

Gaza update — Part 1 Just peace in Palestine and Israel / Jonathan Kuttab and Alain Epp Weaver

This transcript was auto generated. Accuracy may vary.

SPEAKERS

Alain Epp Weaver, Christy Kauffman, Jonathan Kuttab, Seth Malone, Sarah Funkhouser

Jonathan Kuttab

I often say there's a clear distinction between optimism and hope. I am not optimistic this situation looks horrible. But I am full of hope that things can and will change. Ultimately, this is because it's in the interest of both the Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews. They will never, never feel secure. They will never prosper. They will never flourish without making peace with the Palestinians. And peace does not mean just forcing Palestinians to do what they want and accept their dictates, but really come to terms with the genuine issues of justice for both people that is absolutely required.

Christy Script

That was human rights lawyer and Palestinian, Jonathan Kuttab, speaking of his hopes for the future of Palestine.

Today on the show we're talking about the present day crisis in Gaza, and how the history of Palestine and Israel is impacting what we are seeing today. And at the end of the show we will have a current update from our MCC representative in Palestine and Israel about MCC's ongoing response to the crisis in Gaza.

I'm Christy Kauffman and you are listening to Relief, Development, and Podcast. A production of Mennonite Central Committee.

Intro

Last year in 2023 was the 75th anniversary of the Nakba or the catastrophe in 1948. When hundreds of thousands of Palestinians lost their homes during the creation of the state of Israel.

This year, in 2024 is the 75th anniversary of when MCC started working in Palestine and Israel, less than a year after the Nakba.

It's not a coincidence that these dates line up like this. MCC works with the most vulnerable, meeting basic human needs and promoting a just peace. In 1948 many people became vulnerable and experienced injustices when they were forced to flee their homes and became refugees. The roots of so many humanitarian needs can be traced to the situations where peace and justice are denied.

I want to introduce you to Jonathan Kuttab and Alain Epp Weaver both of whom have a long history working in the region.

Our Palestinian friend and previous MCC colleague Jonathan got the conversation started.

Jonathan Kuttab

I was an MCC volunteer. Working on issues of peace and justice back in 1979. I continue to be very involved with peace and justice issues to this day. I'm an attorney, human rights attorney, a member of the bar in Israel and Palestine, and in New York. I'm also now currently the executive director of FOSNA, Friends of Sabeel North America, which supports the Sabeel ecumenical movement for liberation theology, basically, emphasizing issues of justice and peace.

Alain Epp Weaver

And I'm Alain Epp Weaver. I'm the strategic planning director here at Mennonite Central Committee. I also worked previously in Palestine with MCC, including two years as our program coordinator in the Gaza Strip. And during that time, I had the pleasure of getting introduced to Jonathan, who was always a valued consultant and counselor for MCC. And so that was in the 1990s and the early 2000s that I was in Palestine.

Jonathan Kuttab

Yeah, my experience with MCC starts with their work on relief and development. They were working in the West Bank primarily when I got to know them. With farmers in the Jordan Valley doing drip irrigation, with women's cooperative doing Palestinian embroidery, and only incidentally, working on issues of peace and justice. Talking about the settlements and doing tours of settlers with Kathy Bergen and Ibrahim Matar at that time, they had a lot of impact on Palestinians, through their teaching of non-violence, especially at the Hope Secondary School. But their program was more relief and development. They were almost reluctant to own up to their peace and justice component and to their non-violent component, which was a pity because this is, I think, the more important part of their contribution to Israel-Palestine.

Alain Epp Weaver

I mean, I'd say that like in the 1950s 1960s, the bulk of MCC's program was very much humanitarian relief in the West Bank, also on the east bank of the Jordan. It wasn't until the Six Day War in 1967, in which Israel conquered and occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip as well as Golan Heights and the Sinai. That MCC really started thinking about "what does a peacebuilding presence look like?" Before 1967 certainly there was recognition by MCC workers that a great injustice had befallen the Palestinian people. But that wasn't being channeled into peacebuilding efforts. I'd say the 1970s, early 1980s, as Jonathan highlights, was a time of trying to figure out what does peacebuilding mean in this context alongside agricultural development work, or education work? I think it was, especially in the with the First Intifada in 1987, where MCC started seeing civil society efforts, efforts at non-violence in places like Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Beit Jala, and learning from Palestinian Christians and other Palestinians about what a non-violent commitment for justice looks like.

