. Seeing so many

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[1] Antonia Kura lives in Berlin and participated in the SiMO program in 2022/23. She is currently studying for her final exams in Protestant Theology at Humboldt University in Berlin and wrote the text in September 2025.

people around me continue with their lives without noticing that others and I – many of whom were much more affected by the war and the German public debate than I was – could not help but be frustrated and shocked. It was disheartening to see how little empathy there was for Arabs and other victims and witnesses of the war, and how little a significant part of German society understood or realized the impact the war in the Middle East, as well as Germany's reactions to it, had on hundreds of thousands of German citizens and internationals living in Germany who have Middle Eastern (and non-Israeli) family ties or close connections to people in the region. Some Israelis in Germany also felt an absence of empathy in their private circles, even though there were many expressions of solidarity with Israelis in the German public – something that was largely missing for Arabs. However, I will focus here on the lack of solidarity with non-Israelis.

The public media contributed to this empathy gap by emphasizing Israeli trauma and Hamas's and Hezbollah's aggression, while neglecting Palestinian or Lebanese trauma and Israeli violence. They also overlooked the context of the October 7 massacre and the significant power imbalance between the conflicting sides. Furthermore, tactics such as derailment and delegitimizing expert opinions were used, among others. Recent research by media critics and journalists, such as Kai Hafez, Nadia Zaboura, and Fabian Goldmann, exposes journalistic malpractice and reveals how the media has created highly problematic narratives (see sources below for more details).

Media, politicians, and other public figures were quick to condemn the rise of antisemitism, often linking it mainly to Arabs and Muslims. While antisemitism is indeed increasing – which is concerning and needs to be addressed – most of the anti-Semitic incidents reported in Germany are carried out by the far right, and these numbers have been rising for several years. It is true that after October 7, anti-Semitic incidents have surged, including hate crimes online and property damage. However, many of the incidents reported after 7 October in the statistics involve statements like "From the river to the sea" or individuals resisting police arrest at pro-Palestine protests – claims and acts many would argue are not anti-Semitic. The sharp increase in anti-Semitic cases after 7 October is therefore partly due to incidents very much open to debate.

To clarify this point, consider an example: The police president in Berlin in autumn 2024 stated in a speech that most of the anti-Semitic vi-

olent acts under investigation after 7 October had, thankfully, not targeted Jews but instead targeted the police. These incidents primarily involved protesters resisting arrest during pro-Palestine demonstrations, which some police officials generally see as anti-Semitic. As a result, these cases are being classified as anti-Semitic. Since 7 October 2023, the Berlin police have been regularly attacking peaceful protesters, claiming to act in self-defence and portraying their own attacks as anti-Semitic violence against them. They also often fail to properly differentiate between criminal offenders, legal protesters, and bystanders. Witness reports and videos show that, for example, people leaving a mall near a demonstration or a waitress serving customers outside a restaurant next to a protest were mistakenly identified as protesters and arrested. The Berlin police are also known for routinely arresting Jewish anti-genocide protesters on charges of antisemitism. All these incidents, among others, are included in the anti-Semitic incident statistics, which distorts the data concerning pro-Palestinian or anti-genocide protesters, many of whom are Arab or Muslim. My critique of these statistics is not to deny that anti-Semitic incidents may occur at some demonstrations but rather to call for a more careful analysis of the reported cases and overall data, which reveal significant shortcomings. In the same speech, where it was emphasized that protesters – especially Arabs and Muslims – in Berlin are largely blamed for a rise in antisemitism, the police president also warned Jews and queer people to avoid certain districts in Berlin mainly inhabited by Arabs, citing their supposed sympathies for terrorist organizations, thereby further fuelling stigmatization.

The rise of antisemitism and the measures politicians took against it were usually mentioned in connection with October 7, often relating to pro-Palestine and anti-genocide demonstrations. Many incidents listed in statistics on antisemitism could be disputed regarding their anti-Semitic character. This gave a false impression of who is mainly responsible for antisemitism and led to the stigmatization of Arabs, Muslims, and pro-Palestine demonstrations overall.

The EKBO (Protestant Church Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia) launched a campaign titled “We Protect Jewish Life” in response to “the increase in anti-Semitic incidents in Germany after the Hamas terror attack.” By indirectly reinforcing the false impression of who is mainly responsible for antisemitism in Germany and focusing its protection efforts solely on Jewish life, while Muslim and Arab lives are also highly

threatened after October 7 in Germany, the campaign promotes a gap in empathy. I know it hurts and angers Muslims and Arabs in Berlin to see that their lives are apparently not worth protecting by the church. Even when they are suffering, facing discrimination, or come under attack, the church seems to refuse to stand for them and instead helps stigmatize them. Not only publicly but also internally, the EKBO contributed to the idea that the rise of antisemitism and the danger faced by Jews in Germany are strongly linked to Arab and Muslim antisemitism – e.g., by partnering with the church's headquarters during the "nationwide action day against antisemitism and Israel hatred," serving Israeli and Jewish food in the cafeteria, and asking for donations to an organization fighting antisemitism in Berlin, emphasizing that this organization specifically works to combat "Muslim hatred of Jews."

While the media, politicians, the church, and the public focused on antisemitism and linked it to Arabs and Muslims, the anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian racism and attacks – which, after 7 October, increased to alarming levels in Germany – were barely mentioned, further widening the empathy gap.

I was not only frustrated and shocked by the lack of empathy toward certain groups in society and in the Middle East, as well as their stigmatization, but I was also surprised by the silence surrounding the war events in the Middle East and Germany's responses to them. People were reluctant to talk about what was happening in Gaza, hesitant to condemn Israeli warfare or the war overall, hesitant to criticize Germany's arms deliveries to Israel and Germany's declaration of full support for Israel (even though as early as November, some people warned of a potential genocide), hesitant to condemn the criminalization of protests and entire groups of people. Instead, people often chose to remain silent.

Organizations like Amnesty International and groups of public intellectuals have warned that we are witnessing the weaponization of antisemitism for political or personal gain. This often helps to delegitimize legitimate protests against Israeli policies and warfare. Several intellectuals, such as Deborah Feldman, have noted that in Germany, accusations of antisemitism have been used to ruin many careers, whereas accusations like racism or misogyny typically do not have such drastic effects. The reason why antisemitism accusations are more powerful than others is rooted in German memory culture. In recent years, this culture has been heavily scrutinized and criticized by many intellectuals, including Max

Czollek and Pankaj Mishra, who view it as primarily serving German interests. They argue it is used to purge Germans of their historic guilt over Nazi crimes and genocide, allowing them to develop a more positive and sometimes even self-righteous sense of moral authority. At the same time, this narrative justifies violence and inequality, and as Mishra points out regarding Gaza, it supports atrocities. Consequently, Jewish trauma is exploited for non-Jewish German interests. The far right benefits the most from this, portraying itself as a close ally to Israel and shifting the blame for antisemitism onto the left and Muslims.

The fear of being accused of antisemitism effectively leads to the silencing and self-censorship of voices in the church, throughout nearly all parts of society and intellectual life. The Archive of Silence database documents cancellations of events by artists, researchers, and others due to Palestinian advocacy, comprising a notably high number of Jewish intellectuals and artists. However, this database is only the tip of the iceberg; it is far from comprehensive, as it cannot include those who weren't even invited to events because of organizers' fears of pressure, nor can it include self-censorship, which many public figures and intellectuals have admitted exists. Studies are emerging that show alarmingly high numbers among experts, for example, in the Middle East. Besides the Archive, a documentary titled "Das laute Schweigen" (The loud Silence) is currently being produced, aiming to reveal the mechanisms of silencing in the German debate about Israel and Palestine. It is expected to be released in spring 2026.

My church, too, has been and still is, to some extent, engaging in silence. Initially, after 7 October, the focus was solely on Jewish victims; there were services and prayers for them as a sign of solidarity with Israel and the Jews. After several weeks, general appeals and prayers for peace could be heard; however, those appeals and prayers failed to name systemic inequalities that hinder a just peace, failed to denounce the war, Israeli warfare, and Germany's involvement in the conflict. But what use is a prayer or an appeal if it does not address the obstacles to peace, one's own complicity in the war, and one's own responsibility and opportunities in working toward a just peace?

Let's take a quick look at two more recent examples concerning the EKBO and the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD). These cannot cover the whole topic exhaustively – more detailed research is needed – but I hope they give the reader a rough idea of the current situation. In April

2025, the EKBO issued a statement on peace, reaffirming that the church aims for a just peace worldwide and sees itself as a participant in pursuing that goal. The statement discusses Ukraine, tensions in Europe, and growing polarization in society, but it does not mention the war in Gaza, to which our government is supplying arms. If the church truly wants to be a "church of just peace", should not it also consider the war in Gaza, especially given that Nicaragua filed a lawsuit against Germany before the International Court of Justice under the Genocide Convention for Germany's support of Israel?

Another recent example is the EKD's statement on the second anniversary on 7 October. It shows significant improvement compared to previous statements. It denounces antisemitism as well as the stigmatization of Palestinians and Muslims – adopting a much more nuanced tone that no longer portrays Muslims or Arabs as the main perpetrators of antisemitism. It also acknowledges that they are targeted, helping to reduce the empathy gap and stigmatization. The statement mentions atrocities committed by both Hamas and Israel – though it avoids certain terms like apartheid, ethnic cleansing or genocide, as is often the case in Germany – and it recognizes the danger faced by churches in the Holy Land. It calls for the upholding of international law and pledges support for Israeli and Palestinian civil societies in their reconciliation efforts. However, it again completely omits German complicity in the ongoing war, which occurs on several levels. Due to the brevity of this text, I cannot address all aspects of German involvement, so I will focus on the most obvious one: arms delivery. Earlier, I mentioned the case in the ICJ, and recently, new facts have emerged regarding Germany's arms exports to Israel. On August 8, 2025, the German chancellor, responding to public pressure, stated that Germany would no longer deliver arms that could be used by Israeli soldiers to attack Gaza. Germany officially halted approval for new deliveries but continued to ship arms that had already been approved prior to the chancellor's statement. A recent inquiry by several members of parliament to the Bundestag reveals that, despite the chancellor's declaration, new arms shipments worth 2.5 million Euros were approved afterward. These included among others target reconnaissance for drones and precision control for rockets, bombs, and tank guns – arms that could be used in attacks on Gaza. By claiming to support Israeli and Palestinian civil societies, the church portrays itself as a benevolent bystander but completely ignores the fact that the country it resides in is complicit and

that, as an actor and moral authority within German society, it is also responsible for not addressing or criticizing this.

All these issues and more caused my frustration, shock, and shame for my church and the society I live in. Many of these developments, like the weaponization of antisemitism or the lack of empathy, were not new, but suddenly they grew much larger in scope and gained more momentum. I saw how these issues led to my country and my church failing our siblings in the Middle East – our Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian, and even our Israeli siblings, some might argue. I also saw how these problems caused my society and church to fail many of its members, fellow citizens, and inhabitants, and I am deeply concerned about where this is heading. It was, and still is, difficult to accept, and it took me a long time to find my place in society and the church, as well as a constructive way to deal with these issues.

Early on, I began sharing information on social media about the situation in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria to raise awareness, provide people with information missing from German public media, and join other voices calling for a just peace. As an initial reaction to my posts, some fellow students I used to have nice conversations with stopped greeting me in the hallways; some ignored me for up to a year. I received some hateful messages on social media, and well-meaning friends advised me to stop posting about Palestine, Lebanon, and a just peace. They warned me that someone might be taking screenshots of my posts to use against my career and me later on. None of this stopped me from sharing more posts, but of course, it was not easy to deal with the negative and sometimes even hateful reactions and the fear they caused.

I grew up quite privileged, and trying to follow Jesus daily meant helping others and stepping in without putting myself at risk. Over the past two years, I have gradually realized that trying to be a disciple can become very uncomfortable. I have learned that witnessing the suffering and resilience of those unheard and unseen by others, and stepping up for humanity, can land me in trouble. Staying vocal is not easy and can be costly. I had heard this earlier in my life when learning about Germany's past, but it always felt distant, and I never really faced any trouble myself or expected to, growing up privileged and unaware of my privileges.

I was born in Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen, which had two concentration camps in its centre and nearby during the Nazi era. In school, we discussed the Nazi era every year across several subjects. The topic was al-

ways present. As a child and teenager, I sometimes wondered what I would have done during that time. Which side would I have been on? It was hard to understand how so many people could have ended up on the wrong side, but that was the reality.

I was told that the population in Oranienburg during the Nazi era did not know anything about the concentration camps. The residents supposedly had no idea what was happening just a few hundred meters away. However, it is proven that they saw the trains arriving with crowds of people being taken to the camps, they saw the inmates walking to the sites outside the camp where they were forced into labour, and they must have heard the shots when several thousand Soviet prisoners of war were killed in a purpose-built "neck shot unit" within a few days. But the population closed their ears and looked away.

And then I learned something about two of my great-grandparents. In my grandma's stories, they always seemed kind and good, and I believe they were in some ways. But, as it turned out, a Jewish family lived in their village. One day in the early 1940s, that family vanished, and no one knew where they had gone. Yet, no one asked or tried to find out.

My great-grandparents, their village, the population in Oranienburg, and the vast majority of German society at the time were all complicit in the crimes committed by the Nazis. They did not protest what was happening; they were privileged enough not to be on the deportation list and chose not to see what was going on around them.

