

Analysis

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Washington Watch

A Christmas message to Mike Pence

By Dr James J Zogby

Mr Vice President:

As you celebrate Christmas with your family and listen to the gospel story of the birth of Jesus, I hope you will read and reflect on the following piece I wrote a few years back. I want you to open your eyes to the situation facing Palestinian Christians and Muslims living in the Holy Land. And I want you to understand why the Arab Christian leadership in Palestine was so troubled by your blindness to their plight that they refused to meet with you.

Christmas: Then and Now

Two thousand years ago, Palestine was subject to a harsh occupation, much as it is today. In some ways, though, the conditions back then allowed the residents of occupied Palestine greater mobility than the current inhabitants of that land. As we are told in the bible story, Joseph had to take his expectant wife from Nazareth, where they were living, to Bethlehem, their ancestral village, in order to fulfill a requirement imposed by the authorities to register as part of a nationwide census. Today, of course, all of that would be impossible.

In the first place no Palestinian originally from Bethlehem could ever have moved to Nazareth. The occupation and closure of the West Bank makes that sort of movement impossible. Furthermore, Israeli law prohibits an Arab from Nazareth from marrying a Bethlehemite and bringing their spouse across the Green Line to live with them in Israel.

Additionally, while thousands of Palestinians in Bethlehem, both Muslim and Christian, can see Jerusalem from their homes, they cannot go to the Holy City to pray. And Arab Christians from Jerusalem, likewise, can not easily go the Christmas services in Bethlehem to pray alongside their co-religionists at the seasonal event.

Bethlehem of old was overcrowded and under siege. Today, as well, the city itself is being strangled, hemmed in by settlements that have confiscated the town's ancestral lands to make way for a 30 foot barrier wall and massive Jewish-only housing colonies that cut the Arab residents off from nearby Jerusalem. The construction of growth and the lack of economic opportunity have forced Bethlehemites to flee in search of jobs and freedom, with tens of thousands of them and their descendants now living in the US and the Americas. They can return to visit Bethlehem with difficulty, but are not permitted by the occupation authorities to take up permanent residency in the town of their origins.

While the kings of old, we are told, were able to travel from afar bearing gifts to honor the newborn child, one can only imagine the difficulties they would encounter today dealing with Israeli soldiers at the Allenby Bridge. Having personally endured their interrogations, I can hear the kings answering hours of questions, such as "Where are you from?" "Who are your parents, grandparents?" "Why are you here?" "Who are you visiting?" "What are these gifts for?" The questioning is reminiscent of Herod's interrogation of the biblical visitors. In today's Israel/Palestine, it is doubtful whether those hapless "kings from the East" would have gained entry.

That Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were able to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's vengeful wrath was possible back then. Today, that option is unlikely. The barrier/wall that encapsulates the West Bank, the hundreds of checkpoints, and the closure of Gaza would make such a life-saving flight impossible.

Finally, as I reflect on the birth of Jesus, I cannot help but think of the almost 400 babies who will be born, this very day, to Palestinian parents in the West Bank and Gaza. I think as well of the number of those who will perish at birth because of inadequate medical services (some babies have been put at fatal risk at checkpoints, because Israeli soldiers would not permit their delivering mothers to pass). And I think of Mary, 2,000 years ago, and am grateful that, despite all she endured, there were no checkpoints blocking her way to Bethlehem.

Our traditions tell us that Mary's joy at the birth of her son was tempered by foresight. She knew her child would grow and endure great suffering. Likewise, the joy that Palestinian parents experience when greeting new life these days must, no doubt, be accompanied by similar concerns. Not only must they question how they will provide for their new child, but they must face down their fears of bringing up a son or daughter under occupation, with its dangers and hardships. From the violence, pressures, and humiliation encountered daily by Palestinians in the West Bank at the hands of the Israeli military and settlers, to the grinding poverty and despair facing those trapped in Gaza, life under hostile foreign rule can drain joy out of even the most blessed events.

There is a traditional Christmas carol that asks the question "What child is this?" - the answer, of course, being "Jesus, the son of Mary". But given the universal message conveyed by the Christmas story we also understand that the child is for us, a reminder of our responsibility to care for the helpless and the unrecognized.

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute



Bangkok struggles to keep canal slums dry

Rung, 63, fought a running battle against the rubbish and raw sewage besieging her old home in a wooden slum perched on stilts on the banks of Bangkok's Lat Phrao canal. "You could see and smell the daily flow of trash," recalled the tailor who goes by one name. "It would stop at the back of my house. I wanted a better life for my son and daughter." On Christmas Day last year, Rung moved into a brand-new, blue-painted house just yards from her old one in the Chao Phor Somboon community - part of the Thai capital's attempts to clear a waterway of illegal settlements that contributed to catastrophic floods in 2011.

