

Theology of Threat: A Prophetic Call to Courageous Presence in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) Region

Written by: Salim J. Munayer PhD, Chaden Hani, and the Core Committee of Peace and Reconciliation Network MENA Region

The Middle East and North Africa, caught in overlapping crises shaped mainly by global power struggles and Western dominance, confronts the Church with a theological choice between silence or prophetic clarity. Reconciliation without justice is complicity and neutrality, and, in the face of violent empire, is betrayal.

In this paper, we propose a **Theology of Threat**—a theology not rooted in fear but in truth-telling and prophetic presence. The sections that follow trace the crises created under Western dominance, the internal and external fractures reshaping the region, and the Church’s call to courageous truth. We examine the dangers of passive theology, the necessity of prophetic witness, and PRN MENA’s practical nonviolent approach to reconciliation. This approach is grounded, incarnational, and defiant against injustice. Finally, we lay out strategic priorities—youth empowerment, reclaiming theological language, and building reconciliation models rooted in good practice that bridge divides—so that the Church may be as a mustard seed, salt, and light in a fractured world.

Naming the Crisis Under Western Hegemony

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region faces many crises; genocide in Gaza, military occupation in the West Bank, state collapse in Syria and Lebanon, and a war in Sudan largely ignored by the world, all shaped by a complex legacy of global power struggles. These are not merely political upheavals; they are struggles that deeply challenge our theology and communities of faith. Under the guise of order, international powers have often deepened chaos, fractured faith communities, and silenced local agency.

The turmoil engulfing MENA is no accident. It is the result of a long, calculated struggle for power. At its core lies Western hegemony: a relentless pursuit of control, enforced through war, sanctions, and ideological manipulation. Cloaked in the language of democracy and counterterrorism, this dominance has repeatedly violated international law and fueled devastation.

This is painfully clear in Gaza, where Israel wages a genocidal campaign shielded largely by Western silence and at times, full Western support. Lebanon endures an engineered economic collapse, Syria remains a proxy battlefield, and Sudan's violent partition serves foreign interests. These are not failures but deliberate strategies. Western-backed regime changes in Iraq and Libya left failed states as instruments of control, while Israel acts as a militarized outpost with near-impunity.

Western institutions—once thought to uphold human rights and international law—have become tools of selective enforcement. Western media often whitewashes crimes and criminalizes resistance. Yet, this system is cracking. China, Russia, Iran, and others openly challenge this dominance, admittedly for their own purposes, while movements across the region, and even Western campuses, demand justice and call out complicity.

Internal and external challenges:

External challenges

1. The Paralysis of Arab State Leadership

The self-protective nature of Arab state leadership has created a profound power vacuum in the region, allowing alternative actors to reshape the geopolitical landscape. The rise of the so-called “Axis of Resistance” reflects not only the retreat of traditional leadership but also the growing influence of non-state military groups that now play decisive roles in regional conflicts. This shift is further accelerated by the introduction of new warfare technologies—such as drones and precision missiles—that have transformed conflict dynamics and reduced the strategic monopoly once held by conventional armies. At the same time, unexpected geopolitical realignments, such as the Iran-Saudi rapprochement, are redrawing alliances and unsettling long-held assumptions, underscoring the erosion of a unified and effective Arab leadership on the regional stage.

2. Israel as the Expression of Western Power in the Region

Israel functions as a central expression of Western power in the Middle East, sustained by direct military, political, and financial support from Western capitals. Its position is further shielded by the United States' consistent use of veto power at the UN Security Council, ensuring protection from international accountability. Despite repeated violations of international law, compromises of democratic principles, and systematic suppression of dissenting voices, Western political elites continue to stand firmly with Israel. This alignment extends to curbing academic freedom,

marginalizing critical scholarship, and weaponizing both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia as tools to silence critique. Together, these dynamics expose Israel's role not merely as a national actor but as a strategic extension of Western influence and dominance in the Middle East.