Jonathan Kuttab

Yes, I remember when my cousin Mubarak Awad started doing non-violence work during the First Intifada, he thought that the Quakers and the Mennonites would be the first people to support him, because that's where he learned about non-violence at the Beit Jala Hope School, Hope Secondary

School. And instead he faced a reluctance. We don't want to get too involved in political issues. This will undermine our relief and development work he says, but, but, but, but, you're the people who bring non-violence and this is what we need here. He was shocked that Mennonites were even reluctant to deal with the issues of peace and justice, because they are much more disruptive.

Alain Epp Weaver

That's an excellent point, Jonathan. And I think it was Martin Luther King Jr. who talked about too often the church they're the, the tail lights or the brakes, rather than being the headlights in the quest for justice and peace. But we were learning from Palestinian Christians and others who are the headlights in their context. We've talked about Mennonites, Mennonite churches, MCC, not always standing as strongly for justice and peace as Palestinians and Palestinian Christians would have hoped. Could you reflect more about the church globally? And how Palestinian Christians look to the church globally to stand with them and how that has not always happened. And different theologies that justify...

Jonathan Kuttab

The church has failed Palestinians horribly. Not only have they failed to even recognize that we exist or that we have a just cause, they have also supported the oppression against us. Sometimes that is because of a false theological position. They think that that's what God wants. They think that that helps bring about the second coming, that somehow Zionist claims to the land are supported by the Bible, that somehow it's expected of Christians to support the State of Israel, that that somehow becomes a theological requirement. And I could deal with those issues. I mean, I've written and worked about them, because that's not actually the what the Bible teaches. But but it has reached a point where Palestinians being the enemies of the state of Israel are viewed as the enemies of God, that somehow God wants you to do, to support the State of Israel, even when what they are doing is clearly ungodly and against anything that Christians should be supporting. I say even some of that false theology is found even among Mennonites. The present crisis of course brings it into direct focus. The situation in Gaza, the absolutely horrific, horrendous actions there cry out for a response of justice and non-violence. There has been a general reluctance in the West, particularly in the United States to call out the genocide, to demand justice, at best even to call for a ceasefire seems to be a controversial matter, even for peace oriented churches. I thank God for some young people who have put together a very robust a series of activities under Mennonite Action, very much at the forefront of those demanding an immediate ceasefire and calling for justice and non-violence rather than killing as being the way to deal with this issue.

Christy Kauffman

So Jonathan, would you tell me a little bit about what was your role, you worked for MCC?

Jonathan Kuttab

Yes, I did. I had, I had the pleasure of actually writing up my job description. Well, what better can there be? I was already a lawyer at that time working in New York, actually working in corporate law at a Wall Street Law Firm, when I went back as a volunteer with MCC. And my job entailed actually learning Hebrew, joining the Israeli bar, and thinking of ways in which we can use a law as a tool for justice and for the rule of law. In fact, that's what I did. It was great fun and tremendously satisfying, also helped set up Al Haq, the major, the premier human rights organization in the West Bank, which continues to be very operational today. In fact, the Israelis have recently declared it to be a terrorist organization, and

tried to shut it down. But it continues to be very much operational. So that was a very concrete way in which one can work for justice, is this through human rights and respect for international law.

Alain Epp Weaver

Was, were you working at with MCC when Al Haq got started?

Jonathan Kuttab

Actually, I was.

Alain Epp Weaver

Or was that afterwards?

Jonathan Kuttab

Actually, I was. That was a large part of what I was doing at that time, setting the basis for the creation of Al Haq and a general understanding of human rights and human rights work, the importance of proper documentation, educating Palestinians as to what universal principles of human rights and international law are, that it wasn't just a tool to use against occupation, but that these were universal principles that apply also to Palestinian society, and not just to the Israeli occupiers.

