

Trigger Warning: *This email contains discussions of violence, loss of life, and humanitarian crises related to the Israeli-Palestine conflict, which some readers may find distressing. Please read with care.*

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Dear Students,

**Disclaimer:** *Please note that the views and opinions expressed in this email are solely those of the Rector, independent of the University of St. Andrews. As the Rector, elected by and representing the student body, I am entitled to communicate my personal perspectives and understanding regarding the Israeli-Palestine conflict directly to the students who elected me.*

*Please note that the information contained in this email is accurate as of 21st November 2023, based on my research and the latest available data. However, the situation in the Israel-Palestine conflict is constantly evolving. Therefore, I urge you to seek the most recent information and exercise due diligence before taking any action based on this email's contents. It is important to stay informed through reliable sources as circumstances may have changed since the time of writing.*

*This message is not issued by the University, nor does it reflect the official policy or position of the University of St. Andrews. It should be read as an independent expression of the views held by me, in my capacity as an elected representative of the students. Any concerns or issues with the content of this message should be addressed directly to [rector@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:rector@st-andrews.ac.uk).*

## **Introduction**

In this email, I will explicitly call for a ceasefire, reflecting on the poignant vigils recently held within our community and addressing the ongoing conflict in Israel and Palestine. These vigils have brought to light the deep sorrow and collective humanity that bind us together in times of crisis. It's imperative that we address the current situation with both empathy and urgency.

I will also take this opportunity to firmly condemn any form of bigotry or hatred within our community. Our collective response to the conflict, while rooted in diverse perspectives, must steadfastly uphold the principles of respect, understanding, and compassion for all.

## **Vigils**

In the last few weeks members of our community came together to reflect upon the ongoing conflict in Israel and Palestine while simultaneously mourning the loss of their friends, families, and community members. In two poignant vigils, student groups highlighted our collective grief and exemplified the humanity that binds us all.

On October 13th, members of the community solemnly commemorated the tragic [October 7th](#) terrorist attacks in Israel at the first of two vigils, honouring the lives lost in the largest massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust. Organizers read aloud the names of those affected, accompanied by the hopeful yet

sorrowful strains of 'One Day.' The vigil culminated in a silent pier procession, symbolizing solidarity, and remembrance.

In early November, following weeks of [genocidal](#) attacks by the Israeli government against Gaza, a second vigil took place in St. Salvator's Quad. Participants at this gathering mourned the significant loss of life and the profound impact on humanity observed in both Israel and Gaza since the October attacks. Additionally, the vigil provided an opportunity to outline the long-standing conditions faced by Palestinians and to share a comprehensive account of the conflict's history. Organizers at the vigil expressed their sorrow, imparted knowledge, and called for [humanitarian action](#). One powerful statement from the vigil particularly resonated with me: "And now, with the cutting off of their electricity, their voices have been silenced... It is our responsibility to speak up for them." This statement highlighted our collective duty to advocate for those who cannot represent themselves, to raise awareness about their situation, and to inform our peers.

## **Casualties**

While each vigil was organized by different student groups and focused on distinct aspects of the conflict, both events underscored a common thread of humanity: the understanding that every loss, irrespective of identity, is a profound tragedy. The recent escalations have indeed caused a staggering human toll with reports from human rights organisations indicate that in Gaza, [over 13000+ people](#) have been killed by Israeli forces, [70%](#) of whom are children and women, and more than 27,400 have been injured in both Gaza and the West Bank. Over [1.7 million](#) Palestinians have reportedly been displaced, with many fearing they'll never be allowed to return to their homes. [4000+](#) Palestinians remain trapped under the rubble of collapsed buildings, as relentless bombardments, decimated infrastructure including roads, and lack of fuel due to the ongoing Israeli siege (continuous since [2007](#)) prevent rescue workers from reaching them. In Israel, there have been at least 1,200 fatalities, and over 240 individuals are [held captive](#). It is important to note that the majority of these casualties in both regions are civilians.

