

July 17, 2014

Rt. Rev. Declan Lang
Bishop of Clifton
and Chair of the International Affairs Department
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales
Alexander House
160 Pennywell Road
Bristol BS5 0TX
United Kingdom

Advance copy via email

Your Excellency:

It is with great distress and sadness that I, like Jews throughout the diaspora, have watched the latest intensification of violence across the Middle East and now, again, in the Holy Land. Only weeks ago, I traveled to Israel to join in greeting Pope Francis on the occasion of his important visit there, which provided, among other elements, a new reminder of the historic deepening of a vital friendship between Catholics and Jews in our era.

Accordingly, I join you in feeling great pain over the tragic, continuing suffering of people of diverse identities – including all-too-many Israelis and Palestinians alike – in the Middle East, as beyond.

However, as one who yearns for genuine, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East, and as a close observer of that region who also believes in the necessity of honest interfaith discourse, I feel obliged to relay that I was pained anew by your statement of July 7 on the current Palestinian-Israeli hostilities.

In fact, I was stunned by it – and must express my alarm that its sentiments, at once misapprehending circumstances on the ground and bearing the moral stature of Catholic leadership, significantly risked doing more harm than good. Plainly, it risked adding grievous insult to the injury repeatedly experienced by Israelis, while emboldening fanatically violent Palestinian elements – something that does not serve the wellbeing of ordinary, innocent people on either side of the regional divide.

I recognize, of course, that your statement did condemn “the firing of rockets by militants from Gaza into populated civilian areas across Israel.” However, the remainder of your statement makes clear your assigning of guilt primarily to the State of Israel, and this

indictment discounts the complexity of the conditions experienced by – and the full, actual record of – that country.

The very title of your communiqué, Excellency, would strongly seem to betray its narrow focus: “Bishop Declan Lang’s Statement on Gaza.” This title highlights hostilities in Gaza, while deemphasizing the violent assault to which nearly all of Israel has by now been subjected. Accordingly, it was sadly unsurprising when you proceeded, before noting the condemnation “in equal measure” of anti-Israel violence, to first report Israeli airstrikes in Gaza.

This chosen sequence would be disturbing enough when considering that the attacks by Palestinian terrorists preceded, and forced, Israel’s response: over 1,300 rockets have been fired at Israel during recent days alone, but the onslaught of these increasingly ominous attacks has now persisted for substantially over a decade. It is yet more inconceivable how you allege “indiscriminate and relentless attacks by the Israeli military machine on the civilian population of Gaza” (a description in stark contrast with the far less evocatively described actions of the Gaza “militants”). It is to be hoped that you are aware, Excellency, that, unapologetically and inherently, it is the Palestinian terrorists’ assaults that are utterly indiscriminate – intended for no other purpose than to terrorize and attempt maximal carnage among civilians – while Israel has aimed, both in principle and out of obvious concern for its international standing, to direct and limit its strikes to combatant targets.

The occurrence of casualties among Palestinian non-combatants, including both deaths and injuries, is undeniable and heartbreaking. However, these casualties are manifestly the result of Hamas’s strategy of executing terrorist attacks, and engaging in terrorist activity, from among the Palestinian civilian population. Observers inclined to accentuate the relative might of Israel and its “military machine” must not then be willing to obscure the critical fact that Palestinian losses would be *inestimably* greater were those Israeli capabilities not exceptionally restrained even in the face of harrowing, growing threats and unremitting attacks.

Intentions matter, Excellency, as does context. Thankfully, Israel is now often succeeding in limiting the deaths of its citizens on its own sovereign territory, but this is not for a lack of violent efforts by Hamas – a group that seized control of a Gaza Strip whose soil (including every single Jewish settlement) was evacuated completely by Israel in 2005, and a group that (unlike liberal and conservative Israeli premiers alike) renounces the two-state solution and maintains open, doctrinal commitment to the destruction of Israel within any boundaries. These realities are patently the cause of recurring Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the resulting suffering, including that of citizens in Gaza. Turning a blind eye to these is cruel and, ultimately, counterproductive for Israelis and Palestinians alike. Accordingly, it is bewildering that you view the conflict, “at its core,” as being about “occupation,” settlements and a blockade. It is certainly a cause for sadness, not comfort, that the document you reference, “Call for a Courageous Change,” libels Israel’s leadership as “foster[ing] a discriminatory discourse promoting exclusive rights” when

Christian and Muslim populations in Israel have consistently risen even as Jewish and Christian populations in neighboring countries have plummeted.