Alain Epp Weaver

Am I correct that Al Haq was the first in addition to now being the premier Palestinian human rights organization?

Jonathan Kuttab

It was very definitely so.

Alain Epp Weaver

And what were the specific human rights issues that Al Haq in those early days in the late 1970s, early 1980s, what were what was Al Haq focused on at that point?

Jonathan Kuttab

Well at that time, we were focused on behavior of Israeli military occupiers as well as settlers. Violence, home demolition, collective punishment, deportations, and radical changes in the occupied territories in contrast to the demands of international law, which prohibited moving civilian settlers into the occupied territories. So rule of law, international law, human rights, these were some of the most prominent issues that Al Haq was dealt with. We also dealt with what we called internal violations, which were violations of Interna- of human rights within Palestinian society, on issues like rights of women, rights of workers, and general good governance within Palestinian society.

Alain Epp Weaver

Could you just talk some about the changes that have happened, you know, since the early 1970s, when the settlement enterprise gets started in terms of how is it different say for you to travel in the West Bank, between the West Bank and Israel in the 1970s, compared to today,

Jonathan Kuttab

Oh my, the situation has been getting worse and worse continuously. Israeli restrictions on the life the movement, the activity of Palestinians has been escalating again continuously. You can't keep people under oppression without resistance. And when resistance happens, even nonviolent resistance, reaction of occupation has been harsh, and increasingly repressive and restrictive. And that's both in the West Bank and in Gaza. People have to understand that separating the West Bank and Gaza is part of an Israeli policy of fragmentation that's been carried out. In Gaza, of course, it's like an open-air prison, and a pressure cooker that has been really horrible, especially for the last 16 years. When Hamas won the elections, Israel found that as an excellent excuse, to increase the restrictions, and to separate the West Bank from Gaza, and to keep Gaza under very tight control. For the for those who don't know, if you look at the map of Gaza, the most significant thing is the scale. It's a tiny place. It's only 22 miles long, and between five and eight miles wide. And it has 2.3 million people living there. Two thirds of them refugees from 1948, when, when Israel was created, and Israel has total control over everything that goes in or out of that area. They have control of every aspect of their lives without actually being in there. They control it all from the outside, from the air, from the ground, from the sea, and from all the points of entry for goods and services and people. So people go underground, start digging tunnels. That's that's what you have to do, just in order to survive.

Alain Epp Weaver

So you live in Jerusalem. It's about a 90 minute drive from Jerusalem to the border of Gaza. But for most Jerusalemites, people in the West Bank, they've never been to Gaza. When was the last time you visited Gaza?

Jonathan Kuttab

Oh my goodness, about 16 years ago, I have been I have not been allowed to go into Gaza. I've tried to go in under humanitarian and other organizations I was not allowed. Before that I used to go to Gaza frequently and Gaza is an amazing place. The people in it are wonderful people, but they've been living under such oppressive situation. It's amazing. During the great march of return when they tried to non-violently walk towards the border. Israeli snipers just just killed them. Just kill them off. In one day they killed 62 people and got away with it. The entire world did not do anything did not say anything. It was just like as if it didn't happen. So, many people in Gaza today feel we've tried non-violence and it doesn't work.

Alain Epp Weaver

You were talking about the separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. But there's also the separation just internally within the West Bank.

Jonathan Kuttab

Yes.

Alain Epp Weaver

Could you say some about like when you started working with MCC in the night, late 1970s? What was it like to go from like Jerusalem to Bethlehem or to Hebron or to Nablus versus today,