In the past two years, I have been reminded of this when thinking about the cost of stepping in for others. Of course, the Nazi era was different from today. Today, stepping in for humanity and advocating for the rights of Palestinians might get you disinvited, disqualified from jobs, have your funding revoked, or get you beaten up and arrested by the Berlin police, but it would not get you killed. And, of course, the crimes committed during the Nazi era can only be compared to a certain degree with what is happening in Germany and the Middle East. But especially since protests in today's Germany are not lethal, how is it possible that so few people have spoken up? How is it possible that so many individuals and institutions, which claimed to learn from the past, have remained silent, self-censoring to avoid trouble? It's shocking to see how quickly people will sell their moral beliefs for a seemingly comfortable life. And I understand that it is tempting. For a long time, when I posted about the death toll in Gaza, the systematic destruction of southern Lebanese vil-

lages, farmland and olive groves, actions of Israeli-Palestinian peace activists, the Israeli incursion into Syrian territory, or similar topics, I anticipated the negative reactions I might face, how it would feel to be ignored by classmates who would pretend they didn't recognize me, and I wondered what jobs I might miss out on if someone tried to launch a smear campaign against me. But for me, the stakes are relatively low. I do not have a full-time job I have always dreamed of, nor a family I need to support. If I do not dare to speak out, to use my privileges and stand up for others, how can I expect others, with far more at stake than I have, to do the same?

But while I am trying to speak up, raise awareness, and step in for others, I wonder: who am I not seeing? Who am I excluding or showing too little grace to? I want my solidarity to be inclusive and free of blind spots, if that is possible. That is why I do my best to stay engaged in conversations, even – or maybe especially – with those who have different opinions. For months, I argued back and forth with a friend who has very different views on what is happening in the Middle East and Germany, and who mainly repeats the narrative of the Israeli government and German right-wing media. Neither of us persuaded the other to change perspective, but at least we are still friends, even if not as close as before, which can be a lot these days. I have come to understand his logic, even though I do not share it. I am happy whenever people approach me and ask to hear my perspective, because they have a different one and want to understand mine. I highly respect that, and I try to be like them. Unfortunately, that does not always work, and it worries me. I believe the worst thing that can happen to German society is when people stop talking to each other. It definitely does not help build empathy. I realize that staying in conversation or starting new ones is a privilege. I can enter debates that others cannot because they might face racism or find it too painful. That is why others and I need to do it even more.

For me, another aspect of speaking out and taking action was starting a reading group on Palestinian theology earlier this year. I personally wanted to engage more with the topic, educate myself, and find another way to amplify Palestinian voices. I was eager to connect with like-minded people in the church. Once I decided to start the reading group, I asked the student representatives of my faculty to share information about it via their email and social media channels. They refused. Then, I printed flyers and handed them out to the faculty. They disappeared within an

hour. Finally, I posted something on social media and received messages from people in different German cities. Initially, I had planned to hold the reading group in Berlin, but in the end, it became an online group, which is actually fine – great, in fact. We are mostly students and PhD candidates studying Christian theology. Some of us have lived in the Middle East, and others have knowledge of different liberation theologies. Together, with our diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge, we are learning a great deal about the Palestinian situation, as well as liberating interpretations of the Bible and more. The discussions in our group deepen our understanding of biblical texts and challenge us theologically. Moreover, we are realizing that our own theological tradition is not innocent in what is happening in Palestine, Israel, and the broader Middle East today. Some German liberal theologians, like Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, have seriously discredited Palestinians and have theological justifications for new violence and oppression against them. There are important responsibilities ahead for my church and for us theologians within it to address this.

Recently, the public discourse has begun to shift a little. Some people who were previously silent are now speaking out, with some admitting their past mistakes and apologizing. However, many pretend they were always against the war and in favour of Palestinian rights, even though some of them previously helped suppress and cancel voices advocating for just peace for Palestine, Palestinians, Lebanese, and others. The suppression and silencing of voices may have lessened somewhat but they continue.

Public opinion has shifted regarding the war on Gaza and Germany's support – such as through arms shipments. This change in discourse has several causes, but one key reason is the many wonderful people who refused to stay silent, thus helping bring about this small change. I call it small because there is still a long way to go, and there is no time to rest.

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To study in Times of extreme Polarization

Johannes Mieth[1]

In the Exposé for my master's thesis, I described my perception of the German discourses and how I struggle with them as follows:

> The terrorist attack carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023, in southern Israel is arguably the most significant event in the Middle East since 9/11. The immediate and consequential loss of security for Jewish people in Israel and around the world, as well as the war crimes committed by the right-wing Israeli government in retaliation for Hamas's despicable attack, continue to this day.
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> Public discussions about the Middle East conflict in Germany are shaped by the country's complicated relationship with its own past and an implicit and explicit need to do better than previous generations. Many people in Germany derive a strong anti-Antisemitism stance from this, while others view the Middle East primarily through a lens critical of colonialism.
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> In recent years, and especially since October 7, discussions in Germany have taken on a new level of accusatory, polarizing, and exclusionary tone, completely lacking the nuance and sensitivity required for such a highly complex and for many emotionally charged issue. When speaking with those affected and their close allies, one encounters undifferentiated positions and an implicit or explicit expectation of unequivocal solidarity with "the right side". Many statements by those less affected serve only as reassurance that they are on the "right side", while accepting the marginalization of other positions and people, including those directly affected. Truly constructive contributions that acknowledge the complexity of the situation are gradually becoming more common, but they remain the minority.
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> My academic interest in untangling and improving the discourse landscape is closely intertwined with my personal motivation and

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> connection to the topic. After completing my intermediate theological exams, I lived in Lebanon from 2017 to 2019, where I completed a study program and worked for a German political foundation. During this time, in countless encounters, I began to view regional history from a non-European perspective and witnessed the great significance of many seemingly minor events – for example, when unrest broke out in several Lebanese cities after the US embassy was moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.
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> I met people who had lived through the 2006 Lebanon War and who are still reminded of those traumatic events by fireworks and aircrafts, and I, too, felt uneasy when I spotted an Israeli surveillance drone in the Lebanese sky above me …
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> Since that day [7 October], I have observed how atheists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Germany, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and many other countries feel and inform themselves, take positions, justify themselves and accuse each other, how they suffer, and mourn, how they feel powerless and angry. I encounter similar feelings of frustration and powerlessness in my work in political education, which takes place largely in schools, where anti-Semitic and racist narratives can only ever be prevented partially.
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> When following the discourse in Germany, I find that such complexity and multifaceted perspectives are lacking. As described above, the discourse often seems to focus on internal German issues, i.e., aligning with the right side of the German political landscape, rather than on the needs of those directly affected.

Living, studying, and working in Berlin, I saw the most intense manifestation of this polarization of discourses. On 7 October 2023, members of an Islamist association infamously handed out Baklava in celebration in Neukölln, Berlin's district that is most characterized by Arab migrant and post-migrant communities. This circulated through all media, setting the stage for the narrative of the "pro-Hamas Arab", rooted in Germany's lingering social racism.

Soon after, another narrative emerged: the "new left academic antisemitism", a simplistic label for the growing groups of compassionate and well-educated young people who expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian people and criticized the Israeli government. Both narratives serve as easy excuses for not engaging with the actual arguments against

the Israeli government and for not acknowledging the suffering of Palestinians.

A year later, a study by the University of Mannheim revealed the weakness of these narratives. It found that young left-leaning academics in Germany had both the lowest incidence of antisemitism and the highest solidarity with Palestinians. This is largely because they tend to be empathetic and sensitive to discrimination and injustice general, which certainly cannot be said for all groups within the German society.[2]

But when the study was released, it was already too late – the rhetorical trenches had been dug and the political consequences were drastic. Civil rights were gradually restricted under the guise of preventing antisemitism. Cultural events were cancelled, and journalists' careers were ended over pro-Palestinian statements deemed too uncomfortable for public or semi-public institutions. But most importantly, the authorities rejected the registration of many pro-Palestinian protests. Those that were allowed to proceed were accompanied by a massive police presence.

Many alleged cases of "anti-Semitic violence against the police" (an absurd classification in itself) could be proven groundless. In one prominent case, a forensic video analysis showed that a police officer had injured his own hand while, without provocation, punching protesters in the face.[3] At the same time, almost every pro-Palestinian protest included anti-Semitic slogans and even flags of Islamist organizations or other radical groups, so that I personally rarely felt comfortable attending any of them. This is leaving me and many others without a space to express solidarity with Palestinians or voice our criticism against the German policy of unconditional support for the right-wing Israeli government.

The political pressure against pro-Palestinian positions and groups extended even to university campuses in Berlin. At one university, a peaceful protest camp was cleared almost immediately after the president called the police. At another university, a heavy police presence appeared on campus uninvited, resulting in a viral video showing a tall officer in full riot gear facing the president – a petite woman – who was calmly ex-

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[2] Cf. www.uni-mannheim.de/en/newsroom/presse/pressemitteilungen/2024/oktober/gip-antisemitismus-1 (10 December 2025).

[3] The full analysis at https://counter-investigations.org/investigation/ police-violence-and-misinformation-at-the-2025-nakba-day-protests-berlin, it was published in German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/ artikel/politik/berlin-palaestina-demonstration-verletzter-polizist-nakba-e991279/ on 11 July 2025).

plaining that the police presence was neither needed nor wanted. In a third case, a lecture by Francesca Albanese, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, scheduled to take place at a university in Berlin, was moved off campus after the conservative mayor of Berlin demanded its cancellation.

Meanwhile, radical anti-Israel groups moved into those already limited and contested spaces of discourse on campus. When a group of students occupied a lecture hall for several days, the university president attempted to initiate dialogue, but her efforts were shouted down. After the protestors were eventually removed, the rooms were found destroyed, with broken furniture and a range of openly anti-Semitic slogans smeared on the walls. In February 2024, a Jewish student was violently attacked and suffered a skull fracture, most likely targeted because he was politically active on campus, raising awareness about antisemitism and advocating for the release of the Israeli hostages.

Overall, there was a lack of constructive, empathetic, knowledge-oriented spaces across Berlin's university campuses. Only a few faculties dared to organize small, closed events that could not meet the need for open dialogue or provide an outlet for the constantly growing pain and frustration among many of the students, whether that stemmed from the situation in Gaza, the fate of the Israeli hostages, or the lack of recognition of increasing racism and antisemitism everywhere.

One rare exception was the Mosse Lectures, which featured four major lectures on various aspects of Zionism and its consequences, including controversial talks by Bashir Bashir and Shaul Magid. Not only did those lectures bring invaluable theoretical and practical insights, but they also served as proof that it would have been possible to host academic lectures and debates without escalation or scandal.

Now, after expressing all this criticism and frustration, the question remains: what can we do better?

My personal approach is to follow the example set by the organizers of the Mosse Lectures: Face the challenge and demonstrate that it is indeed possible to do better. This means creating spaces for genuine dialogue, where people can exchange perspectives and acknowledge the suffering of all sides without reducing them to opposing camps, as if they were rival football teams.

Following this approach, we successfully secured a workshop at Kirchentag 2025, Germany's largest Protestant gathering and conference.

As the German alumni association of the SiMO participants, we prepared and facilitated a session that addressed the difficult situation of Christians in Palestine. Out of the 4,000 total program items, our workshop was one of a handful covering the Middle East and the only one even mentioning *Palestine* in its title.

Even though the organizers apparently tried to side-line the topic as too difficult and controversial, events like ours refuted their approach. They exposed a reluctance to engage with what is arguably one of the most pressing political and moral questions of our time.

That same summer, I led a five-day seminar about the Israel/Palestine conflict for scholarship holders of the Protestant Studierendenwerk Villigst (scholarship foundation and student association). My focus was on presenting the wide range of perspectives and approaches that are part of the German discourses and how each perspective and approach shapes the perception of what is happening. As part of that framework, I invited different Christian and Jewish guest speakers from Palestine, Israel, and Germany to share their perspectives.

The overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants in both formats demonstrated that it is indeed possible to create positive and inclusive spaces, underscoring the fact that such spaces are still lacking in our German society.

However, this requires an effort that many are neither willing nor capable of making: accepting the limitations of our own knowledge and perspective. Only then can we approach others with an open mind and open heart, ready to understand, learn, and broaden our horizons. We must acknowledge others' suffering, pain, and fears, whether we share them or not, because pain and fear are not rational, and no argument can simply erase them.

We must listen and be fully present to those who need it – even if that means sharing in their feelings of helplessness or vulnerability when we cannot offer solutions. Even if it does not resolve the underlying problem, being heard can help ease their pain.

These are lessons that are easier to formulate than to apply, including myself. However, one thing that helps is to connect with and stay in contact with people from diverse backgrounds who live in different contexts and realities. The SiMO Program can provide a foundation for ongoing exchanges of perspectives and ideas. It certainly has for me.

The Lines between us

Fears and hopes after Assad

Joscha Quade[1]

8 December 2024, was a cold Sunday in Stuttgart. Sunday mornings are usually when Stuttgart's main streets are not crowded with cars. But that day, they were filled with vehicles that kept honking and playing loud music. From open windows, green, white, and black flags were flying. In every German city, you could see similar scenes. While residents without ties to Syria were just waking up and slowly getting the news from the previous night, people with Syrian roots were already on the streets, sharing a powerful and seemingly common emotion: joy.

After more than fifty years, the Assad family's rule in Syria ended. The opening of Sednaya's gates revealed past horrors but also brought hope for freedom, not just for the prisoners but also for the entire society, freeing them from the grip of the old regime. From an outside perspective, the diaspora in Germany appeared united – an image reinforced by New Syria – merchandise flooding Arabic stores in Berlin and other areas. And whenever the Syrian-German music group *Shkoon* performed with the new colours on stage during a concert in Berlin, the crowd erupted in cheers.

December 8 marked a turning point, with the change in colour becoming a symbol of hope for the future. The past was gone, and everyone was now free to dream of new possibilities. Even German politicians soon started to dream: since the dictator had left, there was no reason why Syrian refugees could not return home. Ahead of the federal elections, many parties – from the far right to the liberal centre – called to undo immigration, not only from Syria, as a way to address various social issues. The campaign peaked at the end of January 2025, when conservatives and the far right voted together in parliament for a motion to reduce immigration and increase deportations. This move shook the confidence that democratic parties still agreed on key issues. After the vote, a Holocaust survivor returned his Federal Cross of Merit.

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[1] Joscha Quade lives in Stuttgart and participated in the SiMO program in 2019/20. He is working for the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) and wrote the text in September 2025.