3. The Role of Mainstream Media

Mainstream media has increasingly betrayed public trust through one-sided coverage and selective expressions of empathy, shaping narratives that reinforce power rather than challenge it. This bias is compounded by the absence of rigorous fact-checking and meaningful accountability, leaving audiences vulnerable to distortion and manipulation. At the same time, the rise of social media has created a paradox: while it has amplified disinformation, it has also opened alternative channels for truth-telling and grassroots mobilization. As a result, younger audiences are turning away from traditional outlets, placing their trust instead in decentralized and often grassroots forms of media that seek to reconstruct reality from the ground up.

4. The Role of Religion

Religion continues to play a decisive role in shaping the politics of conflict and power in the region. Christian Zionism has lent theological legitimacy to military aggression, often invoking distorted frameworks such as “Just War” rhetoric to justify violence. Many Church leaders, meanwhile, remain silent—paralyzed by Holocaust guilt or by fear of being branded anti-Semitic—thereby reinforcing the status quo. Within dominant religious-political discourse, Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians are routinely demonized, while militant strands of Judaism have increasingly come to shape Israel's political and military direction. At the same time, Islamic resistance movements, many of which are also militant strands, are gaining popular traction, positioning themselves as both religious and political counterforces to occupation and domination. These polarizing interpretations of all three Abrahamic faith traditions contribute to the increasing violence and conflict. However, all three faith traditions also have theologies and histories that could lend good theological and practical backing for a justice filled peace process.

Internal Struggles

Over the last few years, several regional flashpoints have reached new levels of urgency:

- **Gaza** has descended into an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. The war that began in October 2023 has resulted in staggering civilian casualties, the decimation of infrastructure, and the disintegration of any remaining hope for a political resolution. In the West Bank prior to October 2023, the situation deteriorated severely with land confiscation, settler and military violence, and restriction of travel. This is not merely a conflict—it is a genocide unfolding in real time. The scale of destruction, including churches and Christian institutions, has shaken the region's moral conscience and left the global Church struggling to respond with clarity and courage.
- **Syria**, after over a decade of civil war, has left a fractured state, deep trauma, and millions displaced. While the regime has regained control of large swaths of territory, peace remains elusive. Foreign military entrenchment (from Russia, Iran, and Turkey), ongoing violence in the northwest, and international neglect have fostered a sense of abandonment. Meanwhile, Christian communities continue to shrink under pressure, migration, and fear—struggling to find a role amid shifting political and sectarian lines.
- **Lebanon** stands at the edge of collapse. The recent war between Hezbollah and Israel—triggered by the ongoing crisis in Gaza—has intensified instability, especially in the south, where towns have been emptied and civilians displaced. This conflict reflects Lebanon's longstanding entanglement in the Palestinian cause and its exposure to regional power struggles. Combined with the 2019 protests, the Beirut port explosion, and a devastating economic collapse, Lebanon now faces institutional breakdown, mass poverty, and an exodus of its youth and professionals. The sectarian system that once upheld fragile coexistence is unraveling, leaving a nation politically paralyzed and socially fractured.
- **Sudan** is sinking into one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. The brutal power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has plunged the country into civil war, devastating Khartoum and spreading violence across Darfur and beyond. Millions have been displaced, entire cities reduced to rubble, and basic infrastructure destroyed. Starvation looms as food supplies are cut off, humanitarian aid is obstructed, and famine takes root in war-torn regions. The collapse of governance has left civilians trapped between warring factions, facing not only physical violence but also disease, hunger, and mass displacement. As in Lebanon, Sudan's crisis is compounded by regional rivalries and international neglect, leaving its people abandoned in the face of suffering, with survival itself becoming the daily struggle.

Amid these crises, **the reemergence of the Palestinian cause** signals a regional shift. What was once considered a marginal issue is now a central rallying cry for justice across the world. It has become a litmus test for moral credibility, particularly among younger generations who demand that their faith communities speak truthfully and prophetically.