Jonathan Kuttab

or to Tel Aviv

Alain Epp Weaver

or to Tel Aviv or all those types of separation

Jonathan Kuttab

Gaza, that there was a lot there was an open movement around and across. There were some people who are who are not allowed to move they were given green cards, rather than the orange cards. Now, everybody in the West Bank is treated as if they are prohibited from movement without a permit, without permission, not even moving to Jerusalem, East Jerusalem. Not even moving within the West Bank. That's become difficult, because a part of the Israeli, the Zionist, specifically Zionist plan is fragmentation. The Palestinian people are not treated as one people. There are those who are Israeli citizens who have Israeli citizenship, mostly in the Galilee in Nazareth and some of the Negev. Then there are those like myself in Jerusalem, Jerusalemites in East Jerusalem. We are sort of residents but not citizens. So we have a unique status where we are not part of the West Bank, but not part of Israel itself. Then within the West Bank, there are different areas A, B and C that are kept separate, and that are blocked off from each other. Then there is Gaza, which is like an open-air prison that's very tightly controlled. And then there are the Palestinians who are in the diaspora, the majority of Palestinians, each of these five groups is treated by Israel differently. A different set of laws applies to them, different movement and procedures, different documents, different rules, and they work very hard on making sure that they have a different leadership. And that there is not one leadership for all the Palestinians. For all its faults, the PLO, and under Yasser Arafat, spoke in one voice on behalf of all Palestinians. Today, there is no Palestinian leader that can speak for all Palestinians. And Netanyahu is very pleased. Who do I talk to? There's nobody to talk to, they don't even have their own act together. They don't, Mahmoud Abbas doesn't speak for people in Gaza, and vice versa. So there's no one to talk to. So I don't need to talk to anybody.

Alain Epp Weaver

And sadly, that fragmentation regime that you described, that was that intensified with this so-called peace process. The first time I visited Gaza was in 1992. And I took a shared taxi from Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, straight into the heart of Gaza City.

Jonathan Kuttab

Yeah.

Alain Epp Weaver

And but then over the past 30 years, it's just become increasingly cut off Gaza Strip and now we got off so that it's almost impossible, as you say, to go to Gaza.

Jonathan Kuttab

It's, it's impossible I have we have relatives from Beit Jala, Bishara Awad, another MCCer, his wife is from Gaza. She hadn't seen her family in like 15 years. They can't go and travel there. They're not allowed. And people from Gaza can't come to Jerusalem or come to the West Bank to be with their relatives.

Christy Kauffman

I want to ask Alain, a little bit more to tell us about your experience in Gaza and why you were there what you were doing.

Alain Epp Weaver

So I lived in Gaza together with my spouse and our two small children 1995 to 1996. And then again 1999 to 2000. And we first went there in 1995 to work to develop relief and development partnerships for MCC that included the Near East Council of Churches which has a long history in Gaza dating back to the 1948 War and is, has many, has operated many development projects across the Gaza Strip serving all Palestinians both Muslims and Christians as well as then different civil society organizations that work for the rights of women and children especially in Gaza. I, to be honest, Gaza is my favorite part of Palestine I love so many parts of Palestine there are so many wonderful distinctive traditions in the Bethlehem area, Jerusalem, Ramallah, but Gaza is there's something very special about it. I don't know if it's the sea. I think it might also be the mix of cultures of Palestinians from the Nagav, Naqab desert, the Negev, like from the Beer Shava, Bir Saba area, mixing together with native Gazans. The food is spicy, most Palestinian food isn't spicy. But in Gaza, there's a bit of a spice to it, which is wonderful. And people are just so incredibly hospitable. Now Palestinians as a whole are very hospitable people. But in Gaza, I felt that warmth the most. And given how much they had encountered over their years. it was just always amazing to me how creative and resourceful Gazans are. And yeah, it's been incredibly hard and painful to see these images as well as to hear texts from former colleagues and friends in Gaza, just short texts, because they're probably trying to save the batteries on their cell phones. But texts along the lines of "pray for us." "This is horrible." "We don't know what to do."

Jonathan Kuttab

This may be my last call.

Alain Epp Weaver

This may be my last call. My father is dead. My sister was killed. Terrible, terrible messages.

Christy Kauffman

Yeah. And you recently went back last summer. Correct?