The developments in Syria did not cause this disruption. However, since the German debate on migration mainly focuses on Syria and Afghanistan, the end of the Assad era likely felt like a win for those who see deportations as a key tool in migration policies. For this country, the moral argument against sending people back to places where they might face persecution and torture – something proven by German courts, which had convicted former prison staff from Syria for these violations – had lost its validity.

While the streets in Germany echoed with celebration, I learned about the fears and concerns of friends and former classmates in Syria. This was not the time for them to take to the streets, but to stay hidden. Could this be the return of the so-called Islamic State, which once aimed to kill Christians when they would get the chance to return to places they had to retreat from? Did not its fighters also contribute to destruction, torture, and killing? Did those living in cities retaken by Assad's forces believe they were living in "after the war"? Now, war was returning; cities were conquered – or liberated – again. A sense of stability first dissolved into fear, then into uncertainty. What just happened? What words should describe it? For Christians and others, the answer to these questions seems to be waiting in the future – once they gain clarity about whether they can have a place in the country.

When I visited Syria in June 2025, the country and the world had already experienced deadly violence in the coastal cities, and the new government either could not or would not stop the massacres quickly. Tensions in Suweida were already high and would escalate soon after my departure, and a suicidal attack on a church in Damascus would kill and injure dozens. Even without considering the interventions of neighbouring countries, could one, given these events, still call it a free country?

"You will not stay long enough to experience the negative aspects of the country", I was told before my trip. And indeed, it went very smoothly. Upon arrival, a security officer served coffee at the border, and no one at the several checkpoints along the roads dared to bother us. The roads, at least, were free. Many restrictions were unofficial – they were more like expectations: how to dress, what to drink, and even how to drink. A water company even started printing recommendations on its bottles. A new freedom of speech emerged alongside behavioural (self-)restrictions – restrictions that Christians, in particular, felt.

Apart from the traffic police, the beards and badges of the security forces reveal who is now in control, including several who apparently came from other countries to fight. Are their priorities to serve the people or their beliefs? Will they allow political competition or limit the legislature's power? Is there a cost to their loyalty, and who will bear it?

Regardless of whether anyone still holds hope for the political future, the current economic situation is poor, and any government will be judged by its ability to foster recovery. Ruined houses are everywhere, electricity is often unavailable, and many believe there has been little progress. They demand positive change. A young generation is ready to be part of that change and to help rebuild the country, but they are also prepared to leave if their efforts are rejected. Germany remains a preferred destination. Germany, which reached a low point in the heated debate on immigration in January, and is now negotiating possible deportations with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Germans like to believe that the recovery of their country after the end of the dictatorship and war on 8 May 1945 was an "economic miracle" – a term that downplays the foreign assistance that made it possible. It includes a sense of guilt but allows the Germans to take ownership of the success. In this view, immigrants are portrayed as people who undeservedly share in the wealth accumulated by others. They are demonized as threats to society, both economically and culturally. Allegedly, they are violent, criminal, and anti-Semitic and therefore embody all the traits Germans want to reject, because we have learned from our history and are rooted in our enlightened Jewish-Christian heritage. So, millions of euros are spent on border control, and we all know that this often involves violence. Human dignity is violated every day to draw a line between us and them. And I got my visas for Lebanon and Syria upon arrival. How did I deserve that?

Against all exclusive narratives stands the practice of Communion. Passing on and sharing what we have undeservedly received is at its core. We come together to recognize the thirst and hunger of body and soul for recreation. Wherever we are or where we come from, for a moment, the light of a new world shines amid our torn countries and societies. Undeservedly, I was able to be part of such a moment after returning from Syria to Lebanon, as NEST closed its Continuing Education Seminar with a small service. May these moments guide our hearts

as we step into the known world where drones fly, rockets fall, and nationalism blinds us.

8 December 2024 was a cold Sunday in Stuttgart. The art gallery advertised its current exhibition in bold red letters: “All systems fail.”

wortGEWALTig[1]

Stories of "power-hungry Jews" and "Islamist Assassins"

Sarah Radon[2]

Some news carries, from the moment you hear it, the certainty that it will keep the affected region in suspense, and capture the world's attention. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were one such moment, as was Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Even before the newsreader finishes the report, it is obvious: This will put international relations to the test, deepen hostilities, and trigger geopolitically driven trench warfare.

7 October 2023[3] joins the ranks of such momentous dates that leave deep scars in history. It was a dark day that opened another violent chapter of escalation in current events. A terrorist act, a crime devoid of any sense of humanity. It was an act of violence of cataclysmic proportions, leaving one speechless and at a loss for words.

In reality, calm lasts only for a few fleeting moments. It seems the world needs only to shake itself once to shatter its frozen silence. Before the initial shock has even subsided, a verbal arms race erupts, each side vying for interpretive authority and competing claims to truth. The mass media (re)constructs narratives about the newly reignited conflict and presents them in ways designed to capture public attention. The brutal events of autumn 2023 thrust the Middle East conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute back into the centre of international attention, laying bare the stakes with stark clarity.

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1 The English translation of "wortGEWALTig" is eloquent. This German adjective expresses that something is described with big words. It contains the terms "wort", which means "word", and "gewalt", German for "violence".

2 Sarah M. Radon visited several times the Near East School of Theology in Beirut as part of the partnership of Ruhr-University Bochum and NEST. The text is a result of her master thesis entitled "wortGEWALTig – Stories of power-hungry Jews and Islamist assassins. Narratives and stereotypical identity attributions after 7 October 2023, using the example of voices from Israel, Palestine and Europe". She lives in Hattingen, where she now teaches Protestant religious education and history as a trainee teacher.

3 7 October 2023 falls on Shabbat and the holiday of Simchat Torah (Rejoicing of the Torah). The day before marked the 50th anniversary of the start of the Yom Kippur War.

I follow the news with great concern, aware that the crimes of this massacre will have far-reaching and formative consequences in the near and distant future – for Israelis and Palestinians alike – both locally and in the diaspora.

However, I have no idea yet how influential these troubling events will be for Germany. Because of my background, interculturalism, plurality, and, by extension, interreligiousness are integral to my everyday life. I have spent almost my entire life in the Ruhr area, in the far west of Germany, where I grew up and was shaped by my surroundings. I live a life of security, under favourable conditions, full of hope, opportunities, and prospects. I particularly love the diversity of my homeland. As one of the largest conurbations in Europe, the Ruhr metropolis is home to people from countless nations.

For example, just around the corner, I can buy Arabic specialties, fill my shopping trolley with food from the Far East, sample traditional Russian cuisine, or enjoy authentic Syrian delicacies. For me, it is easy to strike up a conversation about God and the world during a weekend visit to one of the many mosques in the area, to celebrate Shabbat with Jewish neighbours in their synagogue, to marvel at the peaceful atmosphere of a Buddhist temple, listen to a Syrian Orthodox service in Aramaic on Sunday morning, and then experience South American hospitality in a charismatic community.

I consider this cultural diversity both a great privilege and an invaluable treasure.

During my studies, I had the opportunity to work interculturally, promote respectful coexistence, and actively help shape spaces for interfaith dialogue and encounter. However, I quickly realized that the latest developments in the Middle East would be more than just challenging for any interfaith exchange. This violent escalation will place significant demands on interfaith dialogue across national borders. I think of my Jewish partners and Muslim friends who have accompanied and supported me. Their stories have shaped me and often moved me deeply. Yet, I still have only a vague sense of how stressful and dangerous the coming weeks and months will actually be for interfaith relations.

The events of 7 October 2023 and their aftermath have influenced my life in recent months, not in an existential way, as they have for those directly or indirectly affected, and certainly not as tragically as the countless victims who continue to endure catastrophic conditions on the

ground. From my sheltered and privileged perspective, I cannot even imagine what all this must mean for them. And yet, ever since then, I have woken each morning, regularly shocked by the latest news. I am often irritated and frustrated by the narratives propagated by the media and politicians, as well as by the stereotypical German approach to debating current events in the Middle East.

I therefore decided to devote my master's thesis to this sensitive and emotionally charged topic. When I made this decision, I did not fully consider what it would mean in light of Germany's historical guilt nor the impact it might have on my interfaith life.

This article reflects on my experiences in the country of the perpetrators of the Third Reich. To this end, I first outline my research interests to clarify the content of my master's thesis.

When language wages war and weapons do not fall silent
The Gaza War and its narratives

War knows no quiet tones; on the contrary, its noise is deafening. First come the echoes of gunfire, the whirring of drones, the rumble of falling bombs, and the thunder of explosions. These are accompanied by screams of fear and desperate cries – calls for a grandparent, a mother, a son, a sister, a partner, a best friend, a beloved colleague, a neighbour, or simply for help. The only thing more merciless and cruel is the deafening silence in which the noise of war fades. It is almost unbearable, because when calm returns, one thing remains certain in war: many have lost their lives.

War changes language and communication in equal measure. Words of understanding, apology, forgiveness, and compromise-oriented negotiations or diplomatic dialogue are rarely heard in war. Instead, it is waged loudly, accusatorily, and irreconcilably, even far from the trenches and front lines.

This is precisely where I place the scholarly focus of my master's thesis. I aim to identify which stereotypes, narratives, and historical interpretive frameworks Palestinian and Israeli approaches are currently (re-)activating, (re-)constructing, and transforming in order to address the existential questions of meaning, identity, and orientation that become particularly acute in times of crisis.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has many layers, which can be used to trace the characteristics of trans-temporal narrative traditions from multiple perspectives and to analyse the specificities and analogies of commu-

nication and aggression. When analysing the traditional identity construction patterns of both parties to the conflict, it is essential to examine shared and divergent concepts of memory, historical processes of meaning-making, and narrative conceptual schemata. As a result of my interest in linguistic phenomena, in the days, weeks, and months following 7 October, I repeatedly cringe at the language used by both sides. On the one hand, pro-Israeli voices formulate islamophobic generalizations, creating typologies such as "Muslim affinity for violence"[4] or "Palestinian collective guilt". On the other hand, Palestinian voices express anti-Israeli denials of "Israel's right to exist" and propagate anti-Semitic narratives such as a supposed "Jewish lust for power".[5]

No matter how diametrically opposed Israelis and Palestinians may be in their recollection of the past,[6] how contradictory their interpretations of the present[7] and future, or how irreconcilable their claims to truth and reality, the narrative tools they employ remain strikingly analogous. Both

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[4] To legitimize their radical war strategy, Israel's ruling elite repeatedly resort to stereotypical narratives of an 'Islam-based terrorist threat' from Gaza and the Palestinian territories. Approximately 97% of Palestinians profess Sunni Islam. The rest are minorities of Palestinian interreligious groups such as Christians and Druze.

[5] Hamas, for example, declares 7 October to be a legitimate day of resistance against the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people by an Israeli apartheid regime based on Zionism, which is illegally occupying and annexing the homeland of the Palestinian people.

[6] The conflict between Israel and Palestine is characterized by diverging narratives, ranging from Israeli stories of the triumphant creation of the Jewish state of Israel to the catastrophic conquest and oppression of the Palestinian homeland. While some speak of a return to their God-given homeland, others tell of unlawful land theft. Jews emphasize Israel's legitimate success story, while Palestinian children hear about the *Nakba*, the catastrophe.

[7] The extent of the violence on 7 October evoked associations in Jewish-Israeli society with the *Shoah*, the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history. This led Jewish people internationally to view the Hamas massacre as a decisive turning point that will shape their collective memory and historical understanding as profoundly as it will shape Jewish identity constructs, narrative figures and traditional patterns of discourse. For Palestinians, the events in the Gaza Strip since autumn 2023 simply continue the story, as they confirm traditional role models of the "Palestinian victim" and "Zionist-Israeli perpetrators". By reactivating the historical continuity of disadvantage and injustice in the Palestinian consciousness repeatedly, Arab-Palestinian narrative images and interpretations of the past have been (re)constructing stories of ongoing catastrophe for 77 years.

sides use dehumanizing and demonizing language as well as patterns of legitimization to justify excessive violence, brutal crimes, and war.

In their narratives, glorified self-images are set against demonized portrayals of the enemy. Israeli narratives depict a virtuous army defending Israel's right to exist against radicalized and anti-Semitic terror from the Palestinian territories. Palestinian narratives, on the other hand, depict a bitter struggle of resistance by heroic martyrs against the Zionist occupying power, which seeks to wipe out Palestinian existence between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.[8]

Such instrumentalisation of language becomes necessary in existential crises, as it provides collectives and individuals with orientation, support, and meaning. Stereotypical historical interpretation templates and narratives categorize and simplify the complexity of reality (or realities) along binary lines of difference, for example, by framing the current war as a struggle between good and evil.

When prejudiced narrative constructions and stereotypical identities are used as political tools in war to present stigmatizing ideas about other groups as assumed truths, the unifying power of language as a medium of interpersonal interaction is undermined. Language is then transformed into a violent instrument of verbalized segregation and a powerful weapon of war.

Germany and the Middle East conflict – between historical responsibility and double standards

From the outset, I intended my master's thesis to be empirically grounded. It is important to me to hear interreligious voices on current events in the Mediterranean and the Jordan region to understand what the parties to the conflict think, what motivates them, and what stories they tell. As an outsider, I can only report on something that does not directly affect me.

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[8] Jewish and Palestinian interpretations of the past and narrative interpretations of history formulate and transmit, for example, transgenerational collective living conditions in a state of continuous existential threat. Both parties to the conflict define their respective collective trauma as a catastrophe. For Jews, this is the mass extermination of Jewish life in the *Shoah* (Hebrew for catastrophe). For Palestinians, this is the *Nakba* (Arabic for catastrophe), as the systematic expulsion of Palestinian identity in the course of the founding of the State of Israel is called.

Such an approach may simplify the presentation of supposed facts[9] in as neutral and objective a manner as possible. Still, it obscures key insights into divergent traditions of interpreting the past, lines of argumentative strategies, and traditional language patterns in Palestinian and Israeli narrative constructions. Through the planned interviews, I hope to develop a multi-layered approach to core Israeli-Palestinian points of contention. Therefore, I am seeking to interview people from different contexts with the goal of producing a multi-perspective comparison that fairly represents current events.