Contrary to sectarian myths, today's conflict is not a religious war but a clash of empires. Sectarianism is a political tool, not a divine mandate. Faith is weaponized, yet the deeper struggle remains for sovereignty, dignity, and liberation. The Church must reject the false binary of a "Christian West vs. Islamic East" and non-violently confront the imperial designs driving violence. This crisis is both political and spiritual, demanding that the Church abandon neutrality. Reconciliation without justice is complicity, and silence in the face of violent empire is betrayal. True prophetic witness calls for naming violent empire, resisting its power nonviolently, and standing unequivocally with the oppressed.

Theology of Threat as Prophetic Witness:

A Biblical Call to Courageous Truth

Jesus lived under Roman occupation and confronted power directly. He affirmed legitimate authority "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," yet proclaimed the Kingdom of God, a radical counter-vision challenging imperial claims (Mark 12:17; Luke 4:18–19; Matthew 5–7). The Apostle Paul urged respect for governing authorities (Romans 13:1–7) but declared, "Jesus is Lord," subverting Caesar's demand for exclusive loyalty (Philippians 2:11). This balance models Christian engagement: civic respect coupled with prophetic resistance to injustice.

The Church today is invited to embody this dynamic; rejecting simplistic, divisive narratives and discerning the complex forces shaping our world. Peace in the Middle East will not arise from hollow slogans but from courageous truth-telling and a commitment to confront non-violently all forms of injustice; political, economic, and spiritual.

Passive Theology and the Betrayal of Witness

Theology that allows or supports our retreat before injustice is not neutral, it is deeply harmful. In today's MENA, where authoritarian violence and social fragmentation prevail, the Church cannot afford silence disguised as prudence or unity. Such theologies preserve institutional security rather than embody the Gospel. Across the region, from Sudan to Syria, Lebanon to Palestine, military regimes and corruption destroy lives with impunity. A church that worships without naming these realities risks betraying the cross it carries.

The prophet Jeremiah warned against this false comfort: “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14, ESV). Speaking peace without confronting injustice is not the Shalom/Peace promised in the Scriptures. Similarly, theologian Willie James Jennings reminds us: “A theology disconnected from the cries of the oppressed is a theology unworthy of Jesus Christ.”

Many MENA churches have adopted a theology of survival, seeking endurance over transformation. While survival has its place amid persecution, it must not become silence. Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb calls us beyond survival, “A theology of survival is not enough... only a theology of hope that confronts empire and dares to imagine justice, can serve the people of the land.”¹

Theologies that avoid conflict often sanctify empire, blessing the status quo while abandoning the wounded at its margins, a risk heightened where foreign patronage, political alliances, and fear silence Christian leaders. Our ultimate allegiance is not to empire but to the crucified and risen Christ who stands with the marginalized and proclaims the peaceable Kingdom of God marked by justice and reconciliation of all things. Martin Luther King Jr. stated: “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.”² If the Church loses its prophetic clarity, it loses its soul.

Rooted in Truth-Telling, Discernment, and Bold Presence

Prophetic peacebuilding begins with truth, not mere diplomacy or quiet coexistence but the sacred task of naming reality as God sees it. In a region marked by war, displacement, authoritarianism, and spiritual fatigue, peace requires justice, discernment, and the courage to a creative non-violent confrontation to what wounds God’s people and good creation.

Theology of threat encourages the Church to see clearly, not exaggerating crisis but exposing its true sources. It does not spiritualize injustice but names it, resisting sanitized narratives that shield

¹ Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014), 8.

² Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963, in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 295.

the powerful, and silence the wounded. Too often, Christian responses echo neutrality even when moral fortitude is needed. The Palestinian issue is not simply a “conflict,” it is occupation, an apartheid, and a genocide. Lebanon is held hostage by sectarian warlords shielded by regional and international powers that clothe themselves in religious identities. Syria is a battlefield where global politics trade in human lives.³

These convictions are grounded in the biblical tradition of truth-telling that refuses to separate peace from justice. The prophets did not comfort the powerful—they confronted them. God declares through Ezekiel: *“I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the breach on behalf of the land...but I found no one”* (Ezekiel 22:30). Prophetic peacebuilders are called to stand in that breach, not with vague language or polite prayers, but with clarity, courage, and costly solidarity. True witness names the sources of violence—greed, domination, and theologies that excuse injustice. It confronts non-violently both the sword and the silence. From Amos to Isaiah, from Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem to the early Church’s resistance to empire, Scripture summons us to a peace that disrupts false harmony. This is not activism for its own sake, it is allegiance to the crucified Christ, who suffers with the wounded and exposes the powers, even when it costs everything.

After the Beirut port explosion in 2020, churches across Lebanon responded with deep compassion, offering food, shelter, and solidarity in the ruins. Yet many found it difficult to publicly name the corruption and negligence that led to the disaster. Mercy was present, but the prophetic voice was often muted. When lament is not joined by truth, injustice is left unchallenged.

In Egypt, the Church has carried generations of suffering with remarkable endurance. In Syria, Christians have remained with the wounded amid unthinkable war. Both are living witnesses of presence. Yet speaking truth to oppressive power remains a costly and complex task. These moments reveal not failure, but the weight of what prophetic discipleship truly requires.

³ Human Rights Watch, *A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution* (New York: HRW, 2021).

Across Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, and Jordan—places still marked by war, displacement, and systemic injustice—the Church is often quietly faithful, holding communities together in the face of chaos. In Europe, the United States, and across the Western world, where comfort can dull urgency, the call to solidarity and truth-telling is no less urgent. As one Church, across nations and denominations, we are called into a deeper witness, one that offers not only compassion, but courage; not only presence, but prophetic clarity. This is the labor of peace: not easy, not perfect, but shared. It is a grace-filled calling to walk with the wounded and to name what wounds them, not in condemnation, but in love that refuses to stay silent.

The theology of threat teaches that peacemaking is not conflict avoidance but confrontation of injustice. Lament without challenge is incomplete; comfort without justice falls short of Christ's commandments; silence amid structural violence is theological failure.

The Church's Calling to Resist Silence and Complicity

Silence amid injustice is betrayal, not maturity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from prison, declared: "Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."⁴ The Church's vocation is truthful, public, costly witness, not polite neutrality.

Across MENA, Christians are often admired for survival, but survival without witness is faithlessness. The early Church defied empire rather than accommodated it. The apostles were imprisoned not for politeness, but for proclaiming a kingdom unsettling to religious and political powers (Acts 4:18–20). Their courage, rooted in hope, enabled them to speak when silence was safer.

Today, churches welcoming diplomats from occupying regimes while ignoring the Gaza and West Bank's devastation are not balanced; they betray the Gospel. In Sudan, vague calls for peace without naming perpetrators deepen wounds. Palestinian liberation theologian Naim Ateek insists: "A theology that does not speak out is false."⁵ Complicity appears in avoidance, ambiguity, "both-

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 340.

⁵ Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 77.

sides” rhetoric, or calls for unity that evade naming injustice. But the cross confronts empire and death—it is not polite endurance. Resisting silence recovers prophetic DNA. Refusing complicity embodies the Gospel in word and deed.

The Church is not just a refuge in crisis—it is an incubator of courage. In a world aching with injustice, we are called not only to pray, but to speak boldly; not only to serve, but to stand prophetically.

The Church is called:

- Not to manage crises, but to interpret them with truth.
- Not to soften injustice, but to expose it with grace.
- Not to comfort the comfortable, but to walk with the crucified.
- Not to accept unjust systems, but to challenge it non-violently.

From Lebanon to Egypt, Syria to Sudan, Iraq to Yemen, and across Europe and the Americas—we are one Body, called to witness with love, clarity, and courage.