Alain Epp Weaver

Last January. So a little over a year ago was the last time I was in Gaza. And I wasn't there for a long time. And it wasn't sure that I'd be able to get in until a couple of days before when I was able to get the permission. But yeah, it was wonderful to reconnect with friends and I thought oh, I'll look forward to going back" Now you know, it's there's so much that's been lost by the people in Gaza over the past four months. You have 90% more than 90% of people have been displaced from their homes. I think the United Nations is reporting that 70% of homes in the Gaza Strip have been either destroyed or

significantly damaged. This, of course, is exacting a great human toll. It's also exacting a great cultural toll. I mean, schools, universities, hospitals that have been destroyed, a deep cultural heritage. churches and mosques that have been damaged and destroyed. Something as simple but as beautiful as a 700 year old Turkish bath in the heart of the Gaza Strip, destroyed. What, what will it look like to rebuild Gaza, God willing, in the future? It will be, it will be years, years to even think about rebuilding. And in the meantime, there are voices in the Israeli government calling for the expulsion of all Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, that makes it all the more urgent to be calling for a permanent and immediate ceasefire, but also to raise the alarm, that there are voices that are calling not just for the horrors of what is happening now, but for even worse, for the expulsion of 2.2 million people from the Gaza Strip.

Jonathan Kuttab

Yeah, Gaza, it's, as you said, one of the most interesting things about Gaza, in addition to the sea is the people. They're really wonderful people in Gaza. And I miss that, I miss that very much. I want to say something as I was talking. I'm thinking about our listeners. What they are hearing from us, is so different from what the mainstream media tells them. The one of the most amazing things for me about the last four months, is the uniformity with which the Zionist narrative has dominated the corporate media, whether you listening to CNN or MSNBC, or Fox News, whether you're reading the New York Times, Washington Post, or your local newspaper or your local TV station, you're getting the same message, as if this thing suddenly happened on October 7, an unprovoked attack that was totally barbaric, no mention of the military aspects at all, no mention of the context from which it happened. And that Hamas is such an evil that needs to be utterly destroyed. That yes, there are some civilians who get hurt, and there's a humanitarian need. But as long as it doesn't get in the way of the goal, which is the utter destruction of Hamas. The uniformity with which that narrative is given, the utter attacks on anybody who questions it? I've never seen such uniformity and an a narrative, and such unwillingness to hear other points of view, or to even question the official narratives, as I've seen around this issue of Gaza, Hamas and the current fighting there.

Alain Epp Weaver

Now you have long history of like partnership and work with Israeli Jewish as well as other Jewish organizations working for justice and peace. Can you talk some about that?

Jonathan Kuttab

Well yes, the there's B'Tselem there's,

Alain Epp Weaver

which is like the leading Israeli human rights organization

Jonathan Kuttab

Leading Israeli human rights organization. Somehow, if it's Israeli, maybe it can be believed. Yeah. There's Breaking the Silence. There's Circle of Bereaved. There are some Israeli Jewish groups, thank God for them. In this country, there's Jewish Voice for Peace. There's If Not Now. And it's very important because it's these voices that are the best defense against antisemitism.

Alain Epp Weaver

And in Canada Independent Jewish Voices.

Jonathan Kuttab

Independent Jewish Voices in Canada. If it weren't for these groups, it would be so easy for people to say, to blame everything on Jews. No, it's against Zionists. There are some Jews who are opposed to what is happening, and who do not accept these violations of human rights and Palestinian rights. So thank God for them. It's very important that we encourage and lift up those Jewish voices who are willing to question sometimes oppose Zionism and the practices of the State of Israel.

Christy Kauffman

Yeah I know that one of MCC's Israeli partners, Zochrot, an Israeli partner that,

Alain Epp Weaver

Zochrot

Jonathan Kuttab

Yes, Zochrot

Christy Kauffman

Yeah, well, would you tell us a little bit about some of their work?