I write countless emails, make numerous phone calls, and speak to various people.[10] I was able to secure two Jewish interviewees in Germany who were willing to speak with me, as well as two Christian interviewees from the West Bank in the Palestinian territories. However, despite enormous efforts, no one is willing to share the Muslim perspective with me in an official interview.[11] In light of current developments, the mosque communities in my homeland are closing their doors. I had not expected this.[12]

They give various reasons for their distance from me. Some have been directly affected by recent events and have lost family members or friends, leaving them so personally shaken and traumatized that, under-

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9 An objective, mimetic and accurate reconstruction, analysis and interpretation of historical events or reality is simply impossible, as any knowledge formation and interpretation are always influenced by the subjective values and horizons of experience of the person presenting, narrating or researching, and can only legitimize claims to truth and validity to a limited extent through critical examination.

10 I would like to take this opportunity to express my special thanks to all those who have supported me so energetically and helpfully in my acquisition efforts by suggesting potential discussion partners and arranging contacts.

11 It is only through contacts with whom I have been able to build long-standing, trusting friendships that I am able to gain an idea of what has been on the minds of the Muslims around me in recent weeks, months, and what they are saying to each other. They, too, only speak to me privately and unofficially. They share their current worries, fears and traumas with me, allow me insights into their emotional world, give me useful literature references that I can read up on, forward me daily news that they follow and thus support my work.

12 Actually, interfaith exchanges with Muslim communities had always been possible without any problems up to that point. I had always been welcomed with openness, warmth and boundless hospitality. In the process, I learned a great deal about Muslim ways of thinking, views and Muslim life in Germany. Above all, however, I learned about the similarities between us as people anchored in faith.

standably, they are not emotionally capable of talking about it. Others explain their refusal by saying that they feel deeply connected to the Palestinian story of suffering and therefore find it difficult to bear both the injustices of the conflict and the media and public debate in Western societies, especially in Germany. They have lost trust and are afraid to express their opinions freely in their home country of Germany.

At the moment, an official interview or even an open conversation with me is dangerous.[13]

They fear that speaking openly could lead to judgments about them, resulting in a loss of social acceptance, threats to their professional life, or even legal consequences. Their statements reveal despair and hurt alongside resignation, anger, and unbridled disappointment. All of this gives me much to reflect on.

Germany finds it difficult to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As descendants of Nazi criminals, we bear a profound historical responsibility rooted in the unparalleled and axiomatic guilt of our ancestors. This dark legacy remains firmly embedded in the DNA of German identity.

German history cannot be remembered, understood, recounted, or reckoned with without confronting the terror, violence, and brutality of the Third Reich. Hateful and megalomaniacal, the Nazi regime under Adolf Hitler and, by extension, much of the German population was guilty of the systematic dehumanization and extermination of Jewish life and other discriminated minorities.

Germany's resulting historical responsibility continues to influence and complicate the objective handling and rational discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a reciprocal and multi-layered way. In light of Germany's past, it is hardly possible to adopt an unbiased and neutral position, as there is a strong sense of obligation toward the Israeli side of the conflict, both now and in the future. As a result, the Middle East conflict

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[13] I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who spoke with me, both officially and unofficially. Thanks to you, I was not only able to complete my work as I had hoped, but I also learned an incredible amount during the course of our intensive discussions, which will have a lasting impact on me as a person. I have met impressive personalities who have helped me to understand the narrative traditions, argumentation *topoi* and historical interpretation patterns of both sides of the conflict. I have come to understand that despite a shared past, present and (hopefully) future, there cannot be just one truth and reality, but rather different, sometimes even contradictory ones, and that one is therefore no less true or valuable than the other.

is contextualized and discussed differently abroad than it is in Germany, where historical events continue to profoundly shape the current discourse. In this context, various risks arise for German debate culture, with consequences that could be momentous for intercultural and interreligious exchange.

This explains why the conflict over Israel's right to exist and the legitimacy of Palestinian self-determination presents particularly fundamental challenges for Germany's historical responsibility, especially if one-sidedness, paralysis, and blind spots within academic discourse, as well as in political and media debates, are to be addressed and overcome.

All of this makes it clear that the most potent weapon in the German debate on the Middle East is the accusation of anti-Semitism. However, repetitive and inflationary accusatory mechanisms that label lines of argument as anti-Semitic are not very effective for a multi-perspective examination of current events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This tendency toward routine accusations shuts down sensitive areas of dialogue at multiple levels by systematically narrowing socially acceptable spaces for opinion and fostering an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.

In this way, certain interpretations are widely disseminated to society, while opposing viewpoints are excluded from public discourse. In Germany, pent-up frustration, dissatisfaction with an unbalanced political, and media discourse have erupted in violent demonstrations, some of which have resulted in anti-Semitic discrimination or anti-Israel attacks.[14]

Furthermore, the reckless use of accusatory mechanisms in German debates carries the risk of attrition and, consequently, the risk of trivializing or downplaying anti-Semitic discriminatory tendencies. This development must be decisively addressed, especially in light of Germany's historical responsibility and the lessons it entails.

I reflect, weighed down by the burden of our historical guilt: How can we draw the correct conclusions from Germany's past when it is the root cause of the current catastrophes in Israel and Palestine?

Not only are we to blame for the Jewish collective trauma, but we also brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the Middle East. It is our fault that Jewish identities carry latent existential fears, which the Zionist idea

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[14] The demonstrators do not only come from Muslim communities, but also from right-wing, left-wing and student circles. German debate culture, which actually seeks to protect Jewish identity in light of its own history, tends to reinforce anti-Semitic discrimination and stigmatization as a result of its self-imposed limitations.

addresses through narrative constructions that propagate the constant necessity of Israeli defence and self-defence against Islamist-motivated terrorism.

The impenetrable border installations and high-tech security fences that separate Palestinian and Israeli territories today stand as monumental reminders of the deep Israeli fear for their existence, rooted in the legacy of Nazi crimes.

This clarifies why German discourse on the Middle East conflict falters when Israel is threatened and why, stemming from this historical guilt, German politics, media, and public opinion instinctively affirm Germany's steadfast solidarity with Israel. Without a doubt, 7 October was a criminal act that cannot be justified or excused. Yet, it cannot be addressed or investigated in isolation if one sincerely seeks a sustainable de-escalation and a peaceful resolution to the conflict.[15]

Rather, if one wishes to seriously and conscientiously fulfil Germany's historical responsibility in its full scope, comprehensive and self-critical vigilance is required. At the same time, dogmatic acceptance of traditional truths is just as unacceptable as the unreflective reproduction of attributive narratives.

Muslims accept and understand Germany's historically close ties to Israel, but cannot comprehend the marginalizing treatment and the inability or even unwillingness to address the current conflict from multiple perspectives. A Muslim voice explains to me, "I can understand that Germany wants to identify with Israel and feels it owes at least a debt of loyalty to the Israeli state. However, this does not apply to the Muslim

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[15] On 24 October 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres strongly condemned the attack on Israel by the militant Islamist terrorist organization Hamas in the UN Security Council, but at the same time pointed out that it had not taken place "in a vacuum" but was linked to a "suffocating occupation" that had been going on for 56 years. This contextualization approach earned Guterres harsh criticism. – For further context: For decades, hopelessness and a lack of prospects have been growing in the Palestinian territories, especially in the Gaza Strip, as a result of geopolitically motivated interventions and Israel's expanding settlement policy, which has a multidimensional impact on the lives and daily routines of Palestinians, for example by restricting the economy and mobility. This is fertile ground for extremist ideologies that give the impression of fighting the "Zionist oppressor as the cause of their own suffering" and advocating for the hopeless situation of their own group.

world. We are not historically guilty of the systematic destruction of Jewish life in the Holocaust."[16]

And that is exactly how it is: It is our historical guilt, our historical responsibility, and our duty not to silently accept anything resembling what we did in the past, but to oppose it vehemently. To this end, we must humbly reflect on our criminal past as a negative example and point out where stigmatizing propaganda and the blind hatred of fanatical regimes can lead.

Muslims accuse the German discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since Hamas' devastating attack on Israel in October 2023 of not only being one-sided, but also fundamentally biased. In their view, "wannabe moral world champion Germany" is caught in a double standard that only denounces war crimes and violations of international law when the perpetrators and victims align with its own role attributions and narrative constructions. In doing so, Germany's pro-Israeli stance, which has its roots in the past, reinforces Islamophobic stereotypes within the German debate culture on the Middle East conflict. Throughout much of the war in Gaza,[17] German politicians and media incorporated Israeli stereotypes into their own public debates, effectively portraying Israel's right to self-defence against Islamist-motivated terror from Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran – at least according to the Muslim perception.

The discussions and research work of recent weeks have also heightened my sensitivity, making me alert to generalizing political statements about German *raison d'état*[18] or media-mediated narrative constructions

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16 Paraphrased, not literal quotation.

17 The territorial conflict between Israel and Palestine has threatened to escalate into a regional war several times in the past two years. Israel is fighting against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, which has been continuously shelling northern Israel since the outbreak of war, as well as against the Houthis in Yemen. Israel has also been shelling military targets on Syrian territory. The tense relationship between Israel and Iran has also erupted into mutual attacks on several occasions. Most recently, the situation escalated in the so-called Twelve-Day War in June this year. The latest explosive target of Israeli attacks was Doha, the capital of Qatar, at the beginning of September. The aim of this operation was to inflict serious damage on the political leadership of Hamas, which was staying in Qatar.

18 For example, Olaf Scholz (then Chancellor) publicly in his government statement on the situation in Israel before the German Bundestag on 12 October 2023 in Berlin. Since then, the statement has been repeated like a mantra in the German debate on events in Israel and Palestine. However, what exactly the term *raison d'état* means

such as a "Middle Eastern logic"[19], which not only imply but also assert an alleged Muslim affinity for violence.

I no longer fear but know that the mutual trust between the Muslim minority and the Christian majority, hard-won over generations and is still very fragile, has been irreparably damaged, primarily as a result of this German culture of debate, which is perceived as one-sided and hypocritical. Once again, Muslims find themselves invisible in Germany's public debate on the one hand and under general suspicion on the other. This has generated fears and uncertainties, making interreligious dialogue extremely difficult when one party to the dialogue feels threatened by criminal prosecution, defamation, discrimination, and stigmatization.

When I asked a Jewish interviewee in autumn 2024 how he perceived the political and media debate in Germany on current events in the Middle East, he replied, "I have the impression that Muslims are the new Jews in Germany." This assessment shook me awake, not only because I believe it accurately reflects the Muslim perception of German debate culture, with its stereotypical narrative constructions, asserted interpretative authority, and moral claims to truth, but also because it starkly exposes our failure to confront Germany's historical responsibility and the lessons drawn from it.

Appeal: Let "Never again" not be mere lip service!

The following words also resonate with me, not only because they reflect Muslim frustration and anger, but also because they call out German double standards and cast serious doubt on whether Germany has been able to draw the right lessons from its past,

> "They (the Israeli government and the Israeli military) have systematically destroyed the Gaza Strip from the outset and tried to eradicate the culture and identity of the Palestinian people. And the entire West has helped them do so. We will never forget and never forgive this. We will create our own culture of remembrance from this. But hopefully one in which 'never again' is not just a hollow phrase but really counts."

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and what consequences it will have is also the subject of intense debate time and again.

[19] Philipp Peyman Engel, editor-in-chief of the *Jüdische Allgemeine*, on Markus Lanz (ZDF), broadcast on 9.10.2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bI4e7Va3BC4 (27 August 2025).

I fear that this person is right – we have learned little from our history if we do not understand that "never again" must indeed mean "never again", regardless of who the victims and who the perpetrators are. Let us also take the statement "Israel's security is Germany's *raison d'état*" seriously. We must recognize that a free and secure Israel can only exist if Palestinians feel free and secure.

However, the only thing that is certain at present is that these events will give rise to old and new (collective) traumas and future hatred, perpetuated by narratives that prophesy grim stories of unspeakable violence and endless suffering.

The events of 7 October 2023 and their consequences have left deep wounds – on all sides.

In attempts to come to terms with them and explain them, stereotypes have degenerated into stigmatization, with narratives telling stories of "Jewish lust for power" or "Islamist assassins".

For interfaith dialogue, this creates not only intercultural stumbling blocks but also walls laden with prejudice that must be overcome. Despite everything, I firmly believe that interfaith dialogue can be the sledgehammer that brings down every wall, even when, in the case of Israel and Palestine, this wall, whether it is called an "anti-terrorist fence" or an "apartheid-wall", seems to have become almost insurmountable, reaching heights of up to nine meters in some places.

“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring peace!”

Lukas Reineck[1]

“Look at the news right now. An incredible number of rockets are flying from the Gaza Strip into Israel”, a fellow student said, nudging me while checking the news app on his phone on 7 October 2023, between two lecture blocks at our university in Darmstadt.

I was surprised, and without any foreboding of what this October day would mean in the following hours, days, months, and years to come for the people of that region. I also had no idea what it would bring for us, in Germany, Europe, and around the world.

9/11 was an unforeseen echo for the entire world. For me, personally, it was just another day – part of everyday life. A late summer day in the Black Forest at home. We played soccer on our local field. It was pleasantly warm. The last rays of the sun touched our skin. We had a good time. Later, we ate chocolate ice cream at a friend’s house. And while we watched TV, two huge towers were burning in New York City. People, out of despair, threw themselves out the windows from the upper floors. Airplanes crashed into the Twin Towers, one after another. The towers crumbled to dust. The events felt very distant. What did it have to do with me?

Nearly twenty years later, I stood at Ground Zero in New York City. I looked into a dark void, like gazing into an endless night without dawn. Water flowed into black pools. Feelings of helplessness. Emptiness. Heaviness. Silence. I felt weighed down. Bird’s twittering above Manhattan’s clear February sky and reached my ears. Cold wind struck my face. My breath fogged the air. Sitting on a bench, drinking coffee, felt almost disrespectful.

