

Sarah Funkhouser: A ceasefire and a just end to the occupation, is the biggest need. There, of course, are enormous humanitarian needs, you know, water, food, fuel, electricity have all been cut off to the entirety of Gaza. And, I don't know how many millions or billions of dollars that it will take to meet those needs, to ensure that all of the people of Gaza have housing and food and hospitals have fuel and the list just goes on and on and on. But the real need is for a solution so that so that everyone can live peacefully on the land.

Meghan: *That was Sarah Funkhouser, one of MCC's representatives in Jerusalem. Today on the show, an update on the conflict in Palestine and Israel.*

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to, "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

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Meghan: *In approaching this conversation, it feels important to start by naming some key truths. Jewish people have been harmed by systems of hatred and racism for generations. And the State of Israel has militarily occupied Palestine for decades forcibly removing people from their homes, erecting walls that separate families and prosecuting children in military courts.*

All of this is true. And we are seeing in real time the way violence leads to more violence.

On Saturday, October 7, Hamas militants launched surprise attacks in Israel, killing over 1,400 people and taking civilian hostages.

Israeli forces retaliated with intensified air strikes into the Gaza Strip, killing over 8,300 Palestinians at the time of this recording.

The Israeli Defense Forces and armed settlers have killed 100 Palestinians in the West Bank.

Israel continues to block access to food, water, medicine, fuel and electricity to Gaza.

A limited number of humanitarian deliveries were granted access through the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza, however these deliveries excluded crucial fuel supplies and are a fraction of what is needed.

Seth Malone and Sarah Funkhouser joined me to talk more about MCC's work in Palestine and Israel and to share updates on our partners and the work they are doing.

Welcome Sarah and Seth. Thanks for being here.

Sarah: *Thank you for having us.*

Seth: Thanks Meghan.

Meghan: *As you know, it's crucial to give context for the new wave of violent conflict hitting the Middle East right now. Could you explain a bit about the history to help situate listeners?*

Seth Malone: Yeah, in the early 20th century, this land was widely recognized as Palestine primarily inhabited by Arabs, Palestinians. Over the course of the early 20th century, a lot of Jewish migration happened and there started to be conflicts about, you know, who owns the land who does the land

belong to. World War II ended. The British, their British Mandate came to an end and all of a sudden, you know, when they pulled out, there was a fight for, you know, between Jewish militia groups and Palestinians and Arabs, Jordan, you know, it was a free for all. And basically what happened was the establishment in the State of Israel. But during this time where Israel established itself, it expelled Palestinians who were living there. So roughly over 500 Palestinian villages were razed, they were totally destroyed. And about over, the numbers vary, but around 700,000, Palestinians were kicked out of what is now Israel.

They either fled to the West Bank, to Gaza, to Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria. So that's what they call the Nakba. Nakba is an Arabic word that translates to "the catastrophe" in English. This is the moment in Palestinian history that is, you know, just it's deeply painful. It's the dispossession of a people from their land. And so we're, we're seeing the threats of of expulsion once more. And this is deeply painful.

Meghan: *And some of our listeners may not know that MCC has worked in Palestine and Israel for a long time, arriving shortly after the Nakba. Can you talk a bit about MCC's work in the region over the years?*

Seth: So MCC has been here since 1949. And our mission, and our scope has changed over the years, over the 70+ years. But right now, we do support Palestinian organizations in the West Bank. And also, we support Palestinian organizations in Gaza. And you know, very importantly, we have partners in Israel itself. These are primarily Jewish led organizations that are working on peace projects. And we take these relationships very seriously. And we really do listen to what our Israeli partners are saying. You know, you can look up their statements. But to summarize them, is, you know, the response of the Israeli government, it doesn't actually need to be this way. You know, we have Israeli voices that are saying, Stop, you know, we need a ceasefire. And so we want to highlight those voices.