Alain Epp Weaver

Yeah, they were established about 20 years ago, and their mission is to remember the Nakba in Hebrew. So that's their tagline and that means that they seek to stimulate discussion and creative thinking about the rights of Palestinian refugees, and of remembering the history of what happened in 1948, not just simply for historical purposes, but in recognition that there has been this ongoing catastrophe, this ongoing Nakba, for Palestinians. Not just displaced once in 1948, but then on an ongoing basis, inside Israel, inside the occupied territories. And needing to remember the history in order to stand for a future of equality and justice for all in Palestine-Israel today,

Jonathan Kuttab

I'm just wondering, this may this may end up being a two-part podcast, there is so much that needs to be said, that is not being said. And there is also so much of complicity of the United States in what's happening. Somehow in this country the issues are sanitized. The narrative is, uh, uniform. And any discussion of that narrative is immediately shut down, even criminalized, prevented from discussing. You're I think of the United States as a country where there's freedom of the press and freedom of expression and First Amendment. In reality on this issue on this issue, there is very little freedom of expression in this country, even on college campuses, where there should be academic freedom, where they should be able to discuss things even which are not acceptable. In ordinary society, the level of repression and silencing of voices that deviates from the standard narrative is phenomenal.

Christy Kauffman

I want to ask you both what are your personal motivations going forward and being a part of this work? And story?

Jonathan Kuttab

Well, for me, there's no question that my faith is a very basic part of what I'm doing. It's also what gives me the ability to continue in the face of tremendously imbalance of power between the two parties. I often say there's a clear distinction between optimism and hope. I am not optimistic, this situation looks horrible. But I am full of hope that things can and will change. Ultimately, this is because it's in the interest of both the Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews. They will never, never feel secure. They will never prosper. They will never flourish without making peace with the Palestinians. And peace does not mean just forcing Palestinians to do what they want and to accept their dictates, but really come to terms with the genuine issues of justice for both people that is absolutely required.

Alain Epp Weaver

In terms of my motivation, certainly faith in a God who is with people who are buried under rubble. The Palestinian Lutheran theologian and pastor Munther Isaak has talked about God is buried under the rubble. But we have a faith that the God who is buried in the tomb emerges from that tomb. And it's because of that faith that we need to act, act for justice, and act for peace. The other motivation is again, just the fact that I have these friendships by having worked in Palestine and Israel for 11 years. Friendships with people in Gaza, Christian and Muslim friendship with Israeli peace builders, the fact that they are continuing to be dedicated in their lives to working for a future of justice and peace. How can I not do something to the whatever extent I can?

Christy Kauffman

And so I guess you kind of answered this question earlier. I was going to ask what are your hopes for the moment? And what are your hopes for the future?

Jonathan Kuttab

Well, for the moment, there needs to be a stop, an immediate stop to the killing. There needs to be a ceasefire immediately. And there needs to be open access, not just drip drip here we'll allow a few trucks in here and there. Open access to food, to water, to medical equipment, to allowing the medical people to move around the ambulances to move around. That's an immediate need. But that's not nearly enough. There needs to be, to address the justice issues at their roots, not to find a different way to deal with it. You know, most of the discussion now in Israel and in the United States about the day after simply, how can we rule Gaza without Hamas? Not how can we have justice? Not how can we address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Not how can people live together in peace and security? But no, how can we manage it? As if as if everything that happened was irrelevant, as if it was an aberration rather than the expected results of the oppression. So yes, there needs to be a lot more work for peace and for justice. We need to have new thinking out of the box, thinking. You know, I wrote another book, if I can talk about it, called *Beyond the Two State Solution*. We need to have new thinking out of the box, how can we really address the issues, that book can be downloaded for free, by the way from the nonviolenceinternational.net. That website, if you go to it,

Alain Epp Weaver

I've got a copy.

Jonathan Kuttab

You can download that, that that book. But you know, we need to have some new and creative thinking about how to solve the problem in its entirety, not just how to deal with Gaza, and how to get Gaza to be no longer a threat to Israelis.