Rung, who now pays just \$2 per month towards the \$6,000 construction cost of her new two-room home, is one of the successes of a project along the Lat Phrao canal launched almost two years ago, which is so far only about a third complete. The authorities have struggled to convince most slum dwellers to relocate, and are unlikely to meet the project deadline of June 2019, according to a senior official.

Delays to the canal rehabilitation, and the slow progress or abandonment of a flurry of other flood-prevention schemes announced after 2011 could result in a bigger flood disaster in the decades ahead unless urgent action is taken, experts warn. Besides causing damage worth \$46 billion, the floods six years ago affected more than 3 million of Bangkok's residents, mostly the poor, across 36 of the 50 districts that make up the sprawling megacity.

Key causes of the flooding included subsidence, poor infrastructure, weak government coordination, and the blockage of vital waterways by littering and unregulated construction. The extensive canal and drainage network that once helped manage the flow of water in the Chao Phraya River has been largely filled in to accommodate the traffic that now clogs the capital's streets. And while efforts to better equip the city to handle flood waters have struggled to keep pace with a booming population, the threat from climate change has worsened, experts say.

"The wet places will become wetter, and the dry places will become drier," said Abhas Jha, a manager for urban development and disaster risk at the World Bank. "What we used to call a one-in-a-hundred-year event is happening more frequently."

Going Underground

Bangkok is a city that is slowly sinking. Built on a swampy plain, the so-called City of Angels has a land subsidence problem made worse by over-pumping of groundwater. Tapping underground wells was traditionally a way

for people to access free water, and at one stage the city was sinking at a rate of 10 cm per year. In the late 1970s, the central government introduced and enforced a new law to help ban groundwater extraction.

The city is now sinking at a smaller rate of 2-3 cm per year - a success story that could be replicated in other cities, researchers said. But it still faces the threat of floods. Today, Bangkok receives just 3 billion-5 billion baht (\$92 million-\$153 million) per year from the central government to invest in new water management projects, officials said. As the monsoon season has become increasingly unpredictable, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration Flood Control Centre has set up a flood

latest data. "We have flooding every year. This year we have had a few floods during the rainy season, lasting three to four hours ... it caused a lot inconvenience," he said. "Our infrastructure is not sufficient to drain the water." Supachai, previously an adviser to the governor of Bangkok, said Dutch experts had already started scoping out a plan, which would cost around A2 million (\$2.4 million). As in other Asian cities, a lack of coordination between local and central government authorities often makes river management difficult, said the World Bank's Jha.

A focus on hard infrastructure projects means people think cities can build their way to safety, he added. "Globally, we find that policymakers love concrete," he said, noting other measures can be simpler and more cost-effective. Green infrastructure projects that could help Bangkok include the protection of wetlands and the development of green roofing, permeable pavements and rain-water harvesting. Dual-purpose facilities - like car parks that double up as storage spaces for floodwater - are also a relatively cheap method of reducing risk.

'Infrastructure Deficit'

Bangkok, which became Thailand's capital in 1782, is now home to more than 10 million people. Rapid industrial growth over the past decade has attracted large flows of people from other parts of Thailand. This migration is set to continue, with the population expected to top 15 million by 2020. Previously, the city's water defense strategy focused on strengthening the giant flood wall encircling its center, and pumping out any excess water.

But as the capital keeps on growing, new approaches will be needed to protect all Bangkok's residents, officials said. Managing the water surrounding the city and longer-term investments are crucial for the city's future, according to urban experts. Rajiv Shah, president of The Rockefeller Foundation, a New York-based philanthropic organization that funds 100 Resilient Cities, said 70 percent of the network's projects in Asia relate to water - from providing clean drinking water to managing storm run-off.

"The huge deficit in infrastructure and infrastructure finance is going to hold back growth and well-being," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "We see a whole new set of technologies and partners that can come together and do things." Back at the Lat Phrao canal, work grinds on to build new homes, reinforce the sides, and dredge the channel. Rung urged those still in slums by the water not to let stubbornness or pride stop them from moving into new homes. "I have no regrets about leaving. It is better and cleaner here," she said.— Reuters

“ You could see and smell the daily flow of trash ”

monitoring system across the city and an alert system that incorporates social media.

But the city needs to expand early warnings to ensure they do not ignore the poor and rural areas, urban experts said. "The problems are more complicated today," said Nambi Appadurai, head of strategy for the climate resilience practice at the World Resources Institute, referring to new construction and Bangkok's population growth. "I wouldn't be surprised to see flooding (like in 2011) happening again. Very little has been learned."