We must continue to recognize and condemn acts that are internationally regarded as humanitarian and [war crimes](#). These include practices such as [apartheid](#), siege, [illegal occupation](#) and collective punishment, which have been observed in the treatment of Palestinians. It is also crucial to acknowledge and denounce the actions by Hamas that qualify as war crimes, notably the taking of hostages and deliberately targeting civilians, which I have and continue to do. These actions by any party contribute to the cycle of violence and suffering and are contrary to international law and humanitarian standards.

I wholeheartedly believe that the complexity and nuances of the situation are no barriers to calling out actions that harm human life and dignity. At the same time, it's essential to acknowledge the reasons behind these actions, understanding that they are rooted in decades of oppression and systematic mistreatment. This historical context is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the current dynamics and the resultant suffering. By recognizing this, we can better appreciate the deep-seated grievances and frustrations that have contributed to the current state of affairs.

## **Calling for an Immediate Ceasefire**

These sentiments and the profound emotion expressed during our community vigils strengthen my resolve to advocate for an immediate [ceasefire](#). While advocating for this ceasefire, it's crucial to emphasize the responsibility of Israel as the more powerful entity in this conflict. The relentless Israeli bombing campaign in Gaza must be brought to an end. While the release of hostages held by Hamas is undeniably important and necessary, it should not distract from the onus on Israel to cease its military actions that have and continue to cause significant human suffering.

A ceasefire should not only end active hostilities but also focus on critical humanitarian issues, such as ongoing efforts to rescue hostages. This includes a comprehensive recognition of [the long history of mistreatment](#) faced by Palestinians and the need for affirming and empowering their rights to freedom and stability. Only through such an approach can we begin to address the underlying causes of the conflict and pave the way for a future where both Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace and security. A ceasefire, by its very nature, requires all parties engaged in hostilities, without exception, to cease their military actions.

We must remind ourselves that despite our physical distance from the epicentre of the conflict, the devastation and loss of life impact us all as global citizens and as members of our respective communities, whether in this country or elsewhere. Our empathy and commitment to understanding these complex issues are crucial in fostering a more peaceful and just world.

I unequivocally condemn any form of bigotry, including but not limited to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, especially in the context of this conflict. We must stand united against any rhetoric or actions that perpetuate hatred and division. Our [Israeli](#), Palestinian, [Jewish](#), [Christian](#), [Muslim](#), and other faith based as well as [non-believing/secular](#) communities, both in St. Andrews and beyond, share a common sorrow and many have also called for an immediate ceasefire. Importantly, condemning the actions of Hamas does not imply an indictment of all Palestinians, just as criticizing the actions of the Israeli government is not an attack on the Jewish faith or its adherents. Recognizing this distinction is crucial to ensure that our discourse does not inadvertently foster feelings of unsafety or marginalization within our community.

## **Final Thoughts**

As we navigate these discussions, I recognize that some may disagree with the manner in which I have presented things here. While it's challenging to encapsulate the full nuance and the varying perspectives I've encountered in recent days without some contradiction, I want to be explicitly clear: my words are not intended to justify violence or dismiss the pain of any community. My aim is to highlight the potential for unity, solidarity, compassion, and action, ensuring that this does not come at the expense of anyone's safety or sense of belonging.

I must be honest about my stance, allowing myself to be guided by my commitment to preserving life and my firm stance against violence. Therefore, I take full responsibility for the sentiments expressed in this message, recognising my role as an independent voice and advocate for all students. While I acknowledge

that some may not agree with my perspective, it is imperative to state unequivocally that peace is my guiding philosophy.

Further links and resources can be found [here](#), these organisations are known for providing information, assistance, and advocacy related to the issues in the region. Amnesty St Andrews' Guide to Action for Gaza can also be found [here](#), with more information on concrete actions we can all take to advance this call for a ceasefire.

In these times of grief and reflection, let us engage in informed and compassionate dialogue. Our goal should be to cultivate a narrative that fosters reconciliation and understanding, while also continuing to speak truth to power.

In the spirit of peace and humanity,

Stella

**Stella Maris**

*(She/Her)*

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