

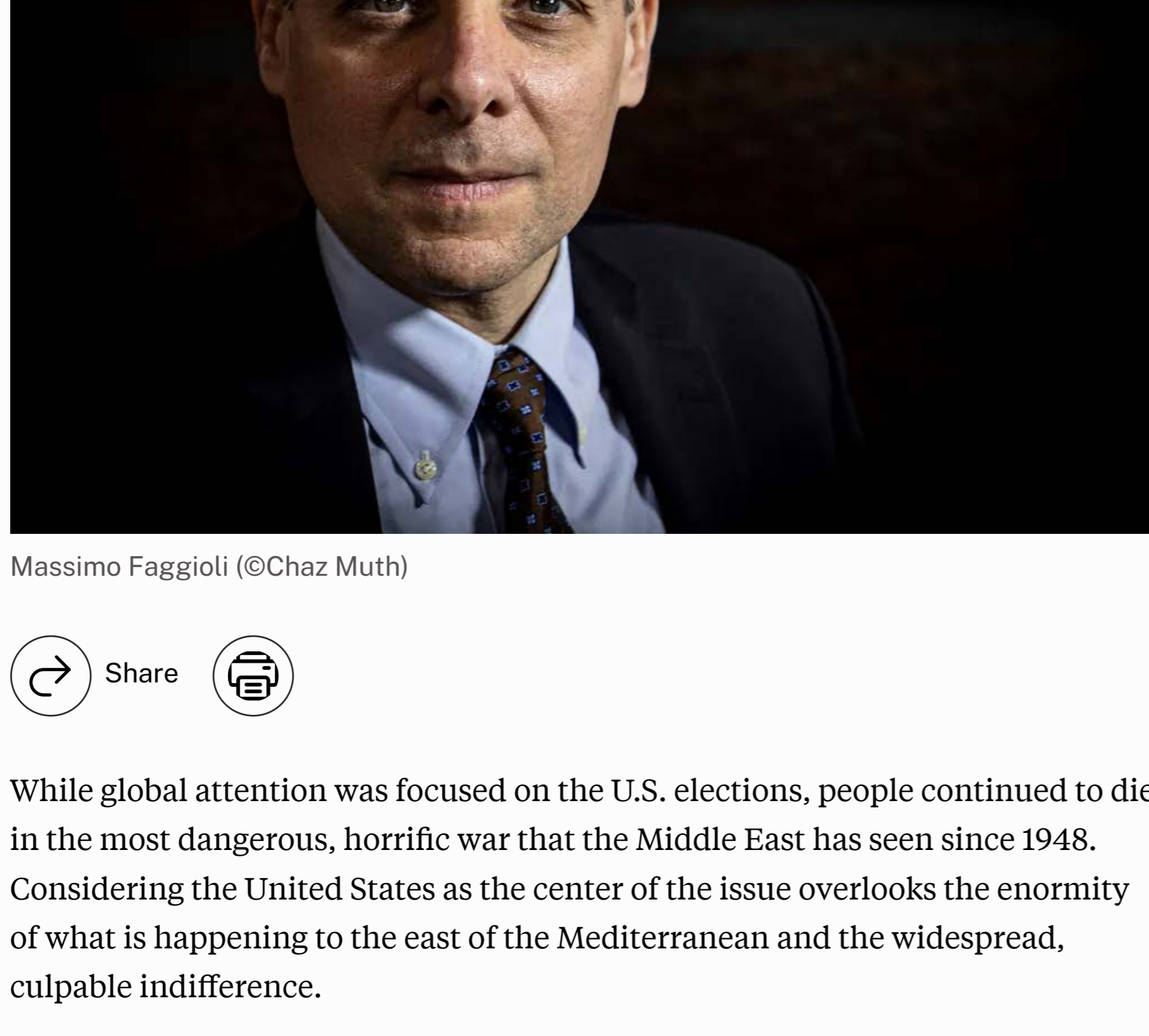
News / Opinions

The church after Gaza

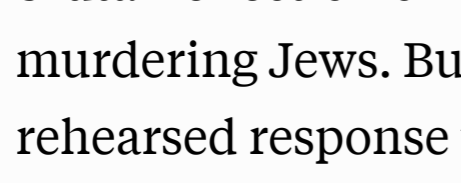
— Signs of the times. The church must confront its silence on the Middle East conflict and recognize the suffering of all victims, especially Palestinians. Addressing this is essential for maintaining moral credibility, supporting interfaith dialogue, and continuing the path set by *Nostra Aetate*.