Master Plan

In an effort to avoid a repeat of the 2011 floods and improve residents' lives, in 2013 Bangkok joined 100 Resilient Cities, a network backed by The Rockefeller Foundation to help cities tackle modern-day shocks and stresses. Supachai Tantikom, Bangkok's chief resilience officer, published a strategy for the city earlier this year, with flooding a key focus. Supachai believes the Thai authorities should create a new 20-year master plan for flood defense in Bangkok's 50 districts and surrounding provinces, mapping out each area and making use of the

Investor's best friend: China pet market sparks deals

Li Mingjie is a pet industry investor's dream. The 23-year-old e-commerce worker spares little expense to make his pooch happy. "I'll happily splash out on my dog," Li told Reuters as he walked his brown poodle Coco in Pingyang, a town on China's east coast. "She is like a child to me." He is far from alone in China these days. The growth in the middle class, a massive move to urbanization and other demographic changes - such as growing numbers of elderly, and people getting married and having children later than before - have been turning this into not just a pet-owning society but also one that is prepared to lavish money on them.

Chinese shoppers are set to spend 46.3 billion yuan (\$7 billion) on their pets by 2022, up from 17.5 billion yuan this year as the market grows at around an annual 20 percent, according to estimates from Euromonitor. The U.S. market may be much bigger with an estimated \$44.4 billion in sales this year but it is only growing around 2 percent a year. The surge in Chinese demand is not only great news for

global pet food behemoths such as Mars Inc and Nestle SA, but also rapidly growing Chinese pet food and product companies, as well as entrepreneurs setting up everything from dog salons for grooming to fancy pet hotels.

It is an amazing shift in a country where owning pets was once banned for being too much of a bourgeois pursuit under revolutionary leader Mao Zedong, and where - despite protests - there is still an annual dog-meat festival in the southern Chinese town of Yulin. "There is huge growth potential in the Chinese market," said Liu Yonghao, the chairman of Chinese company New Hope Group at a recent event in Beijing, noting that younger people especially were developing closer bonds with their pets. "They are willing to spend lots of money on the pets because they have become like part of the family," he said.

New Hope joined a consortium, including Singapore's state-owned fund Temasek and private equity firm Hosen Capital that just closed a \$1 billion deal to acquire Australian pet food maker Real Pet Food Co, with the aim of bringing the firm's brands to China. The growing popularity of pets is turning China into a magnet for local and global firms. Thomas Kwan, chief investment officer of Hong Kong-based fund manager Harvest Global, said China's pet market would be one of his personal picks for 2018 as consumers looked to shift up to premium products. The questions pet owners are asking now: "Can you buy them healthy foods? Can you give them a good lifestyle?" he said.—Reuters

Big strategies drive small plane deals

Airbus and Boeing are pairing with smaller regional rivals to add sales at the lower end of their \$100 billion-a-year commercial plane duopoly, but the two market leaders are also laying the foundation for a longer-term strategic contest against more powerful threats such as China. US planemaker Boeing Co and Brazil's Embraer SA said on Thursday they were discussing a "potential combination" widely assumed to focus on jetliners, confirming a report in the Wall Street Journal.

News of the talks comes just two months after Boeing's European archrival Airbus agreed to buy a majority stake in Bombardier Inc's 110 to 130-seat CSeries jet, the Canadian rival of Embraer's biggest E-Jets. "This seems initially to be about blunting the offering of the CSeries," said consultant Jerrold Lundquist, managing director of The Lundquist Group, one of the first industry-watchers to predict the move. "One of the things the CSeries brings to Airbus is the ability to offer a broader product line."

Both Embraer's E-Jets, which generally range between 70 and 130 seats, and to a greater extent Bombardier's CSeries, overlap at the margins of the big-airplane portfolios of Airbus and Boeing, but the products are mainly seen as complementary. Boeing and Airbus smaller planes start at around 125

seats. Such commercial tie-ups allow plane-makers to offer package deals and expand opportunities for generating revenue and profit, a person familiar with the CSeries deal said.

Boeing now appears to be a convert to this approach after initially - at least in public - dismissing the deal between Airbus and Bombardier, several analysts said on Thursday. But the proposed alliances, neither of which is finalized, are not simply about tacking on revenue and cash flow, analysts and industry sources said. First, they could quickly lead to technical overlap. "If Boeing begins to collaborate with Embraer, you could imagine them creating commonality in the Boeing cockpit," Lundquist said. Others see similar benefits at Airbus.

More importantly, they broaden the battlefield for the next round of developments in 2030 and beyond: one in which Western jet-makers will be up against growing competition from China and Russia and could rely on their new partners to spread the risk.

Boeing and Embraer had already prepared just such a tryst in confidential talks over a decade ago. In October, Reuters reported that the template for a possible Boeing-Embraer response to the Airbus-Bombardier deal already existed in dormant plans for a new generation of single-aisle planes, for which there had been a previously unreported collaboration between Boeing and Brazil. Plans for an all-new plane were put on hold while Boeing and Airbus focused on engine makeovers for existing models, cashing in on fuel savings that were considered strong enough to hold off Chinese and Russian competitors for another 10 or 15 years.—Reuters