Ground Zero revealed the trauma faced by Americans. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were the unforeseen echoes of 9/11. The so-called “War on Terror”. The result: millions of traumatized and desperate lives

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[1] Lukas Reineck was part of the SIMO program in 2013/2014. He lives with his family in Frankfurt am Main. He works for Christlicher Hilfsbund im Orient e.V. an NGO, which supports mainly Armenian-Evangelical communities in Lebanon, Syria, Armenia and Iraq. He wrote the text in August/September 2025.

lost. Over 20 years later, it happened again on 7 October. Like 9/11, it triggered an unexpected ripple – destruction, displacement, hunger, and an unforeseen echo. Destruction, Displacement, Hunger and a mental health crisis, which is unprecedented in the entire region. The impact on many people moving forward is still unknown.

A Psalm of David
2 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?
3 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?
4 Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
5 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
6 But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.
Psalm 13:2–6 (NIV)

Psalm 13 is biblical poetry of striking brevity. Six verses in total. A psalm of lament where the psalmist expresses God's distant presence and the growing fear creeping into his heart each day. As war, hostage situations, and hunger continue, the psalmist's question became my own, "How long?" עַד־אָנָה

For me, as a German, the Shoah is the darkest chapter in our history. Growing up in Germany, no history class skipped the Holocaust. Visiting concentration camps was part of the school curriculum. The Nazis were criminals! Without question. Their leader, Adolf Hitler, was a mass murderer. This has been the post-war narrative for German society since the end of World War II. Intrinsically motivated, guided by reconciliation and international understanding, generations of volunteers went to Israel. Me too. Along with Israeli and Polish youth, I visited Auschwitz. We stood in a gas chamber. Holding hands. Singing. Praying. One does not forget that. "Never again". Persecution of Jews in Germany. Maybe that was what Theodor Adorno meant in a radio lecture in 1966, when he said the aim of all education must be that Auschwitz does not repeat itself.[2]

[2] Micha Brumlik, „Dass Ausschwitz sich nie wiederhole …". Pädagogische Reaktionen auf Antisemitismus. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Bonn 2008,

In my theological studies, I learned to pay attention to context, to examine carefully, to look twice, and to turn the stone once again. I learned not to settle for easy answers or be satisfied with them, nor to seek binary solutions, but to courageously accept both – and. If there is no definitive answer to a question, then that itself is the answer – No answer; or no answer for now. To endure the tension.

I had been aware of the conflicting views on Israel's founding, in theory. I understood more it at NEST. It became real. A few key phrases: a promised homeland for the Jewish people. A land without a people for a people without a land. Vs. Colonialism, occupation, apartheid, rogue state. Irreconcilable positions facing each other. Theological thinking, speaking, or silence, acting or not acting – these are rooted in our experience and context. The events around October 7 amplified this insight for me.

The global response to October 7 reveals how people instinctively put themselves first. Sensitivity to context, building bridges, and understanding seem to have decreased. It is easy to overlook others' experiences; practicing empathy is more difficult. Ignorance hurts me, especially when it involves ignoring their own blind spots in this current conflict and the suffering of others. I admit I am not perfect. Not that I am not ignorant here and there. Quickly people tend to form sides quickly: Team Israel, Team Palestine. Which side are you on? Are you a good guy or a bad guy? There is a lot of black-and-white thinking here, with little recognition of the grey areas. It is not about convincing someone to pick one side! But would not it help if we watched carefully, looked twice, and turned the stone over again? I realize that our reactions often respond as fast as breaking news itself. I am still learning not to let this emotional rush control me.

In October 2023, a pastor from Beirut visited us. I remember it clearly. We were on the airport shuttle, leaving the grounds, when the first political question came up: "Have you heard that Israel bombed the Anglican Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza?" Back then, the news was only half an hour old. Nothing was clear about anything. I was stunned. How should I react? Ignore it? Discuss it right away? Justify it by saying that Hamas uses civilian infrastructure for its purposes? Or explain that one must look carefully before judging? Which media outlet reports to us here? How

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www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/41277/dass-auschwitz-sich-nie-wiederhole/ (23 August 2025).

much trust do I place in them? I decided to examine the substance of the report carefully, rather than getting caught up in a heated debate. In the following days, the conversations became more political, sometimes contentious. We discussed which Israel we were really talking about, whether a continuous link exists between biblical Israel and the modern state, and whether I am a Zionist. The friendly relationship that connected us moved into the background. Front and centre was the question: "On which side do you stand?" I chose to stand on my own side.

The uncertainty about the exact timing of Israel's ground offensive caused our visitor from Beirut great anxiety. Would Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his then Defence Minister Yoav Gallant order the bombardment of Beirut? Not being with his family in Beirut visibly tormented our guest. The constant glances at the Apple Watch and the news ticker in view, expecting updates about the upcoming offensive, kept our guest from being fully present with us.

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? Ps 13:3.

The psalmist describes an unbearable daily fear. Expecting each new day to bring more bad than good prevents hope. Today, worries and sorrow in the Middle East are bitter daily realities. The region seems to be in its most depressive phase in years. In those October days, in 2023, we both, I believe, carried worry in our souls and sorrow in our hearts. Personally, I worried about how "day-by-day" life deteriorates for so many in the Middle East. Worry about how "day by day" the willingness to understand the complexity of a conflict, or at least acknowledge the complexity of such a conflict, fades. Worry about how, day-by-day, the discourse over the misery of others loses empathy and becomes harsher. The media contribute their share.

"No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Israel is fighting human animals." Perhaps the clearest example of rhetorical derailment by ex-Defence Minister Yoav Gallant in the days after 7 October. Not just a Freudian slip; it was meant literally. I assume war affects people this way. Part of me is glad I did not hear all the rhetorical outrages of the past two years – rhetorical slips from both sides. Graffiti tags in the men's restroom at Goethe University Frankfurt are enough – dirty words. That is enough for me. Just more proof of how much that conflict is pre-

sent in our public life here in Germany, even in the most private public spaces.

The opening lament of the psalmist, "How long?" shows that these days of sorrow have already gone on too long – up to this very day. Too long. How long will the people of Gaza be pushed back and forth, from place to place? Hunger. Daily displacement. Everyday life in war. Words fail me when it comes to Gaza's suffering. How long will families of hostages in Tel Aviv wait at Hostages Square for their loved ones? How long should someone hold on to hope for a sign of life of a beloved one? Or how long can someone hope? It might sound naïve, but perhaps what connects people in Gaza and those protesting in Tel Aviv is the same question that troubles the psalmist,

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? Ps 13:2.

It is about experiencing God's healing closeness and seeing His face. This theme recurs throughout the psalms. Rest. Silence. The future. A desire to pass through the metaphorical night and wake up to a new morning – free from worry and sorrow, greeted by new images and good news. It feels like a utopian longing amid dystopian realities. When will God address the daily worries and sorrows of people in Gaza and Israel? No one wants to be forgotten. Some things we do want to forget. As Christians or simply as humans, is not it our duty to remember those involved in this war? Not to ignore them? There are countless people, unknown to us, who this war has affected for years. Our own daily fatigue should not prevent us from praying for them. The anticipation of a new morning, which will surely come, justifies prioritizing prayer and action over our own sluggishness and tiredness.

"October in Europe" is a song by *Antilopen Gang*, a German rap-punk band. It reflects the insecurity faced by Jewish life in Germany after 7 October. "Never again." Memorials, Holocaust stones, and plaques evoke memories of one of the darkest chapters in German history. And not to forget: Stolpersteine. Brass stones were placed in front of homes of those persecuted during the Third Reich, most of whom were Jewish. *Antilopen Gang* raps that these stones are no longer polished, and Jews can no longer safely show their identity openly on the streets in German cities. The Star of David hidden under a blouse. The *kippa* hidden under a baseball

cap. Since October 7, security for Jews in Germany has plummeted. It is hard to bear. It fills me with sorrow and worry.

The attackers of the 7 October pogrom did not care about political beliefs. Voting choices did not matter. Their only goal was to kill Jews. The Hamas terrorists targeted the most vulnerable babies, girls, and the elderly. People were ambushed in everyday situations – wrong place, wrong time, bad luck. Do not get me wrong, I do not mean this cynically; it is just hard to understand. Putting myself in the victims' shoes, imagining having a baby daughter – puhhh – I try to distance myself from that event. Some international journalists got access to the footage from the terrorists' body cameras. Inconceivable for me. At some point, I stopped trying to piece together the events of 7 October. Making sense of it? I do not know how. Some might call the events resistance against colonialism or Zionism, but ultimately, abuse, rape, and murder are not resistance – they are horrendous crimes, period. Nonetheless, victims from kibbutzim Be'eri, Kfar Aza, Nir Oz, or Nirim were often motivated by a desire for peace and dialogue with their Palestinian neighbours. I have heard they even tried to create job opportunities for workers from Gaza, but they were eventually betrayed by those they tried to help. Trust was shattered. Presumably, only a few residents of those kibbutzim voted for Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud) and his far-right allies, Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir. Surely, these residents wished for different policies – for a different Israel.

Astonishingly, Psalm 13 does not ask for the enemies' destruction. It simply expresses the psalmist's wish for personal growth and safety, which are basic human needs.

... and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. Ps 13:5.

In contrast, today's war rhetoric fantasizes about the total destruction of the enemy. I feel overwhelmed when I think about the multi-front war Israel is fighting and its impact on the region. I am weighed down. Helpless. Sorrow and worry. It is a similar feeling to gazing into the pools at the edge of Ground Zero. Uncertain whether the metaphorical black pools of October 7 have a bottom. A bottom where it all ends. A good end. For everyone involved.

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.
Ps 13:6.

Psalm 13 reminds us that night can be endured. There is light at the end of the tunnel – failing love. Translated into human terms, it is akin to a peace process with an outcome that brings joy to the hearts. Still, to this day, the political and geopolitical results remain uncertain. Dawn is delayed. It is a long night. The echo of 7 October lingers far too long. Two years is too long for everyone involved.

In Luke 19:42, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring peace!"

Jesus rides into the city of David on a colt. And so it must be: Jerusalem bears on its hands the blood of Israel's prophets past and to come. Today, decisions about war and peace are made in the Knesset in Jerusalem, as well as in Gaza. Jesus' words remain relevant today – and will continue to be relevant tomorrow. May these words find a listening heart in both places, with those responsible. I know it might sound naïve, maybe even cheesy for some readers. Of course, that is a pious wish! However, I am a realist – a hopeful one. I also allow these words to speak to me personally. I want to open my heart's ears to them. Jesus' call stirs a sense of responsibility in me. How can I contribute with my thoughts, words, and actions toward what destroys peace? Serving peace to the best of my ability, despite my limitations and lack of political power. A peace that welcomes a good new morning, "but now it is hidden from your eyes", this is how Luke 19:42 continues. The verse from Luke still feels true today. In the last two years, especially, political leaders involved in this conflict have been blind to the pursuit of peace. I am aware that peace talks are taking place sporadically, and I hope their outcomes will have a lasting impact on the entire region. However, even so, hope for a good new morning can transcend current realities and imagine a new dawn. That is what hope is for. Yet, hope requires patience and persistence. And hope needs people like you and me – agents of change, agents of hope. It is up to us to keep hope alive for lasting peace. Presumably, we have no better option!

Have Mercy

Tabea Schünemann/Tabea Sturm[1]

I.am.in.Beirut.

With these words, the first page of my online blog begins.

I wanted to share my experiences about my time in Lebanon, which had just begun.

I arrived at the Near East School of Theology (NEST), a small theological college in the heart of Beirut, in September 2023. For two years, when my professor in Germany said about the study program Studium im Mittleren Osten (SiMO), "This could be something for you", I had been looking forward to it. And there I was: With *pita*, *labneh* (and Alpro oat milk to remind me of home), I stood on my room's balcony at NEST, watching the sunset, feeling terribly tired and intensely awake at the same time.

I immediately fell in love with Beirut, Lebanon's broken heart. The mountains, the sea, the food, and coffee, along with the Arabic that constantly blends in French and English. Thanks to Soha, the best Arabic-language teacher in the world, we were so proud as our conversations in the *dekkein* (small shop) at NEST grew longer each day.

The other students and I were warmly welcomed at NEST. I enjoyed the coffee breaks, the table tennis and volleyball games, and the mix of living, praying, and studying together.

On 6 October, we went hiking in the mountains and attended a lovely apple festival. On 7 October, my German friends sent worried text messages, "Did you hear what happened?"

Of course I did. But nobody could answer the next question: "What does this mean?"

So, we waited, our fingers on the phone, the news app open all the time, while also trying to move forward "normally". I learned that, sadly, this is

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[1] Tabea Schünemann studies Protestant Theology in Leipzig. She went to Beirut with SiMO in 2023. After the abrupt return from Lebanon, she published a book (with Silke Schmidt) containing poems and stories from people connected to Lebanon: Das Glück ist in den kleinen Dingen. Gedichte und Gedanken zum Libanon, Ahrensburg 2025. Her other writings can be found on her blog.
Tabea Sturm lives in Neuendettelsau and participated in the SiMO program in 2023. She studies theology and wrote the text with Tabea Schünemann in September 2025.

normal with a capital N for most of the people we became friends with in this very short time.

"We've survived one war. We will survive this. Don't worry."

Of course, they worried too, said their dark circles under their eyes.

Nobody knew how Israel and Hezbollah would act. Therefore, we waited and watched as it got worse by the hour, as Saba, our Palestinian fellow student, shared his story.

At NEST, we did the one thing we could: we prayed. I will never forget this moment. We had students from Armenia, Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. All these countries are experiencing violence and uncertainty these days (and it continues while I am writing these lines). Everyone shared their country's situation with us, and we prayed: LORD, have mercy!

I am very impressed by everyone at NEST and how they have handled the situation. I admire their faith – trustworthy and resilient – a faith that remains grounded in the mud yet looks up to the sky, saying: "This is not the end. We have hope". Then they act accordingly.

I am amazed at how privileged and uninformed my theology and faith were before attending NEST. I still sometimes struggle with my beliefs, especially when I see all this injustice.