Meghan: *And what are you hearing right now from our partners in Gaza?*

Seth: What we're hearing, from partners who have experienced multiple rounds, over many years, multiple rounds of bombings, multiple rounds of incursions into Gaza...The overall sentiment here is that this is this bombing is unprecedented. There's been nothing like it. Whole neighborhoods are wiped out. The amount of destruction is almost unfathomable. And they're doing their best to stay safe, but they say they fear for their lives every night. So, it's a very difficult situation for our partners. That's what we're hearing is, impossible conditions that they're operating in. And we're very worried for them day in and day out.

Meghan: *I'm so sorry to hear that. And you have good reason to be worried. I know a church connected with one of our partners was recently bombed. Could you share a bit more about what happened?*

Seth: Yeah, our focal point, the people we were talking to at the Near East Council of Churches, our longtime partner. They were taking shelter in one of the churches in Gaza. It's the Greek Orthodox Church, and it's one of the oldest churches in the world, continuously worshipped in. So, a few hundred people were sheltering in that church. And then there's another couple hundred people in another church. So, we're reaching out to them to try to figure out how MCC could support the people taking shelter. These are primarily Christians, there are others as well. That was on Thursday afternoon, we got off the phone with him, we're trying to get ideas on what to do. And you know, he was saying you know, get back to you on prices on different things that you know, we could use help with. And then we were sitting in our living room, far away enough but close enough away in

Jerusalem, and we're just reading the news and all of a sudden we start seeing reports of the church bombing. And there's only a certain number of churches so we pretty much gathered that there was the same one that he was taking sheltering. So, we started seeing pictures come out of that bombing.

Sarah: Now, the Christian community here is very small. So, I mean, every pretty much everyone that we know knows someone, you know, a relative, or a friend, or a friend of a friend. So that, the impact of that is very widely felt. In the whole of the Christian community, in Palestine. And I think in all of this in, in the standard sort of media framing of what's going on, it's, it's really easy to forget about Palestinian Christians. And we shouldn't, we shouldn't forget about them.

Seth: And it really speaks to, where are safe spaces? You know, to date, medical facilities have been targeted and bombed, hospitals have been targeted, called for evacuations, ambulances are being bombed, medical workers are being killed. Schools are being damaged by the shrapnel, if not targeted directly. So...

Sarah: Adding places of worship to that list of not safe places doesn't leave very many left for, for people to actually take shelter.

Meghan: *Are there any left?*

Seth: I mean, no. Even the UN schools are being targeted and even UN workers have died. And this is the problem is they told everyone to evacuate the North. So now you have a bunch of displaced people in the South. There, they're bombing the north, considerably. They've wiped out entire neighborhoods. But they're still bombing in the south, and they've bombed the evacuation routes to the south. So even with the North being virtually emptied, it's not any safer in the South. So when we talk about safe spaces, there's nowhere left. It's really, it's really dire. And we're talking about the safety and protection of civilians, I mean, children, women, like even innocent men, it's really difficult to think about how can we protect these people when there is no safe place for them to go?

Meghan: *Yeah, it's hard to imagine. I'm curious, are you hearing from partners in the West Bank?*

Sarah: Our communication from partners in the West Bank has also been kind of limited. I think that we really need to not forget about the West Bank, when, at the moment all eyes are on Gaza. There have been, since the start of all of this, hundreds of arrests. There's been forced displacement in the West Bank. Multiple people have been killed. We really need to, we really need to remember the West Bank with all of this going on and not forget that, you know, the overall context of occupation is not just in regards to Gaza, it is the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well. You know, the cutting of aid, and the West Bank has essentially been closed, the checkpoints have been close to Palestinians pretty much since the start of this. So not being able to, you know, there are a lot of, there are a lot of workers that come in from the west bank into Israel proper, on a on a daily basis, because they can get better wages. But with the West Bank closed, those workers are not able to do that. And so, the economic impact of that, like further restrictions on their movement, are, are really significant. So, although what's happening in the West Bank, at this moment may not be as intense as what's happening in Gaza at this moment, the repercussions of all of this are serious.