By Massimo Faggioli

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Massimo Faggioli (©Chaz Muth)



While global attention was focused on the U.S. elections, people continued to die in the most dangerous, horrific war that the Middle East has seen since 1948. Considering the United States as the center of the issue overlooks the enormity of what is happening to the east of the Mediterranean and the widespread, culpable indifference.

October 7, 2023, is a *caesura* and periodizing date in our history. There is no possible moral justification for what Hamas did on that day against Israel, a brutal reflection of its appalling commitment to destroying Israel and murdering Jews. But while Europe and the Western world in general have a well-rehearsed response to antisemitism, their response to what happened after October 7 has been far more problematic. Either Europe and the Western world do not realize the extent of what is happening to the Palestinian people, or they are in a state of moral and political denial. Or worse.

The behavior of the Israeli government and armed forces is beyond what is morally acceptable and legally permissible. Israel continues to bomb places that can hardly be said to be a military target or where the proportion between military targets and civilian "collateral damage" goes beyond any understanding of morality and legality. Civilian victims have become victims twice, thanks to widespread mistrust—or international ignorance—of the news in wartime propaganda. Yet, the reality of what is happening is undeniable.

Navigating religious and political tensions

Israel has a right to exist and to defend itself, and it's hard to fathom what this means from the quiet of the American suburbia where I write this. However, looking back on it from the start, Israel's action in Gaza cannot be seen solely as a response to October 7. The ethnic supremacist undertones of Netanyahu and his collaborators had been present long before October 7.

The narrative on the role of religions in world affairs is dominated by extremist positions — in Islam, Judaism, Christianity, not to mention Hinduism and more — that are too often considered the only true ones. Christians and Catholics, in particular, must walk a very fine line. There is a significant difference between clearly condemning the Israeli government's specific policies and the violent sentiments held by some Christians and Catholics toward the entire State of Israel, which often extends—implicitly or explicitly—to a broad animosity toward all Jewish people.

Further reading: **Catholic universities in the United States and the Israel-Hamas war**

Needless to say, this goes back for millennia. It is striking — and terrifying — to see how some radical-progressive Catholics went from Philo-Semitism in the late 20th century to the risk of seemingly flirting, sometimes unknowingly, with anti-Judaism and antisemitism today. The pro-Israeli stance of many governments cannot hide the anti-Israeli aversion and sometimes the open antisemitism, especially among those who have not yet renounced political activism. On the other hand, there is a moral unresponsiveness, even among the most aware and least naïve who acknowledge and defend Catholic-Jewish dialogue as one of the most important fruits of Vatican II and the post-Vatican II period. Their fear that critique of the State of Israel could morph into new forms of anti-Judaism and antisemitism is real, but no excuse to sit on the sidelines as things progressively escalate.

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Historically, the political, cultural, and ecclesiastical elites of countries important for Catholicism, such as France and Italy, have had a different and more intimate relationship with both Muslims and Christians in the Middle East and the Arab world compared to Britain and the United States. In the last few years, the Catholic perception of the Middle East has been shaped more by the Anglosphere, leading to an undeclared (and occasionally declared) Catholic Zionism that often overlooks the heavy toll paid by innocent victims—particularly Muslims, but also Christians and Jews. They are simply "collateral damage."