It is further bewildering that in contrast with your blunt, direct condemnation of Israel, your statement does not even mention by name its terrorist adversaries whose program vis-à-vis Israel is rooted in a political and theological outlook that is as extreme and uncompromising as it is fundamental. Notably, despite the fact that far more Arab citizens have been killed, to take just one example, in only three years of terrible violence in Syria than in 70 or 100 years of the conflict over the restoration of Jewish statehood, your statements on wars such as the one in Syria have been more restrained in tone and accusation than your text on a pluralistic democracy, one existing in a singularly challenging environment, Israel. Moreover, your issuance of a statement “on Gaza” awaited the assertive Israeli response to attacks from that territory; the website of your diocese yields not a single mention of Sderot, an Israeli town whose children have never known a life free from indiscriminate, unprovoked cross-border rocket attacks from Gaza.

It should go without saying that no country, including the United Kingdom, would be expected to be passive in the face of utterly grave violence directed at nearly all its civilians – violence founded upon not a simple territorial dispute or political aspiration but on the destruction of an entire country.

In light of this, it is, Excellency, frankly bewildering that you would refer to Gaza as a “walled prison,” with the implication that Israel, rather than those whose actions force the construction of walls, bears responsibility for “an end” to this predicament. Is the key to preventing further violence allowing the unfettered armament and movement of those who sanctify murder and martyrdom? Is it reasonable to ask Israel’s leaders to neither protect their people with force nor “walls,” or to initiate new withdrawals under fire and when faced with unmitigated threats of destruction? Are the people of Israel not entitled to equal compassion when experiencing in their region a “walled prison” formed of violent rejection, discrimination and near-total exclusion for nearly seven decades, both predating and outliving any contemporary Jewish presence in the most ardently disputed areas of the Holy Land?

Indeed, injustice to the Israeli people is augmented when some abroad – despite the persistence elsewhere of numerous, too-often far deadlier, conflicts and wholesale abrogations of human dignity – direct only at one party of one conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict, inflammatory rhetoric such as embodied in terms like “military machine” and “walled prison.” One wonders whether it is Israel’s relative vulnerability, not its strength, that makes it a convenient target for such unnuanced foreign condemnations.

Excellency, I hope you will agree that all those committed to a just peace – not least religious leaders – have an obligation first to do no harm in addressing serious global problems, an obligation not to obscure complexity and certainly to avoid exacerbating and exporting tensions. The first casualty of war is innocence, and Israel likely has

available no perfect solutions to the crises it faces; it should not, however, be equated with its terrorist attackers, let alone be demonized in a way that even the terrorists are not.

As a reminder of the respective defining values of Israel and Hamas – and, portentously, I would note that the views and goals of the latter are not held by that group alone in the region – I take the liberty of appending a copy of the foundational documents of these two parties. I also respectfully offer a reminder that in contrast with the denunciations of the shocking, heinous killing of Mohammad Abu Khdeir by Israeli President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, rabbis of all stripes and even bereaved mother Rachel Fraenkel – who said, “Even in the abyss of mourning for Gil-Ad, Eyal and Naftali, it is difficult for me to describe how distressed we are by the outrage committed in Jerusalem: the shedding of innocent blood in defiance of all morality, of the Torah, of the foundation of the lives of our boys and of all of us in this country” – the hostage-taking and murder of young Israelis was legitimated and celebrated by Hamas leaders and too many other Palestinians.

Excellency, I hope you will appreciate that this letter is written out of pain and alarm, not any wish for quarrel and certainly not out of indifference to the genuine needs of Palestinians. My forthrightness should be taken, above all, as a signal of the importance ascribed to Christian leadership and especially to the extraordinary Catholic-Jewish friendship that has been nurtured over the last half-century.

It is my prayer that we will find ever-improved ways to give voice to empathy for all those created in the Divine image, maintaining the sensitivity to fairness that may be just as vital as fervor in pursuing reconciliation and peace.

Sincerely,

David J. Michaels
Director of United Nations and Intercommunal Affairs