

Nonviolent resistance: Just peace in Palestine and Israel part 2 / Jonathan Kuttab, Alain Epp Weaver and Jad Issac

March 2024

Christy Kauffman Script

Since we released the last episode about Gaza, we have another update for you. With famine imminent in Gaza, MCC has delivered a critical truckload of emergency food. As part of a convoy of other trucks transporting humanitarian relief via Jordan, the vehicle sat for hours in a long queue at the border crossing, but finally made its way through the Kerem Abu Salem crossing into Gaza on March 19.

MCC partner Al-Najd Developmental Forum (Al-Najd) received the lifesaving delivery from the first of six planned truckloads, including locally purchased food such as chickpeas, lentils flour, cooking oil, canned meat, fish and beans. The packages will be delivered to 665 displaced families currently living in tent camps in Deir al Balah and other locations between Gaza City and Rafah, known as the “Middle Area” of the Gaza Strip. It’s harder for families living in the Middle Area to access humanitarian relief than it is for those who fled further south. That’s our current update, and now we’re going to continue with our previously recorded part two of last month’s episode.

[Music transition]

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.

Christy Kauffman Script

Last month we released the first part of this conversation with Jonathan Kuttab and Alain Epp Weaver about Palestine and Israel and the current conflict. Today we continue with part two, This part will focus on looking at nonviolent resistance and some of the stories through the history of MCC’s presence there. As mentioned in the last episode, MCC has worked in Palestine and Israel since 1949, for 75 years. MCC and its staff has been witness to displacement, occupation, and human rights abuses, along with witnessing and partaking in nonviolent resistance.

If you haven’t listened to part 1, I would strongly recommend you go back and listen to that. In that episode you will hear more about the context and experience of Jonathan and Alain as well as a current Gaza crisis response update.

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

Christy Kauffman

Can you start off just telling us what did MCC presence start out like the very beginning?

Alain Epp Weaver

I mean MCC’s presence starts in 1949 and March of 1949 when MCC sent Titus Lehmann, here from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to work as the chief nurse in the refugee camps that at that time were being administered by the Quakers, American Friends Services Committee. Those camps were eventually then taken over by the United Nations or UNRWA agency. Titus then went to Jericho in 1950s, when he helped set up MCC’s relief operations in the refugee

camps around Jericho. So MCC's work very much starts out responding to those basic human needs of the hundreds of 1,000s of refugees from the Nakba.

My understanding is in the 1970s, mid 1970s when MCC's agricultural development program began, was that part of the intent of the work was to help Palestinian farmers protect their land from confiscation because the Israeli military authorities were appealing to like Ottoman era laws. Can you talk some about ways that the Israeli military authorities were seeking to confiscate land?

Jonathan Kuttab

Yes. The issues in Palestine between the Zionist movement and the local people have always been land and population. By land, the Zionist Movement wanted to acquire as much land as possible, take it from the Arab owners, either confiscate it outright or move it into the public domain and then get that land to serve Jews only because in a Jewish state to serve a Jewish purpose was the most natural thing. Of course it came at expense of the non-Jewish owners. And one of the tricks that were used to take land away from Arabs was a sort of twisting Ottoman law to say, if you're not using your land, if it lies fallow for 10 or more years, it changes its nature, it becomes *miri* and not private, and therefore, it can be taken over by the state. And if it's taken over by the state, then the state being here, the Israeli military government, then it can give it to Jews as settlers.

Christy Script

This historical agricultural program that MCC was a part of is a type of nonviolent resistance, planting trees to stop land from being taken. I wanted to talk to someone who was directly involved in that project to hear more about it. So at this point I'll introduce you to Dr. Jad Issac, who has been a part MCC's long history in Palestine and Israel.

Jad Issac

I'm Jad Issac, from Beit Sahour.

Christy Kauffman

So, and I understand that your organization has been long term partners with MCC, yeah?

Jad Issac

Yes. Don't tell me how many but it's almost four decades or more.

Christy

Oh wow

Jad Issac

I am the director general of the Applied Research Institute, ARIJ which was established originally by MCC. Back during the First Intifada. But my involvement with MCC goes long before that. MCC started embarking on an agricultural program in Palestine. First program they did was planting olive trees. And it's now almost 40 years, you see 1,000s of trees that have been planted by MCC and are producing olives and olive oil by the farmers protecting the land because, you know, when you plant in an area, you try to reduce the appetite of the settlers. And this is what the first project with MCC was. I think this was about more than 40 years ago.

The second thing was that, so MCC did the first needs assessment for the Palestinian communities in the Jordan Valley with Bir Zeit University. And they realized how badly those people in the Jordan Valley who were subjected and still subjected to ethnic cleansing. Where

they started providing them with the drip irrigation greenhouses, sheds for their livestock. And by that they promoted their steadfastness, they stay on the land.

Jonathan Kuttab

So using your land, especially planting trees on it became an act of not only survival, but also resistance to the land acquisition, which is why you see settlers going around cutting olive trees and burning them and preventing Palestinians from using their land. Because once they don't use the land, it becomes easier for you to take it. Whether under legal pretenses, it becomes easier to take the land if people are not actually living on it and using it.