Because it is still true, what George Orwell in *Animal Farm* wrote, "All are equal. But some are more equal."

We Europeans were and still are those "more equal". For us, the entire world was mobilized to "get us out of there". The pressure was intense to move us to safety, so I decided to leave. The others arrived in Germany a day later, as the government had given us no choice.

But what about our friends? Do Palestinians and Lebanese not deserve a life in peace? None of us had anything to do with these political decisions of war. Nobody wanted this. And yet, in my own home country, within my own family, some people believe that violence is the nature of the so-called Middle East.

Regarding this term, I will never forget how Rima Nasrallah, our professor at NEST, gave us a disclaimer in our first lesson in the "Eastern Churches" class. She discussed the term "Eastern" in the context of "Eastern Churches" and emphasized that we must be cautious with it. She said with a sarcastic tone, "What does it even mean, Eastern? East of what?"

So, there I was, experiencing my privileges and the post-colonial reality just like I did before when I spent a year (2018/19) as a volunteer in Palestine/Israel, witnessing apartheid and occupation first hand.

"Why does it need a passport to matter?" Saba, our Palestinian fellow student, asked in his story. I had tears in my eyes reading this, and I feel so ashamed. I am ashamed of my own country and government, which still fails to act according to what we supposedly learned from history. There is so much selective solidarity and misuse of the term "Never again." There is also a misuse of solidarity with Palestine, for sure. Still, I cannot believe we just stopped sending new arms to the Israeli military only two weeks ago. I am ashamed of most Churches in Germany, which fail to see the "Christ in the rubble". Some do. Increasingly. But slowly. When the first ordained woman in the Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, Sally Azar, was asked at Kirchentag 2025 what people of faith could do for Palestinians right now, she said, "Talk about us". That is also what Saba writes in his text: "Listen! Share our stories! Do not look away!"

A Lebanese friend of mine also said before I had to leave: "When you go home now, and you hear the Israeli war minister say on TV that Arabs are animals, you know now that it's not true".

Of course, that is not true. But how do we remain human in these times?

"On the other side of the wall, there are also mothers." This is a significant line from the play "How to stay human after a massacre in 17 steps" by Israeli playwright Maya Arad Yasu, which I saw in Germany in November 2023. She survived the brutal violence by Hamas and fought inner battles not to give in to revenge and hatred.

In the last two years, many people have forgotten that there are humans on all sides of the borders. I still believe that empathy is essential, especially in my own society, where families do not talk to each other anymore because of the violent discourse here.

I do my best to remind the people I talk to in Germany that these are humans suffering here. It hurts so much to recognize places and hear the language when watching the news. When the war escalated in Lebanon, I anxiously sent text messages: "Are you okay?" I cried when Dar Assalam, a community centre in the Lebanese mountains, was destroyed, even though I never had the chance to be there. I celebrated when the ceasefire was announced and screamed at God (for the first time in years) when it was broken again and again. It hurts so much, but I am thankful to feel anything still. To feel connected. To know names and faces behind the numbers. At least some. It makes me more human.

It was very hard for me to leave Lebanon after such a short time. I felt as if I was leaving my friends behind, even though there was nothing I could do for them there.

So, after a year of escalating war in Lebanon, I felt compelled to do something here in Germany – to give people a space to share their stories. This inspired the idea of an online "Lebanon poetry project". I started with Silke, a fellow SiMO student from Germany. People from many different backgrounds sent us their poems and stories about their experiences. It was inspiring to read them; these words are tragic, sad, thoughtful, personal, hopeful, and beautiful. We decided to publish them as a real book in three languages and donate the proceeds to rebuilding Dar Assalam. Our Arabic teacher, Soha, gave us the title with a short but wise sentence from her story. It is a sentence that often sounds corny when read on a greeting card, but hearing it from her in this context of war, it is powerful without sugar-coating anything, "Happiness is in the small things."

We are very grateful to everyone from NEST and its friends who shared their texts and supported us. For me, it is an important way to stay connected, share people's stories, and process my own experiences.

To better understand the stories, narratives, and perspectives, and to continue exploring Palestinian theology differently, we have started a reading group. SiMO alumni, friends, and interested individuals meet regularly online to learn more about Palestinian liberation theology and to stay connected with people who share similar experiences.

I wish all my friends from Lebanon and the region the very best and continue hoping for an end to this ongoing violence and destruction. You are not forgotten!

I mourned all the experiences, relationships, and moments I had to let go of when I had to leave the country after only a few weeks because the situation was too unstable. I also felt guilty about my grief, given the widespread death and violence. Then I learned to take my feelings seriously and not judge my pain. When the other German students and I had the opportunity to study in Romania for the summer instead, this did not heal the pain or replace Lebanon. It never could and was never meant to. However, we also enjoyed our time there very much, deepening our knowledge of "Eastern" churches and strengthening our friendship as a German group.

And I strongly feel and hope that I will return to Lebanon someday.

Inshalla.

“What did you do?”

A personal insight

Hannah Stobbe[1]

“Ceasefire now.” The sticker I placed on the blue child seat on my bike a year and a half ago is still there. Despite rain, snow, and heat, it has become ingrained – this desire, this longing for a ceasefire – it does not go away. Sometimes I cannot believe that this sticker is still there because the war is not over yet. I can hardly believe that no one has yet managed to stop the killing and starvation, or prevent the right-wing extremist Israeli government from making Gaza an even more unliveable place with each passing day. A place of displacement, destruction, death, suffering, and hopelessness.

Hopelessness has become my constant companion over the past two years. It has entered my warm living room and come into my life, which is filled with prosperity and abundance. Is it appropriate for me to feel hopeless while I am living a privileged life with a roof over my head and a well-stocked fridge?

I do not have an answer to that, but I feel I cannot allow myself to be hopeless because we are the hope for those who have lost their voice or strength. Still, I would be lying if I said hopelessness does not often overwhelm me like an unstoppable wave of gloom and darkness.

From fall 2016 to summer 2017, I studied at NEST as a SiMO student. Even then, Lebanon was a country facing multiple crises and challenges – and yet, it seemed to me that it was still a different country. It was before the explosion at the port, before inflation, before the gasoline and financial crises, and before the war that brought so much destruction, death, and suffering also to Lebanon.

When I arrived in Beirut, I already had a history with the Middle East, having spent three and a half years as a volunteer and student in Israel. My background is characterized by a close connection to Israel. For my devout Christian grandparents, the Holy Land was a personal matter close to their hearts, while my mother was mainly interested in Jewish-Chris-

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tian relations and chose to send me to a Jewish school in Berlin. In addition, although Jewish life in Germany is by no means synonymous with the State of Israel, the country nevertheless played a central role both in my school's religious education and in the sense of Jewish identity that was conveyed there. In short, it was almost destined for me to engage with this country.

This is why I came to Beirut, not only to study theology in a country so rich in Christian diversity, but also to gain a different perspective on Israel and Palestine. The year at NEST had a profound effect on me. Some connections have endured. Until a few months ago, I was still taking an online Arabic course with a former SiMO classmate, taught by a Lebanese woman. Our teacher's house is no longer standing. It was bombed by the Israeli army shortly after she fled with her family.

My connection to Israel has also persisted and has actually grown stronger. Today, I am married to an Israeli, and my daughter holds both German and Israeli passports.

My Israeli husband is someone who refused to serve in the Israeli army and who moved to Germany nearly twenty years ago. Yet, Israel is still the country where almost his entire family lives. It is a piece of home.

Day after day, he is overwhelmed with despair as hope for peace slips further out of reach. He laments the policies of occupation, deprivation, and expulsion, which not only make life unbearable for Palestinians but also weaken the remaining foundations of democracy in Israeli society.

I share these personal insights because my view on Gaza is influenced not only by the heart-breaking news reports but also by my personal connection to a country responsible for ongoing genocide.

Because I am affected as a wife, mother, and human being.

Because I find myself in a situation where, due to family ties, I am on the perpetrator's side, while condemning the war with all its acts against humanity with the deepest conviction.

Although many people in Israel now call for an end to the war, this is rarely because of the suffering of Palestinians. They are demanding an end because it does not protect the lives of the remaining Israeli hostages; instead, it threatens their lives. It is heart breaking to see that the Israeli government neither prioritizes nor cares about the return of the hostages, turning their fate and that of their families into pawns in a brutal power struggle.

When it comes to the suffering and death of the people in Gaza, the silence within Israeli society is deafening. There is no room for empathy or compassion because where compassion should be, the all-consuming feeling of not being seen in one's own pain has taken hold. "Why should we love our enemies?" they ask, as they repress the fact that babies and children are never enemies, but vulnerable and helpless creatures of God.

The pain is overwhelming, centred on the 7 October massacre, along with the deaths and kidnappings of friends, relatives, and acquaintances. There is a constant feeling of threat from rocket fire coming from all directions. The trauma is so intense it seems to blind them, making them tough and emotionless. I see a society that feels misunderstood, isolated, and disconnected, driven by dehumanizing, one-sided reporting on Israeli television.

Acknowledging and recognizing the suffering of the Palestinians is considered radical left-wing in Israel. Anyone who holds left-wing views is often seen as a traitor to the people. "Bejachad nenaze'ach" – in English: "Together we will win." This slogan is visible everywhere in the country, on many house walls, on trains, and as a permanent feature in daily news broadcasts. It is an effort to unite a deeply divided society in the face of war – an effort that often fails.

The group within Israeli society that aims to highlight Palestinian suffering and has chosen to address the genocide openly is still very small. Too small. Much too small. But they are brave and courageous – because it takes courage to go against the flow of one's own society and risk social exclusion. Israelis and Palestinians who team up in movements like the "Standing Together" initiative, who raise their voices and shake up everyday life because life cannot just go on as usual in the face of genocide – they are the ones who give me hope, with whom I feel connected, and whose voices I want to amplify.

Meanwhile, the German government has chosen to justify repeated breaches of international law and heinous crimes against humanity by citing *raison d'état*. In light of the Shoah – the Holocaust that claimed 6 million Jews – we as Germans carry a special responsibility. I agree with the German government's reasoning on this point, but I draw very different conclusions about what it should mean for our actions as a nation.

Defending a right-wing extremist government that expels, kills, and dehumanizes people does not serve our national interests or the small

group of individuals living on this land who strive for an equal and dignified life for all its residents.

At the start of the war, protests showing solidarity with Gaza were often met with bans. During the demonstrations that have occurred and are still ongoing, people repeatedly face severe police violence.

Banning those demonstrations was often justified due to concerns about anti-Semitic speech and slogans. This concern is valid – reports have consistently shown that anti-Semitic slogans were shouted at demonstrations, that in some cases there was a lack of necessary distance from terrorist organizations, and that the right of the State of Israel to exist was sometimes openly denied. Although my husband and I supported the core message of the demonstrations, we chose not to attend many of them because we feared that, as a Hebrew-speaking German-Israeli family, we might face exclusion or even physical attacks. Instead, we repeatedly participated in the Israeli peace initiative "Israelis for Peace" and demonstrated with them, knowing that our voices are welcome there.

Despite my personal concerns, I believe that the decision to ban demonstrations ahead of potential challenges is fundamentally wrong. With around 40,000 Palestinians, Berlin has the largest Palestinian community in Europe. Many of them have friends and relatives affected by the wars in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon. And those not directly affected have every right and good reason to be angry, disappointed, and desperate in light of the catastrophic situation.

The pain is real and justified. It must be acknowledged and recognized. Of course, intervention is necessary when anti-Semitic slogans are shouted, and demonstrations may need to be interrupted or stopped. However, this does not justify cancelling a protest beforehand. Conversely, those who feel unseen are more vulnerable to radicalization, bitterness, and doubt in the actions of the state. We have been witnessing this for at least two years.

My concern about antisemitism in Germany is extremely high. I worry about my husband, but most of all, I worry about my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

She is growing up unknowingly with an Israeli father. Occasionally, she happily shouts "Shalom!" – the Hebrew equivalent of *Salam* – to greet people on the street. Each time, I flinch and turn around to see if anyone might be bothered by it. How am I supposed to explain to my

toddler when she may or may not speak a certain language without frightening her?

Compared to the previous year, anti-Semitic incidents increased by nearly 77% in 2024. People are assaulted for speaking Hebrew, homes with Jewish residents are marked with Stars of David, and Israeli restaurants are defaced with Hamas symbols. That, too, is part of the reality.

I am seriously considering changing my daughter's Israeli last name – which I did not take – to a double name combining German and Israeli, without a hyphen, so that she can later decide how much of her identity to share. The fear of Jews living in Germany – whether Israeli or not – is real and significant.

However, state repression against protesters and the federal government's friendly relationship with Israel, which faces little criticism, do not help in the fight against antisemitism. On the contrary, they actually strengthen it.

If politicians genuinely cared about combating antisemitism, there would be many starting points: a clear stance against antisemitism within their own circles – including white middle-class communities – not just in migrant or Muslim communities. They would also take a strong stand against the far-right party AfD, which has long shifted public discourse to the right and spread anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in various settings. Most importantly, it would be essential to fund education and prevention programs in schools and other educational institutions properly. Instead, however, funding for these projects is repeatedly being cut during these unpredictable times, making it impossible to carry out the much-needed educational efforts effectively.

I believe the German government is complicit in its supposedly well-intentioned actions, not only toward Palestinians but also toward Israelis fighting for a different, equal, and democratic future.

We are guilty if we stay silent. Finding the right words is like walking a tightrope for me. And breaking my silence here is much easier than doing the same among my in-laws.

This is not a soccer game where you have to pick a team and then hope the other one loses. Because even if some people try to present it differently, there are no winners here, on either side.

Sometimes I wonder which questions will come my way in ten or fifteen years. "What did you do back then?" my daughter may ask me, and I have no good answer to give. "Not enough" is what I shall respond be-

cause we failed as a global community while countless lives are being lost.