Seth: New Profile right now, you know, you can look on their social media, what they're doing is they're trying to say, you know, militarism and military response is not going to solve the problem. They're very emphatic about that. And we're very encouraged to see those types of voices in Israel speak out against, you know, this type of horrendous military response we're seeing play out. And Zochrot, their mandate is to teach Israelis about the Nakba, what happened in 1948, and the expulsion of the Palestinians on the land. So, when we reached out to them, you know, and hearing

from them since, they're there, they're encouraging us to remember the throughline between 1948 and what is happening now. So, when we talk about displacing 1 million people, most of those people are descendants of people who have already been displaced. So, we're talking about...the situation needs to be resolved, where the underlying causes of the conflict are, are really what needs to be addressed.

Yes, the ceasefire. Yes, humanitarian aid. Yes, opening up the electricity and the Internet and the water. All of these things are beneficial. But this will keep happening unless we address what's actually at the root of this. Is that all people on the land deserve...all people on the land deserve to live in peace and security. And they need to have all their full rights. And they need to not be threatened, and they need to live in harmony. And that sounds like a crazy vision. But that's what our partners are working for. Every day.

Sarah: Everyone is entitled to safety and dignity.

Meghan: *Yeah, ugh, absolutely. It sounds like under these conditions, it's obviously so difficult for our partners. I'm curious if they've been able to respond. And if so, how?*

Sarah: CFTA and NECC really have not been in a position to respond with the support of MCC to the situation. Al Najd has been incredible beyond words. I cannot fathom how they're doing the work that they are doing. And, you know, we reached out at the beginning of this inquiring about their safety and making sure that they were okay, and almost immediately the response from Al Najd was, can you help us help? We want to do something. Our volunteers are asking, is there something we can do? And it's incredible. It's incredible. Without food and supplies being let in, you know, right now, it's really only possible to respond with local partners. And so MCC being able to support Al Najd in providing food baskets and bedding to families who have been displaced or have had their homes destroyed. It's incredible.

Meghan: *It sounds like they're doing, yeah, amazing work. I know you've said some of these things already, but in case there's anything else that you want to say, what do you wish people in Canada and the United States knew about what's happening?*

Seth: We wish people would recognize that it is easy to look at the events of October 7 and think that this group of people are violent, and their, you know, their only response is violence. And if you were to look at the news, you would only see that their responses are violent. What everyone leaves out is that for decades, there have been peaceful non-violent protests, movements, everything. They've tried to have a non-violent response. In 2018, there was a "great march of return" where people peacefully protested in Gaza against, you know, their essential incarceration in Gaza. They marched on the fence peacefully, and then they were sniped at, they were shot. Many people died.

Sarah: Thousands of people were maimed.

Seth: They were maimed for life. The snipers were aiming at their knees. You know, so there's a lot of people that are disabled. And that's why we talk about addressing the root causes. That's our main thing. Like, you can't isolate the events from October 7 by themselves. They're part of a larger ecosystem. They're part of a larger conflict. And that's what we need people to understand.

Meghan: *And my last question is, what are you hearing from church leaders?*

Sarah: I think we are hearing from church leaders to you know, one, don't forget about Palestinian Christians. They are here and you know, their voices matter. But with that with that, please, resist,

you know, separating Palestinian Christians from the overall Palestinian cause and desire for liberation, for freedom. You know, the Palestinian Christian community is small. Two per cent, maybe, of Palestinians overall. But their desire for freedom, for dignity, for the realization of all of their human rights is the same as all Palestinians. I think that's extremely important to remember.

Seth: And what we're also hearing from Christian leaders is they're calling on Christians in the West to not be complicit in what is happening. They are saying what we are saying. That if you want a solution to this conflict, we need justice. The message that they're sending is that we cannot be complicit in the violence. We need to call for a ceasefire. We need to call for an end to the bloodshed. And we need to work for justice.