Alain Epp Weaver

Really want to underscore what Jonathan was saying about the urgent need for a permanent and immediate ceasefire as a very as a very minimal, immediate step that needs to be taken. The United Nations says that everyone in Gaza is under threat of famine. And not just that well over 60% of people in Gaza are facing catastrophic, severe food insecurity. Just yesterday, I saw an update from the Catholic church in Jerusalem saying that the Christian community sheltering at the Catholic and Orthodox churches in Gaza, they are running out of food and water. And for many Gazans, they have already run out of food and water and are desperately looking just for small bites to eat. Drinking polluted water. This is an inhumane, terrible situation. People are dying of starvation. People are dying of preventable diseases like typhoid, there needs to be an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

Jonathan Kuttab

There's 50,000 pregnant women, that I mean, how can they survive without water and milk and hygienic products? How can people actually live, and without anesthesia? They have C-sections without anesthesia. It's incredible.

Christy Kauffman

How can people in the U.S. and Canada who are listening help with ...?

Jonathan Kuttab

Right now, the United States and also Canada are part of the problem. They are part of the problem. And, and citizens in those countries need to really challenge their representatives to stop being part of the genocide. To stop being part of the genocide. I can't believe that they have actually suspended funding to UNRWA, on the basis of an unproven allegation that 12 members out of 13,000 UNRWA employees were involved in the October 7 attack, no proof was presented at all. And even if they were participating, the only organization that can supply whatever little food and water is allowed in is UNRWA and you cutting off their funding. I mean, the United States and Canada are complicit in what's happening. And we need to tell our representatives to stop it. They can and should stop it. They are part of the problem. They are not part of the solution.

Alain Epp Weaver

And UNRWA, that's the United Nations Relief Works Agency, which responds to the humanitarian needs of Palestinian refugees, not just in Gaza Strip and the West Bank, but also in other countries in the Middle East as well.

Jonathan Kuttab

Jordan, Syria, Lebanon

Alain Epp Weaver

Yeah, just yesterday, actually, I read a report in Haaretz, the Israeli newspaper saying that actually, the Israeli government or military was telling the United States you need to allow humanitarian distributions through UNRWA, because they are the people who can have the infrastructure to do it.

Jonathan Kuttab

There's nobody else,

Alain Epp Weaver

Even though the United States has cut this off. So in part of what needs to happen is the United States and Canada need to reinstate funding to UNRWA. I mean You mentioned Mennonite Action, this is the new independent initiatives.

Jonathan Kuttab

Yes, yes, yes let's end on a positive note,

Alain Epp Weaver

...US and Canada. Yeah. I mean, what do you see about them? You were saying Nonviolence International's been partnering with with Mennonite action.

Jonathan Kuttab

Mennonite Action is a group of Mennonites. It started by young people, but also there are older people who decided to do something about Gaza. Their first action was a very organized sit ins and hymn sings at 43 offices of representatives. Come to the demonstration, bring your hymnbook along. It was wonderful. And then it was followed by another action where hundreds of them went to the rotunda in Washington, and I think about 150 got arrested there to direct action, knowing that they were going to be arrested, calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. They're very active, they're very energetic. They really take their commitment to peace and justice seriously. I would urge all of you to help and support that group and participate with it. It's one of the few shining lights I think, among Christians, and the Christian church in America today where the truth is. The church has failed, has been rather silent. Its response has been mild, tepid, oh, a little bit concerned about the humanitarian needs, no discussion of justice, of peace, no clear and forthright condemnation of the genocide and of the complicity of the governments of the United States and Canada, in the evil that's taking place right now.

Alain Epp Weaver

And also MCC has opportunities for people to write to their congressional representatives, as well as their members of parliament in Canada to speak up for a permanent ceasefire.

Jonathan Kuttab

I want to have ordinary Mennonites be prepared to have their leadership take positions that run counter to the prevailing narrative. Really step out of the norm of narrative that everybody else is following and really work in a prophetic way for justice and for peace.

[Music transition]

Christy's script:

Alain talked about the immense need for food and other supplies in Gaza. While it's been challenging, MCC partners in Gaza continue to respond as they can. Here's an update from Seth and Sarah, our MCC representatives in Palestine and Israel.