PRN MENA’s Approach to Reconciliation: Grounded, Defiant, Incarnational

The Peace and Reconciliation Network PRN in the MENA region is a contextual network, practical and rooted in relational dignity and spiritual resilience. In a region marked by sectarianism, occupation, repression, and war, we firmly reject superficial peace built on silence or false unity. True healing begins with truth telling.

Central to this approach is narrative healing, creating safe spaces where pain is named, memory honored, and dignity restored through testimony. Members of PRN are actively engaged in history projects that contribute to peacebuilding, each in their own capacity, serving as agents of transformation, fostering encounters that do not erase difference but humanize and connect. These non-violent efforts help disrupt inherited hatred and cultivate prophetic empathy.

Our work transcends sectors, bringing together theologians, human rights advocates, legal experts, and grassroots activists. We resist any attempt to separate theology from political and social realities. Across the region, all its members, especially youth and women are empowered to lead reconciliation through diverse, nonviolent culturally sensitive expressions of healing.

At the heart of our network is a commitment to faithful presence, choosing to remain in contested and broken spaces rather than retreating. Our vision is for reconciliation with and among the wounded, realized through long-term accompaniment, cross-faith solidarity, and radical hospitality. Justice is not simply pursued as an abstract ideal but embodied alongside those who are denied it. This is a theology of presence over withdrawal; of courage over complacency.

Our praxis rests on:

1. Sacred dignity of every person, regardless of faith or identity.
2. Justice as inseparable from peace.
3. Bold, faithful witness in contested public spaces.
4. Non-violent actions.

In Gaza, Sudan, Syria, and Lebanon, reconciliation is a prophetic disruption of silence and revenge, not a finished product. The Church must embody Christ's costly way in the ruins of our countries, cities and communities.

From Vision to Action: PRN MENA's Strategic Priorities

Based on regional engagement, PRN MENA focuses on:

1. **Grounded Models for Reconciliation**
Partnering with local leaders, developing participatory, context-sensitive reconciliation tools like photovoice to amplify grassroots stories.
2. **Hope and Youth Empowerment**
Addressing widespread youth hopelessness through theological formation, leadership, and civic engagement—drawing on scholarship like *Why Men Rebel* to foster faithful imagination.
3. **Reclaiming Theological Language**
Convening a theological task force to critically renew terms like “peace” and

“reconciliation,” grounding them biblically and culturally to empower confident Church witness.

4. **Bridging Generational and Theological Divides**

Promoting intergenerational dialogue and mutual learning to strengthen public theology marked by courage, relevance, and hope, supporting leaders with moral courage and commitment to reconciliation.

So what? A Call to Courageous Faithfulness

The Church stands at a crossroads. Decades of survival have confined it to margins, silenced it amid injustice, and fostered hesitancy. Yet the Gospel invites a different posture: faithfulness that transforms quietly yet powerfully, like a mustard seed, salt, and lamp.

Now is the time for courageous faithfulness: stepping forward in bold presence, becoming active agents of reconciliation and truth. PRN MENA envisions a public theology that is lived and contextual, rooted in suffering and oriented toward healing and hope.

We invite the Church to ask:

- What forces shape our national and regional realities?
- How do these connect to global power shifts?
- What theological and pastoral resources sustain courage, compassion, and prophetic witness?
- How do we move from silence and self-preservation to testimony and presence?

Faithful presence in a fractured region means bearing witness within suffering—not from above it. It means being the mustard seed that grows, the salt that preserves, the light that shines in darkness. It is a call to walk by faith, deeper into the world, not away from it.

This is no mere moment for response but an opportunity to reimagine faithful presence in a fractured region. The Church is summoned to rise, not as a passive bystander but as a courageous, prophetic witness grounded in hope and justice. Let us be the mustard seed, the salt, and the light, walking boldly by faith into the heart of the world’s pain and promise.