Meghan: Oof, well, I know that you are probably deeply tired. You have your own work, along with the grief that you're processing through all of this. So, I want to recognize that. Really wishing you both rest where you can get it and a lot of strength for what you've gone through and what's to come. And yeah, we're thinking of you.

Sarah: Aw, thank you.

Seth: Thank you.

Meghan: *That was Seth Malone and Sarah Funkhouser. They are the MCC representatives in Jerusalem.*

As you heard Sarah say, it's important we remember Christian Palestinians.

So shortly after my conversation with Sarah and Seth, I spoke with Pastor Ashraf Tannous. He is pastor at a Lutheran church just outside Bethlehem. I asked him what message he has for Christians in the West and what he is praying about. This is what he said.

In Arabic, we have a song which says:

يا رب السلام أمطر علينا السلام /
يا رب السلام امنح قلوبنا السلام

يا رب السلام أمطر علينا السلام /
يا رب السلام امنح بلادنا السلام

Which means, Lord of peace, rain on us, peace.

Lord of peace, give our hearts peace.

Lord of peace, rain on us, peace.

Lord of peace, give our country peace.

And I think this is a very meaningful hymn for us. Because it's very important for us to have inner peace. Because the moment you have inner peace, then you will be able to love. You will be able to see the "other" in God's image. And you will be able to see God in the "other." Then you will be able to make peace in your land.

I pray as well that there will be enough people to shout and be the voice of the voiceless. I pray for mercy. I pray as Jesus said, blessed are the peacemaker because they will be called the children of God.

I pray to have equality, to have our just peace, to be treated equally and as normal human being. I pray that the whole world recognize us as Palestinians here. That we are the descendants of Jesus. We are the people of this land. I pray that peace may prevail. I pray that love may prevail. And I pray that people may feel our suffering and act accordingly.

And lastly, I want to remind everyone, and especially the Christians brothers all over the world, that we are all praying the Lord's prayer. The first words we say, "Our father." This means that the moment we say "our Father," there are relationships created. We are the children of God. We are brothers and sisters.

And we today, as Palestinians brothers and sisters here, we are in pain and we are asking our brothers and sisters and praying for our brothers and sisters to feel us and to shout for our freedom, for our rights, for our justice and for our equality.

This is the land of the bible. And this land of the bible is the Holy Land. And it is not holy if it has no people. The people of this land makes this land holy. Why? Because they are created in the image of God, in God's own likeness.

This is what I'm praying for. Amen.

Meghan: *That was Pastor Ashraf Tannous. I reached him from his church just outside Bethlehem.*

MCC is currently responding to the humanitarian needs in the Gaza Strip, given the significant humanitarian crisis and lack of access to food, medicine, water and fuel. MCC's partner Al-Najd Developmental Forum is providing ready-to-eat food baskets and bedding to more than 250 families affected by the current conflict.

As the situation develops and escalates in the Middle East, MCC plans to scale-up its response in various locations as safety and resources allow. To learn more about how to support this work, check out the show notes.

The Humanitarian Coalition just announced a match for the Gaza Humanitarian Emergency appeal. All donations made by individual Canadians up to \$10M CAD will be matched until Nov. 12 (and retroactively from Oct. 7).

In Canada and the U.S., MCC offices continue to advocate to their governments to work for an immediate end to the violence, humanitarian access and aid and protection of civilians. We invite you to take action and advocate as well. There are letter-writing tools available on the MCC website and I'll link to them in the show notes.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was hosted and produced by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

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Show notes:

To learn more about MCC's work in Palestine and Israel, visit: <https://mcc.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/palestine-and-israel>

To donate to MCC's work in Palestine and Israel, visit: mcc.org/give-palestine-israel

Advocate!

For Canadians, call to an end to violence in Palestine and Israel: <https://mcc.org/campaign/call-end-violence-palestine-and-israel-canada>

For Americans, call for an immediate ceasefire and aid for Gaza: <https://mcc.org/campaign/call-immediate-ceasefire-and-aid-gaza-us>