I also reflect on all of this as a Christian. Knowing that no human life is more or less valuable than another is. That we can come before God with all our worries, in all our hopelessness – no matter how big or small our needs are. My faith does not turn every hardship into ease, but it gives me the certainty that I can find companionship in all pain. Christ weeps with the powerless in Gaza and with the traumatized in Israel. And I believe that he also weeps with me and you, because I believe in a God who sees and accepts us in our true, authentic, and vulnerable selves.

"Can I take that off?" my daughter asks me one afternoon, pointing to the sticker on her bike seat. She loves playing with tape and stickers. "No", I reply, without further explanation. I wish I did not have to keep waiting for a ceasefire. I truly wish the time had finally come to remove that sticker.

“Thy Kingdom come …”

Stay with us despite war, destruction and revenge!

Friederike Weltzien [1]

It is the first evening in Erfurt. The members of the consultation have exchanged their expectations for the days ahead. The discussions have ended, and some are already making their way to the lounge, chatting about the different types of beer. In front of me rests a black plastic sleeve on the small side table, a tube designed to transport large papers. “In there are the posters”, said Rev. Dr Rima Nasrallah, the Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Practical Theology at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut. Preparing for the consultation, she had asked ten pastors and students from across Protestant churches in Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria to describe their current situation on large display posters. Though the conference room is small, we manage to hang them all. The large posters sit close together, each one telling a different story. My eyes wander from one to the next. I am immediately drawn to the images: people standing amid destruction, villages reduced to rubble, churches and mosques destroyed, fertile soil poisoned. Yet even amid this devastation, I notice signs of resilience: volunteers offering help, food being distributed, church services still being held, and individuals reaching out to one another despite the chaos around them.

Our colleagues and students from the Middle East try to convey to us, what they have experienced in recent months, and how the violent conflicts and the war between Hezbollah and the Israeli army have shaped their current living situation. Reports of the upheavals in Syria and the destruction of the livelihoods of Palestinians in the West Bank are layered onto this. Gaza remains present in the background with the terrible images we are shown every day. How do we live here in Germany with this knowledge, with these reports, with our horror and simultaneous helplessness? This question stays with me into the night.

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I am all too familiar with the images of destruction. They surround me like a flood. They shape my everyday life. WhatsApp messages from Lebanon arrive constantly, pulling me out of my own world each time. Sometimes I do not want to look at my messages anymore. I feel I must protect myself from the horror in every image of destruction, every report of death, and the endless number of deaths. And yet, I continue to look. I try to give this small measure of respect to the victims on both sides of the conflict. We hear numbers, and sometimes I try to imagine the faces behind them, each with their own story, each with family and friends. Every day, the feverish curve of death tolls rises. I get stuck counting the injured. I want to take sides, to hurl my anger at those responsible. I feel a powerless rage toward the Israeli military and government, which seem to have abandoned moral standards, human rights, and international law. I feel even more helpless when I think of the fanatic ideologies of Hamas and Hezbollah. There is no mercy left on both sides. Sometimes it helps when we meet up with friends for rallies and demonstrations. It feels good to be with like-minded people, but it is also unsatisfying. I see the same anger and helplessness reflected in their faces and know how little we can achieve. German politics sweeps over us in its unshaken solidarity with the state of Israel.

I lived through such turmoil as a child in Lebanon. In the early 1970s, I lived with my parents in Beirut, near the sea, along the Corniche. I still remember my nightmares. I dreamed of Israeli forces arriving from the water, advancing toward our home, and opening fire. Those fears were not entirely imaginary. Israeli secret agents did land in boats on the Lebanese coast off Beirut, breaking into homes and murdering individual members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). I can still hear the outrage in my father's voice as he railed against state-sanctioned terrorism. "The government of one country decides to execute people in another country without any legal scruples?" Lebanon has been enduring such daily violence since 7 October 2023. Israeli drones track and strike people in their cars, on their mopeds, and inside their homes. These are executions. Executions without trial, without court orders, decisions made with the help of AI. Anyone the Israelis identify as a member of Hamas or Hezbollah is the enemy, and under the logic of war, these individuals must be eliminated. Who examines the evidence before a house alleged to shelter a Hezbollah commander is reduced to rubble?

I lie in bed, unable to fall asleep. Anger rises in me again. The Israeli army justified the destruction of the NGO Dar Assalam by claiming that it was targeting a Hezbollah commander. Dar Assalam in Wardaniye was destroyed on 9 October 2024. It was a German-Lebanese centre for socio-cultural dialogue. The centre had sheltered 87 refugees seeking protection from the bombing of their villages in southern Lebanon. There was no Hezbollah commander in the house, but six innocent people died when the house collapsed. Among them was a young couple, whose children only survived because they were playing in the garden at the time. I had co-founded this centre and regularly taught trauma therapy courses there. I am a German Protestant pastor, well trained in Judaism, and a psycho-therapist specializing in trauma therapy. I have been working for many years with Palestinian women whose families have lived in refugee camps in Lebanon for over four generations. I see their fate as part of a long chain of injustices, but ultimately, I view what was done to the Jews in Germany as a backdrop to what has happened – and continues to happen – in Palestine. I often wonder whether Israel would have been established in 1948 if the Jews, threatened with extermination, had not sought a safe haven. The Zionist movement, which already existed in Palestine, had to absorb this influx of desperate people. For me, one of the greatest tragedies in history is that the founding of the state of Israel, with the Jews who fled the Shoah, also became the Nakba of the Palestinians, the catastrophe of expulsion from their homeland, Palestine. To this day, Palestinians live almost entirely without rights under occupation in Israel or scattered around the world as stateless persons, or confined to refugee camps in Lebanon, waiting for their seemingly unattainable right of return.

Thaer Ayoub, a young Palestinian poet who was able to flee from Aleppo to Germany in 2014, describes the Jews and Palestinians living in Germany in one of his poems as "twins of a wound!"[2] "Twins of a wound" applies equally to the situation in Israel and Palestine. A wound cannot and will not heal under the current political circumstances. Guns, rockets, and drones will never bring healing or peace. The question of guilt wraps itself like an octopus, with its tentacles wrapped around the official statements of German politicians. We are becoming increasingly

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[2] Ruben Schenzle, Fiktive Grenzverletzung. Zusammenhänge von Shoa, Nakba, Holocaust erzählen – Ein Essay, Berlin 2025, 29.

guilty by remaining silent about the crimes of the Israeli army. As a German, I feel a shared responsibility for the injustice that traps Palestinians.

Difficult questions haunt my night. Sleep will not come. My thoughts wander, this time to my days as a student of Protestant theology. "How can you still study theology after Auschwitz? How can you even talk about God anymore?" When I returned from Lebanon to Germany in 1975, following the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon, I was confronted with the question of German guilt in light of the crimes of the Nazi era. The enormity of the crimes committed by Germans and carried out across the world became overwhelming for me. I followed the example set by my professors in Berlin, Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt and Peter van der Osten-Sacken, who believed that the way out of this dilemma was to study Judaism itself and engage deeply with Jewish history. I came to understand that there was no other way to deal with the Shoah. In 1979, I travelled to Israel with a study group for six months to translate rabbinical texts. At the same time, we attended meetings with concentration camp survivors. We listened to their stories and saw the numbers tattooed on their arms. Feeling at home among the Arab population, I took Arab buses to the Palestinian territories and experienced first-hand what it means to live under occupation. I worked on a kibbutz for a while, harvesting grapefruit from morning to night and sleeping in the room of a young Israeli woman. At night, the young woman talked about her service in the army; she had been stationed on the Lebanese border. She could not believe that I had lived in Lebanon, "They're not human beings, they're animals!" I heard the hatred in her voice. "Be human!" echoes in my ears the voice of Holocaust survivor Margot Friedländer, who died in Berlin in May 2025. The memories carry me further. On a later trip to Israel, I walked through Jerusalem and found myself standing at the upper entrance to Yad Vashem. A large park spread out behind the gate. As I looked inside, a young Palestinian man approached me. He was the security guard. Since we both spoke Arabic, he invited me to his guardhouse for tea. We exchanged the usual Arabic pleasantries about family status and the number of sons and daughters. When we fell silent for a moment, he suddenly said, "Why didn't the Germans do a more thorough job back then?" I did not understand what he meant until he pointed to the memorial. "That!" I remember looking at him and wondering how someone could guard the entrance to this memorial, this place of human horror, this place where evidence of the greatest inhumanity is

preserved. How could someone even think such a thing? It is incomprehensible to me. I think something inside me broke at that moment. Was it my hope for peace? The hope born of humanity, of the ability to empathize even with the enemy. How can anyone remain untouched by these testimonies? Today, I think that he, the guard at the Yad Vashem memorial, had become blind to Jewish suffering. His own experience of injustice clouded his vision. Who sees the suffering of his people? Thousands of people from all over the world walk through this museum of horror. Visiting the museum is part of Israeli soldiers' training, and the 'never again' in relation to Nazi policy is automatically applied to the perceived threat from the Arab states. Has there ever been a memorial to the crimes committed against the Palestinian people? Their suffering remains utterly ignored. At that time, I missed the opportunity to ask the security guard these questions. I left, and I remember how I trembled from within.

Who is guilty? We Germans live in the context of this enormous and never-to-be-erased guilt for the destruction of Jewish life under National Socialism. And we deepen this guilt by being unable to criticize the Israeli government and call its actions in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon what they are: war crimes and violations of international law. In my opinion, the Israeli attacks against the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank can no longer be justified as a response to the excessive crimes committed against the civilian population of Israel by Hamas on 7 October 2023. I remember very clearly how shocked I was when I heard the news on 7 October. At the same time, I could not help thinking that something like this was to be expected, although the massacre exceeded all notions of cruelty. The people in Gaza had been kept in a state of absolute hopelessness for far too long. The longer the war lasts, the more desperate the situation becomes for both sides. We Germans will not be able to escape our shared responsibility for the crimes committed by the Israeli army against the Palestinian population. This has been the case not only since 7 October, but since the creation of the State of Israel. The German crimes against the Jews continue in the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people.

Once again, I think of the people I met in Israel back then. Many of them were old, survivors of the Holocaust, and many have since died. But their traumas live on. I see various symptoms of traumatized people expressed in political behaviour. Traumatized people can lose control over what they do to one another in their desperate defence against the pain

they have suffered, a pain too great to be consciously acknowledged. This imperceptible pain, which nonetheless causes constant suffering, can hinder or even eliminate the ability to empathize with the pain of others. What the Jewish population has suffered, not only during the Nazi era, but through the recurring pogroms and the repeated destruction of Jewish life, continues to shape Israeli politics as a deep-seated fear.

For many years, I have worked with Palestinian women to help them recognize their own trauma and learn to live with it more effectively. It changes their lives when they discover their own power. They no longer need to see themselves as victims. They learn to manage their feelings and behaviour. I know this work is only a drop in the ocean. However, I am convinced that it is necessary to address trauma on a much larger scale and to influence the current political situation. I feel that we are complicit in the crimes of the Israeli army, acting through the lens of unresolved trauma. Crimes that German politics turns away from, under the pretext that any criticism carries the seeds of anti-Semitism.

The rather sleepless night is over. I am standing in the conference room in Erfurt again, reading what the students and pastors want to tell us. I find no political statements, no angry accusations, neither against Israeli politics nor against our silent German churches. Instead, I find descriptions of suffering, a reality we rarely hear about in the public media. The writers balance this suffering with moments of mutual support, relief efforts, and solidarity. They describe what it looks like to celebrate an Easter service in a church that has been destroyed – a celebration of the resurrection, even as life has been violently disrupted. The church in Yaroun, in south Lebanon, for example, has only one remaining wall, on which the small church tower with the cross still stands. Beyond Lebanon and Palestine, many uncertainties confront Christian communities in northern Syria, where the collapse of the Assad regime and shifts in governance under the Kurdish administration have created deep insecurity. Rev. Mathilde Sabagh lives in northern Syria in the Kurdish-organized area of Hassakeh. In her congregation, no one knows what all this will mean for them, what will become of the soldiers of the Assad regime and those responsible for the Kurdish self-administration, and what it will mean for Christians. The uncertainty does not lead to paralysis but strengthens her conviction to shape her work in ways that stabilize and support people through the strength of the Christian faith. As I continue reading the papers in Erfurt, I can see how significant the impact of this

work is. At the top of her poster is a photo of her twin daughters, both five years old, looking straight into the camera, eyes bright and a little cheeky. "How do I explain this war to my children?" the mother asks herself. It is a question every parent faces while trying to shield their children from the horrors of war. What does war mean for children who experience the bombings first-hand in Gaza and Lebanon, who wake at night and run out of their homes, afraid that the walls above them will collapse? What does it mean to lose your home and to live in refugee shelters with hundreds of others in empty school buildings? What does it mean when schools are closed, and you have to find a way to continue your studies online? How do people live with loss and suffering without breaking down? I want to highlight some of the statements from the posters that, for me, exemplify what the Christian faith can achieve in almost hopeless situations.

"A Glimpse of Hope amid Ruins" – Maria Dal Bzadigian describes her encounters in Christian villages in southern Lebanon:

> What gives me hope is the tenderness of the people we met – especially the young. In the midst of so much destruction, they still carry light. Their courage to press on, their deep love for the land, and their determination to serve their communities reminded me that even in the darkest times, hope lives on. They were not bitter. They spoke of healing, rebuilding, and staying rooted in love and faith.

Rev. Rabih Taleb of the Evangelical Church in Alma Al Shaab:

> In our harsh trials, we feel God's presence with us to strengthen and comfort us. But He does not stop there – He is also at work. Even though He is not responsible for the chaos we create, He works as He did in the story of creation (Gen 1): "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep …"
>
> This is our hope today: in a God who comforts us and strengthens us, but who also works to bring about a new beginning for us in our region, where the land is truly formless and empty.
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> Lebanon needs a real new beginning. It needs the creative power to overcome the crisis caused by years of mounting destruction.

George Sahili:

> God suffers with us … However, as we look forward to the culmination of the kingdom of God, we stand firm, shaken but not shocked, trying our best

> to reflect through our beings the very image of God who loves, understands, and cares.