Alain Epp Weaver

It was also during the 1970s that MCC's I'd say partnerships with Palestinian churches became more prominent, those were also there in the 60s in the 50s. But especially from the 70s onwards, could you say some about what's the role of Palestinian churches and Christians been in this work for justice and peace?

Jonathan Kuttab

Well, this is a very interesting because Palestinian Christians, although they are a minority in the Palestinian community, they're a very effective and active minority in civil society, and schools, hospitals, institutions, etc. And this is not well known, certainly in the Western world. But the vast majority of Palestinian Christians of whatever denominations are pacifist. They read their Bible, he's the Prince of Peace. He calls us to love our enemies, he calls us to turn the other cheek. It doesn't make sense for Christians to be fighting, to be killing one another, or anybody else. And this is the view not only of Christian Palestinians, but also of Muslims. They look at fishes, how we don't understand Christians being involved in fighting and killing. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. We all know that. And so Muslims are always surprised that that Christians are involved in fighting and killing, and are so militant and militaristic. So most of Palestinian Christians, of all denominations not just Mennonites have always been pacifist. And they and they have felt totally uncomfortable with concepts like armed struggle.

Alain Epp Weaver

At the same time, there was also Palestinian Christian involvement in nonviolent resistance.

Jonathan Kuttab

Oh, yes.

Alain Epp Weaver

Can you talk some about how Palestinian Christians have been part of that broader Palestinian story of nonviolent resistance to the occupation?

Jonathan Kuttab

Yeah well, from the very beginning, Palestinians have been very involved in the political life and the political struggle and the political suffering of the people. And since they weren't going to go into armed struggle with very, very rare exceptions, they had to come up with new ways of coping with the occupation, whether it's by international law, or human rights. Whether it's protests, whether it's demonstrations, whether it's boycotts, or the BDS movement, boycott, divestments, and sanctions. Planting trees becomes an act of resistance, standing up to the occupation, creating alternative economic and social structures to the existing Israeli one, Christians have been very involved in all of these activities. Mubarak Awad was actually deported by the Israelis for his nonviolent activities. Many people think he basically set the tone and the standards and some of the tactics of the First Intifada, the first uprising that Palestinians

had, since he was deported he started another organization called Nonviolence International, where he uses nonviolent methods all over the world, not just in Palestine. And that organization continues to be active today.

Christy Kauffman

Do you Jonathan have specific stories of scenarios of non-violent resistance that you've been a part of, but is there one that stands out that you can, that you can tell us?

Jonathan Kuttab

Many. Many, many, many. I mentioned, some of them in my latest book, *The Truth Shall Set You Free*. And one of the stories I tell there is a personal story, where I decided to actually stand in front of a bulldozer that was trying to destroy part of a Palestinian farm. And it was a, in retrospect was a very frightening thing. And it happened, where there was actually nobody around, no journalists, no cameras. I had told the Mukhtar, the leader of this village whose whose lands, the village lands were about to be taken and confiscated by the Israelis. And so he came to my office as a lawyer. And I said, okay, as a lawyer, I will try and help you but, but, law is only 5%, 95% of the work belongs to you. You have to defend your land, he says, "How can we we don't have any guns?" I said, "No, no, no, not with guns. You have to be willing to stand if it has to be even in front of bulldozers and assert your ownership nonviolently." Well, one day, I get this call from him, that Israelis with bulldozers are trying to take our land, please come. So I jump into my car, and I go to the village, and he meets me at the village. And we walk out toward the land. And there's nobody, there's just one Israeli bulldozer that's working, what I didn't know is that the army had come and arrested all the villagers. So I said, well, you and I have to do what we said we were going to do. So we stood in front of the bulldozer. And the driver of the bulldozer didn't want to have any trouble. He left the bulldozer. And then an armed settler, jumped in the cockpit revved up the engine started working, he had a big gun next to him. And so I stood in front of the bulldozer. And he stood behind it so the bulldozer couldn't move back or forward. And I realized, you know, there's only us and this armed settler. And so I told them, you know, here, you know, there's of course no signal, there for, cell phones, I said here, go run into the village called my brother who can call some journalists, because my understanding of nonviolence at that time is you have to have cameras and people to witness what's happening. So all that was left was me and this settler. And now that the Mukhtar left, he could back up the bulldozer and come at me. So I turned around, there was this little pile of rubble, that he was clearing and that I was standing in front of. And it was you know, I looked at I said, "My god, I'm gonna die today. It's a good day to die." And then I got the tremendous inspiration that I would turn around and have my back to him instead of my face. Maybe I didn't want to see my own death. And maybe I felt I thought, you know, here I was. I wanted to make it clear that I wasn't trying to attack him. I know if I had reached down to grab a stone he would have shot me on the spot. Suddenly the guy stopped and turned off his engine. And then I realized it's really hard to kill somebody who is not presenting you with any threat, but was not running away from you either. And that nonviolence works, even if nobody else is observing, because it operates on the insides of the person, your insides and his insides, as well as third parties. So it was a big lesson for me in nonviolence at that time.