A call for moral clarity

Now is the time for a moral denunciation of what is happening in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon. This is the work of far more than the Holy See. In fact, it is not clear how much the Holy See can do. Catholics can act in ways the Vatican and the pope cannot. Liberal-progressive Catholics, especially, are under an obligation to give more explanations than conservative or traditionalist Catholics. University professors at Catholic universities cannot teach about Dorothy Day, the Berrigan brothers, liberation theology, and not teach about the Middle East today. They cannot teach how to do theology inter-religiously without talking about what is happening in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon. It is morally impossible to condemn "Christian nationalism" without considering the risks of a theocratic turn in the relations between religion and politics in the State of Israel.

This war is changing interreligious relations in ways that will continue for decades, even for the rest of our lives. The fact that this is complicated is no excuse and never has been for Catholic understandings of moral culpability. Forgetting the victims has become one of the most typical moves today—and perhaps the most subtle form of contempt. The deafening silence of Catholics on this topic carries profound long-term consequences for the relations between the church and Islam that will endure far longer than the effects of the vote of Arab-American voters in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. To the historical guilt of the European and Western Churches for the Holocaust is now added the guilt toward the Middle East. Such a burden cannot be alleviated by the clear and pressing need to respond always and everywhere to the return of antisemitism.

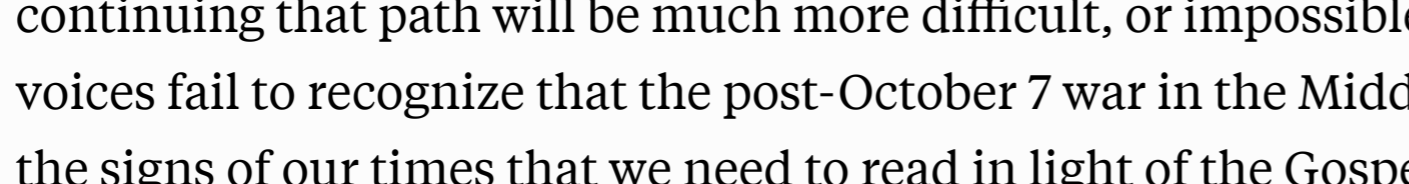
“This war is changing interreligious relations in ways that will continue for decades, even for the rest of our lives. The fact that this is complicated is no excuse and never has been for Catholic understandings of moral culpability.”

The question for Catholics is how to raise their voices so as not to leave the victims of the ongoing war in oblivion. It is simply wrong to expect that only the pope and the Vatican should do it. Central to the Francis papacy has been a push for a new vision of Global Catholicism. What is happening in the Middle East could turn it into a graveyard of this vision for Global Catholicism, along with many other dreams and lives. The institutional silence or hesitation of church leaders and Catholic authorities, both clergy and lay, regarding Gaza and Lebanon in Europe and the broader West aligns with the prevailing interpretation in the Anglosphere and translates into a strong push for the re-Westernization of Catholicism. The turn towards a more global church, requiring a break from the Anglosphere and attention to a diverse and local-global dialogical Catholic self-understanding, cannot be reduced to something like a "diversity, equity, and inclusion" corporate program. Global Catholicism is not about recruiting more diverse personnel. It is about diverse understandings, ones that truly reflect global realities and not simply power plays or historical amnesia.

Further reading: **The effects of the Israel-Hamas war on Jewish-Catholic relations**

This is not the time for an *ersatz* orientalist nostalgia for the status of Christians under the Ottoman Empire or in the post-World War I "mandate system." As Christians and Catholics, we cannot ignore or overlook what is happening in the Middle East, especially the catastrophe facing the Palestinian people. Of course, the caution of Catholics in taking a stand on the conflict in the Middle East must be understood in light of their role in the history of antisemitism up to the Holocaust. Within the Western world, Christians carry a heavy responsibility. The most conscientious quarters know that antisemitism is alive and well and must be fought tooth and nail. But keeping the legacy of *Nostra Aetate* and continuing that path will be much more difficult, or impossible, should Catholic voices fail to recognize that the post-October 7 war in the Middle East is one of the signs of our times that we need to read in light of the Gospel.

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