Seth Malone

Being as responsive as we can to our partner needs, there are things that we can do that we should do. We've recently wrapped up the third phase of an emergency distribution project with our partner Al Najd. This last phase was distributing hygiene kits to people displaced and in camps. Now we're working on a project funded by Canadian Foodgrains Bank, through the Canadian government to actually ship food into Gaza to be distributed by Al Najd. We're in the final stages of procurement and delivery of the goods. And so hopefully, by the end of February, the first shipment will have entered. But it's it's very difficult logistically to operate in an environment where the communications network is cut out, you know you can't really communicate in real time with people. It's really hard to do things in Gaza. There's fuel shortages, which makes transporting really hard, every building is a target, it doesn't feel like there's any safe place to go. Airstrikes are indiscriminate. So if you're setting up a warehouse, the likelihood of that warehouse being bombed, it's there. And there's very little that we can do to ensure the safety of our partner staff, and any assets or anything that they're doing while trying to do the distribution. So a lot of our work has been doing risk mitigation planning, making sure that we can, to some degree, ensure the safety of the partner staff, and then also ensure that the shipment goes well and is distributed to the right people and everything like that.

We also are working on projects with an MCC partner, partner DSPR, they are doing cash transfers to people in Gaza. There's stuff that is available for purchase, it's incredibly expensive, your normal person cannot afford these items. So the cash transfers are meant to support them, as best they can, in the absence of being able to get things in. So the initial transfer was made. We're evaluating whether or not we can do additional transfers through this partner. We also have a mental health and psychosocial support project with the same partner, they have staff in Gaza that are providing the support to children and women. As you can imagine, being in such an environment is extremely terrible, and has incredible effects on people's mental health and their sanity. So this is sort of like psychosocial support first aid, it's making sure that they can get by today. And then we had an existing project through the Near East Council of Churches where early on, we've reported this before their centers that we were supporting through a vocational training program were bombed. We're finishing out our project with them by just paying the living staff salaries so they have income during this difficult time. In additionally with another partner with Culture and Free Thought Association. At the very beginning, we did a cash transfer project with them a little bit smaller than the one I just described, but it was to support families that were taking refuge in their shelters and their centers. So we're working with them. And we're thinking of ways that we can help them even more because they have a lot of displaced people that they're trying to take care of. So we're always sitting, listening, doing our best to try to respond to needs, and there's not, there's not always very much we can do but what we can do we work with our partners.

Sarah Funkhouser

I think that we would ask for people to keep advocating for an end to this. Our partners are exhausted, living through something that we cannot even imagine. And I think to be in solidarity and support with them and of them is to do what we can to not get tired of advocating for peace.

Seth Malone

So far to date We've appreciated all the donations that we've received. It's gone to helping in a desperate situation. But this is not, this is not, donations don't fix the problem. The problem is that there's active violence. What we ask is, is for people to get involved, we're calling for a ceasefire. We're calling for hostilities to stop between everyone that the bombing stops and that people can return back to their homes. So we're advocating for a just peace. We're advocating for a ceasefire in the short term. We're asking for people to support these efforts, wherever they are in U.S. and Canada. In this case your singing in the rotunda. Is it effective? I don't know. Is it being faithful? Yes. So it's the right thing to do. And to be fair off, a lot of our partners and people we know here saw that and were in deeply encouraged and it was important for them to see that type of solidarity. So it does have an impact. So we appreciate the contributions. But what we really need is a is the resolution of this conflict.

Christy's script:

Thanks for listening and taking action through advocacy, donations and learning.

Links to donate to and be a part of advocacy efforts through Mennonite Central Committee are in the show notes. You can also find there a link to Mennonite Action.

Next month we are releasing a part 2 of this conversation around a just peace in Palestine and Israel, that episode in March will be focused on the stories of non-violent resistance over time.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on the traditional land of the Algonquin, Lenape, Nanticoke, Piscataway, Shawnee and Susquehannock people groups.

It was recorded and produced by me, Christy Kauffman, and the head producer is Emily Loewen.

The audio you hear is the singing from 135 Mennonites in four-part harmony inside the Rotunda in Washington DC advocating for ceasefire.

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.

Outro, Lord listen to your children praying