Christy Kauffman

Yeah, you didn't even have to have someone witness it.

Jonathan Kuttab

Exactly, It was enough that I knew what was happening and he knew what was happening. Later, I wrote an article about how nonviolence really operates on three different battlefields. The first and the more most important is yourself, the oppressed people, they have to overcome

their fear, they have to be strong, they have to be disciplined, to find a way to be both to resist and at the same time, not to use violence, and not to run away. The second battlefield is you're operating on the hearts and minds of your oppressor. And third, of course, you're operating on third parties who could intervene in solidarity or in support or in sanctions or whatever involvement they can have. Actually, I've I even wrote that up in Arabic and shared it with some of the Hamas leadership, that this is what nonviolence is, that doesn't mean you just refrain from using weapons, you have to be actively confronting, and dealing with the oppression and the oppressor.

Christy Kauffman

It takes a bit more effort to find the creative solutions that isn't violence, and it isn't doing nothing either. There's a bit of creativity.

Jonathan Kuttab

A lot, a lot more effort, discipline, resources, commitment, and sacrifices. People think that if you're non-violent, that that that guarantees that the other side will be non-violent. No. Sometimes they get more violent, and you have to be willing to accept the price. It's funny how people think that, that violence, it's okay. It requires a lot of weapons and discipline and preparation, and lots of people will die and that's fine. But if you're nonviolent, they're not willing to invest even a portion of the resources and the discipline and the commitment and accepting sacrifices, as you do in a violent struggle.

Christy Kauffman sript

That is the end of the conversation with Jonathan and Alain.

I had asked Dr. Jad Issac if he had any stories of peaceful resistance through his decades of work and his time living and working in Beit Sahour. One specific story immediately came to mind for him. He speaks of his experience in the First Intifada. While many things have changed in Palestine and Israel since that time, he provides a powerful example of what nonviolent resistance looked like 40 years ago.

Jad Issac

They imposed a curfew on Beit Sahour. Consulates coming to the town were denied. Bishops were denied. So we thought, well, let's do something jointly with the Israelis.

Christy Script

In 1989 Beit Sahour was one of the first places that had an organized non-violent resistance to the Israeli occupation by doing many things including, not paying taxes to the Israeli government. This was one of the creative solutions and decentralized actions that took place in the First Intifada. Israel, in response, put the village under house curfew and declared a closed military area.

Jad Issac

So we invited a number of Jewish families from the peace camp to come and spend the night in Beit Sahour. And about 20 families came and stayed with us on a Friday afternoon. So they know that Shabbat will they will be in Beit Sahour. So they came and stayed with us and we had dinner together under the title "break bread and not bones." So we had dinner together. We broke the bread together and the next day we marched Israelis and Palestinians. When all of a sudden the army discovered that and they came to Beit Sahour. "What the hell is going on?" And our Jewish friends, they told them "we are coming here to protest against the closure of Beit Sahour and to support them." He told them but do you know that Beit Sahour is now a

closed military area you should leave. They told him, "How can we leave?" So he said "Okay, I will impose a curfew on the Beit Sahourians but you will have to go somewhere and stay. I'll bring buses to take you back to where to Jerusalem." They told them "but it's Shabbat we cannot leave."

Christy Script

Shabbat or the sabbath is Jewish day of rest. One of the basic rules of Shabbat is that you cannot travel on this day.

Jad Issac

We have to stay until Saturday evening at seven o'clock. And the military governor could not do anything. So they stayed until seven o'clock in Beit Sahour defying the military, staying with us. But this was embarrassment for the Israeli army. And immediately afterwards, they punished who were involved in this activity from our side. For them, they didn't want this rapprochement demonizing the Palestinians is the best thing they can do. And when they see that, you know, there are Jews who support Palestinians, they talk to Palestinians. And that Palestinians see the Jews not in the form of military officers and those who are putting them in jail or killing their children. But they see there was people from the Knesset with us.

Christy Script

The Knesset is the name used in Israel for the Israeli Parliament, these are people with power In Israel.

Jad Issac

He was I heard them personally. When the military governor told him, you know, something, we have exact information that we are going to slaughter you. And he told them, but you know, I slept with them last night. I never felt as good as safe as I am in my home in Jerusalem. And military governor went berserk. "You stayed last night with them?" "Yes, I stayed with them in their homes. We had dinner together. My children were with me, and they played with Palestinian children and nothing happened." This was, you know, the issue of demonization to tell them that we are terrorists. We are all subhuman. But for this first time, you know, we can see each other as potential good neighbors. And frankly, I still see that the only chance is that for the Israelis to accept us as their good neighbors and we accept them as good neighbors, but I will never accept the Israelis as my masters or my occupiers, but they are welcome to be my good neighbors.

Christy's script

That's our episode for today. I hope you found the stories of nonviolent resistance inspiring and thought provoking.

Thanks for listening and taking action for a just peace in Palestine and Israel through advocacy, donations and learning.

Links to donate to our Gaza crisis response and to be a part of advocacy efforts through Mennonite Central Committee are in the show notes.

Next month we will be speaking with a partner in Myanmar and we'll hear an update from them. 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.

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.