Farah Bou Kheir:

> This world remains marred by violence, displacement, and division. Yet, it is also miraculously full of light … This is what we are witnessing in Lebanon and in every place where the church dares to remain … We are not only recipients of hope: we are bearers. The Lebanese church is wounded but worshipping, diminished in size but not in spirit. We continue to … send out peacemakers. We do so not because it is easy, but because it is true.

George Shammas:

> In South Lebanon, I saw a glimpse of what the church is called to be: A community that holds the tension between devastation and hope, that serves with hands and weeps with hearts, and that prays not only for deliverance but for the courage to stay present in the aftermath of destruction. It is here, in the ashes, that I find the church most alive. Not triumphant, but faithful. Not loud but present.

Saba Qara (Palestine):

> Do not look away. Do not let your compassion be selective. Let justice be justice for all….We do not ask for pity – we ask to be seen … Let your voices join ours – not as saviours, but as friends and companions – on the long and painful road toward healing, dignity, and peace.

These powerful testimonies of faith in overcoming violence, suffering, and destruction offer me hope of new beginnings here in Germany.

Once again, they awaken memories in me. As a teenager, I saw the world I had trusted completely fall apart with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war. At the same time, I discovered a different kind of strength.

> Waiting for the school bus in Beirut in 1975.
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> Early in the morning, we are standing on the Corniche in Beirut, waiting for the school bus.
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> We don't know if it will come or not. If it doesn't come, we know there is fighting somewhere in the city. We wait until we are sure that the bus really isn't coming. Then we go home, unpack our school bags, and put our lunch boxes in the freezer. Maybe there will be something on the radio?
>
> On the days when the bus does come, we drive through the city until we arrive in Doha, where our school is. Sometimes we must stay at school because fighting has broken out in the city.

> That was 50 years ago, when the civil war in Lebanon began.
>
> I stand and wait for the school bus. I look out at the sea. Every morning, I stand there and look at the sea. One morning, these words came to me, "Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." When the school bus comes and we drive along the sea, these words are there, "Yours is the kingdom …" When the school bus doesn't come, I continue to look out at the sea and listen inwardly to "Yours is the kingdom …" I dive away from fear into a glory that seems to be reflected on the water, untouchable. I flee into an indestructible power. I can trust, even when everything breaks apart. And I mean to belong to, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done …"

When the ground beneath my feet began to crack, I came to understand these words. With every new war I experienced in Lebanon, with every bomb explosion I saw on WhatsApp, with every story of fear and panic, with every image of destroyed homes, with every account of torn bodies, I feel the old crack in the ground of trust, like a torn muscle that never heals. But wherever I am, I try to remember the sea, the blue horizon, and the line where the sky and the sea come so close they seem as if they might touch. I let the images rise up, and hope that the words form themselves again: "Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Ever since those days when we stood on the Corniche and looked out at the sea, ever since those days when we did not know whether the school bus would come, I have longed for this power: the power and glory greater than fear and despair in the face of all this immeasurable suffering.

A Confession to Human Rights

Uta Zeuge-Buberl[1]

When I was 16, I attended a school lecture on the Israel-Palestine conflict. A German peace activist spoke about the complexities of this ongoing conflict, which I could fully grasp at that age. It was the first time I learned something about the Middle East, and I was fascinated by its cultural and historical heritage. About seven years later, a dream came true when I had the opportunity to study in Beirut for a year as part of the German program "Studium im Mittleren Osten" (SiMO).

One evening, during a gathering hosted by the pastors of the German Protestant congregation, we discussed the Israel-Palestine conflict and Germany's role in it. Someone argued that we Germans bear collective guilt and must recognize our responsibility. This statement has troubled me ever since. How long does this collective guilt last? Why am I held responsible for war crimes that my great-grandparents indirectly contributed to, and what can I do to honour the German idea of taking responsibility?

The more I learned about the entanglement of Western political and economic interests in Middle Eastern socio-political, cultural, and religious developments, the more sympathy I felt for this region. In Europe, many people consider the Middle East as a place that has experienced numerous wars driven by political and religious conflicts. The causes of these armed conflicts are often highly complex and difficult to understand, at least for a person living in Europe who is not familiar with the region's historical context.

7 October 2023, was a Saturday. The news of the terrorist attack by Hamas hit like a shockwave, even in Europe. In the hours that followed, it seemed as if the public sensed a turning point in this long-standing conflict and as if many had taken sides. The traumatic events led many people to conclude that, regardless of Israel's response, it could be deemed reasonable.

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[1] Uta Zeuge-Buberl lives in Vienna, Austria and she took part in the SiMO study program in 2005/2006. Uta works for the Christian social organization *Diakonie Eine Welt* in Vienna, her article was written in September 2025.

I remember telling a friend that two-thirds of the population in Gaza is under 30 years old, so in the event of a war, the Israeli military is most likely to kill children and young people. After two years of warfare, this scenario has become a brutal reality. It is therefore extremely difficult to maintain a neutral perspective on the war.

A Jewish Austrian journalist recently stated in an interview that nothing is being reported in the media these days about the terrible events of 7 October 2023; only the situation in Gaza is being discussed. The other participants immediately disputed this view, asserting that not a day goes by without the war in Gaza being placed in the context of 7 October. Since then, the date has been mentioned in almost every article about the war in Gaza. This creates the impression that the conflict can only be understood in relation to that Saturday in October 2023.

There are certainly turning points in history, but nothing happens in a hermetically sealed space, as António Guterres noted shortly after the outbreak of the war in Gaza. Events such as the terror attack carried out by Hamas must be seen in context. Were the Palestinian territories and Israel a peaceful place on 6 October 2023? Not at all.

But what does the statement of the Austrian journalist mentioned above mean when we look at the armed conflict between Israel and Gaza, as well as at the alarming developments in the West Bank? Do I neglect the massacre committed by Hamas if I discuss the humanitarian crisis and the high number of victims in Gaza without mentioning 7 October 2023, in the same breath? Are there perhaps two different ways of talking about the war? Why do we always have to take sides? Is it wrong to consider multiple perspectives and form your own judgment? No one wants 7 October to happen again. But I am also certain that no one wants the time before 7 October to return either. Now, one might ask: what can we – as Germans, as Europeans – do to promote justice and peace in the Middle East?

I would like to cite a saying of Jesus, according to the evangelist Luke:

> *Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven. Luke 6:36s*

To judge always implies that something is false. Judgments are often irreversible, and it is not easy to convince someone that there are other solutions as well. The war in Gaza has fuelled increasing judgment against

Israel, or more broadly, against anyone associated with Israel – tourists, artists, intellectuals. Synagogues and Jewish institutions in Germany have had to intensify their security measures. Whether Israeli citizens or German citizens with an Israeli or Jewish background support the war against Hamas politically or not, they are judged simply for having the "wrong" citizenship, for being on the wrong "side".

On the other hand, if you criticize the Israeli government, the military actions of the IDF, or operations against the so-called proxies of Hamas in Lebanon, Iran, and Yemen, you may be labelled as anti-Semitic. There have been reported incidents in which Germans accused Jewish residents in Germany of being anti-Semitic simply for condemning the military and political actions of the Israeli government. If German police arrest an elderly Jewish woman for holding a protest sign, the paradox is difficult to grasp. Luke further writes:

> *Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye," when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. Luke 6:41s*

Is there only one side to the truth? The paradoxical reactions to different protests in Germany after 7 October 2023, clearly show that we should judge neither those who support nor those who oppose the war in Gaza. Since Hamas began its terror attack on Israel, and since Israel has responded to this traumatizing incident by causing further suffering and grief, a mantra has been repeated by politicians and the media in Germany "We stand by Israel's side without reservation". This statement, referred to as the German *raison d'état*, is an expression of collective guilt toward the Jewish people, whose survivors and descendants fled to Palestine in the aftermath of World War II.

When I first discussed collective guilt as a student, I was hesitant to accept that the atrocities committed by the Nazis had anything to do with me. Today, I am convinced that nations and communities still bear responsibility for what their ancestors did to others. Yet, in my view, my responsibility as a German in the aftermath of the Shoah is not to enact

the *raison d'état* day by day. It is not my duty to judge others without consideration, nor should I overlook actions that violate human rights. As a German and a Christian, I feel obliged instead to monitor the observance of human rights and I believe that the power of words should always prevail over the power of weapons.

These principles are enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany. In May 1949, Germany adopted the constitution after years of war and terror. The first article states:

> The German people, therefore, acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world.

Article 3 continues:

> No person shall be favoured or disfavoured because of sex, parentage, race, language, homeland and origin, faith, or religious or political opinions. No person shall be disfavoured because of disability.

I am always moved by these lines, which refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted just one year earlier in 1948. Thus, every person in Germany is obliged to *acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community*. This duty does not only apply to my country – I am also committed to the observance of human rights in other "communities". Germany bears historical responsibility and, at the same time, is obliged to uphold human rights and to help others do the same. This is not only a legal obligation but also an ethical duty and a goal we should always keep in mind when we are tempted to judge others.

As a Christian, I am also disturbed by the hesitant statements of the churches in Germany (and Austria) regarding the ongoing violations of human rights in Gaza. But I am even more unsettled by my own seemingly calm protest against the injustice happening before our very eyes. I collected donations to support humanitarian aid when Israel attacked Lebanon in the autumn of 2024. I support community kitchens in Gaza, organized by NGOs that can operate locally, though only on a small scale. Passing donations or collecting money during church services is one way to express compassion and solidarity, but it has little influence on communities or decision-makers outside the church. Churches can, however,

be among many voices expressing what unites us: the universal belief in human rights, whether they are grounded in God or in nature.

In 2019, the German theologian Gerd Theißen published an article in which he called for a confession to human rights as a liturgical part of worship.[2] He argues that such a confession, within the context of worship, expresses what is truly important in life. It is not a legal obligation but an ethical goal that one should always keep in mind. The confession concludes with the words

> If human rights are violated, one must obey God rather than men. If human rights are crucified, we hope they will arise again in peace, justice, and for the preservation of creation. May the Lord help us.

We must reaffirm our commitment to these ethical duties as regularly as we reaffirm our constitution. A confession is spoken aloud and inspires action to ensure that every human being has the right to live and that human dignity remains inviolable.

It is one thing to be aware of one's ethical principles and act accordingly. It is another to listen to our sisters and brothers in the Middle East and respond to their questions and requests.

In many conversations, I have had with Christians in the Middle East, and in the articles, I have read about churches in conflict areas, one thing in particular has always struck me: in the face of armed conflict or difficult living conditions, people draw immense comfort and strength from their faith. It always reminds me of Paul's words to the Corinthians, where he writes that the seeming weakness brought by hardships, insults, or calamities is in fact strength in Christ:

> *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Cor 12:9*

I recently read a statement by Rev. Sally Azar from the ELCJHL (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land), saying that faith has the power to inspire action: "Faith does not mean to withdraw from

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[2] Cf. Gerd Theißen, Plädoyer für ein Menschenrechtsbekenntnis im Gottesdienst. Über seine Chancen im Religions- und Glaubenspluralismus unserer Zeit, in: Markus Wriedt/Raphael Zager, Notwendiges Umdenken, Festschrift für Werner Zager zum 60. Geburtstag, Leipzig 2019, 167–185.

life; it is rather a power to face the challenges of life."[3] Similarly, the story of Daoud Nasser, a farmer and peace activist, and his project, Tent of Nations, is a vivid example of a commitment to human rights and an empowering faith. "In Christ we are not victims, but active creators and cultivators of life and bearers of hope."[4]

At the entrance to Nasser's farm, a stone is inscribed in Arabic, English, and German, "We refuse to be enemies." Despite ongoing litigation aimed at preventing the registration of land actually owned by Nasser's family – not to mention countless attacks by settlers – this slogan expresses a boundless belief in goodness. It demonstrates respect for others and acknowledges that every human being has an equal right to live and be free. The moment the other party is declared an enemy, a peaceful solution is no longer possible.

Despite the current tragic developments, many Palestinian and Israeli peace activists continue to advocate for peaceful coexistence. Can we, who have seemingly become passive and distant observers, claim to advocate for peace in the same way? We should! We, as Germans, must refuse to be enemies – not of our Jewish or Palestinian neighbours, nor of the Muslim community at large. Rather than remaining silent observers, it is our duty to foster dialogue and to stand up for peace when conflicting parties seem gridlocked.

If Palestinians and Israelis cannot cross barriers because of their own trauma and deep pain, then we must stand beyond those barriers and create spaces for peacebuilding. This is Germany's responsibility in the aftermath of the Shoah. This responsibility is not fulfilled by delivering arms to support a state's security. Our collective guilt in the aftermath of the Shoah requires us to uphold human rights continuously and to ensure that no nation, no ethnic group, or religious community is exposed to persecution or total destruction.

Therefore, we must listen to the people in the Middle East. If we take our responsibilities seriously and confess what we truly believe, we will know how to respond.

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[3] Im Lande der Bibel 2 (2025), 28, ed. by Berliner Missionswerk der Evangelischen Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz im Zusammenwirken mit dem Jerusalemsverein.

[4] Beharrlich bleiben und beten: Tent of Nations übt gewaltfreien Widerstand, ibid., 16–19, 18.

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The book brings into focus diverse perspectives on the conflicts in the Middle East particularly in the wake of 7 October 2023. It gathers voices from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Germany, demonstrating how history unfolds not only in political events but also in lived experience. The volume includes essays and personal narratives, revealing how individuals in for example Beirut, Latakia, Nablus, or Berlin interpret, endure, and theologically reflect on recent developments.

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The book adopts a multi-narrative approach that creates space for honest and respectful exchange. It demonstrates how trust built over decades makes possible what often seems politically unattainable: a conversation that neither harmonizes nor relativizes, but truly listens.

Claudia Rammelt is currently a research assistant in the project "Between Intensification and Relativization. Modalities and Mechanisms of Religious Change among Muslim and Christian Refugees from Syria in Germany, Austria and Switzerland" at the University of Göttingen and is also connected to the Ruhr University Bochum through the project "Encountering Theology".

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