
A Mennonite Response to Gaza

Robert Lee Atchison

Last January, I was arrested by Capitol police in Washington, DC, along with 135 other Mennonites who ranged in age from 18 to 83. We had gathered in the rotunda of the Cannon House Office Building for an unannounced hymn singing and to demand a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

The event was organized by Mennonite Action, a grassroots movement bonded by a common belief that Mennonites must be public about our peace values. Singing is an important part of our Anabaptist tradition, as is our understanding of Jesus's teaching to love our enemies. We knew ours was an act of civil disobedience, and I am grateful to live in a country with a constitution that offers First Amendment rights when we disagree with our leadership.

As a historic peace church, Mennonites oppose violence in all its varied forms. We condemn the brutal October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas that took the lives of over twelve hundred Israelis. We grieve for the families whose loved ones are still being held hostage. We grieve for the destruction of Gaza and for the estimated thirty-five thousand deaths, a majority of them women and children.

In my more than twenty-five years of working on peace and justice issues related to Israel-Palestine, my experience has been that the conflict in this region, like so many other conflicts, leads many people to immediately take sides. For that reason, it is important to be clear that I love both Palestinians and Israelis. I pray for their reconciliation, and I am frustrated by the lack of leadership demonstrated by the powers that be to help make that happen.

Since visiting the West Bank in 1998, I have engaged in a variety of Israel-Palestine peace and justice activities in my home town of Manhattan, Kansas. On one occasion, I hosted a peace march that started at our local Islamic Center and included sharing meals as part of an interfaith small group. Manhattan Mennonite Church also hosted a (contentious) event with both Jewish and Arab neighbors that featured a well-known Palestinian international human rights lawyer, Jonathan Kuttab. These efforts have not always been as successful as I would have hoped and sometimes alienated people. Even so, I continue to work toward healthy dialogue and relationships.

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I currently chair the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), a national grassroots organization that advocates for peace and justice in Palestine and Israel. I am also a member of the Mennonite Jewish Relations group, which endeavors to address antisemitism and seeks relationships with mainline Jewish communities. Our country and my church, and many people have some type of reparation work to do associated with the Holocaust or antisemitic behavior. I believe our collective guilt is one of many reasons peace and justice in Israel-Palestine has been so elusive.

For the past four years, MennoPIN's Gaza Twinning program has connected Manhattan Mennonite Church with the Youth Vision Society in Gaza, a non-profit associated with the Edward Said Library that provides badly needed resources to the women and children of Gaza and especially the Beach/Al Shati refugee camp. Bi-monthly Zoom meetings have helped create relationships and understanding of the humanitarian issues facing the people of Gaza.

Through this work I became friends with Tareq Abuhailima, a student who came to the United States last year to complete a master's degree in business administration at Bluffton (Ohio) University. Tareq also co-directs The Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center at Bluffton. Since October 7 last year, three of Tareq's sisters have been killed in Gaza. Two by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) snipers as the sisters were looking for their lost children following the carpet bombing of the UNRWA facility where they were staying after their own homes were destroyed. Tareq's remaining family now lives in tents in southern Gaza.

The brutal killings by Hamas have been described by some as unprovoked. Yet, for decades the people of Palestine have been oppressed by the violence and occupation of Israel's form of apartheid that includes home demolitions; child detentions; separation walls; settler colonialism and violence; seizures of land; and controls over water and food supplies, a form of aggression that often goes unreported. Since Hamas was elected in 2007, Gaza has become an open-air prison, where Israel controls how much water, electricity, and food is available to Gazans. Extreme measures taken by the Netanyahu government have made life increasingly hostile for Palestinians. The practice of the United States' one-sided, national-interest-driven-diplomacy and the country's unwillingness to address the apartheid system have contributed deeply to the violence both sides are now experiencing.

The US State Department defines "terrorism" as an activity that involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure and appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking. For years now, there has been a lack of diplomacy and action because Hamas is recognized as a "terrorist" organization. In my opinion, however, the actions of the leaders on both sides of this war meet our country's definition of terrorism

and bear responsibility for the deaths of the innocent. For years, we have looked for a two-state solution through Camp David, the Oslo Accords, and the Road Map for Peace only to see Israeli settlements increase in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, upheld and supported by an ever-expanding apartheid system. Some estimates suggest there are more than seven hundred thousand Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It is doubtful that the State of Israel has the will or capacity to remove them.

As difficult as it is to imagine, Jonathan Kuttab, an international Palestinian human rights lawyer, has suggested a new vision for a one-state solution in his book *Beyond the Two-State Solution*.¹ Whatever the path forward, it must include a different approach than a two-state solution that serves as a guise for Israel to settle the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Each year, the United States provides billions of dollars of support to Israel. Some of our Senators and Representatives suggest we are supporting a democracy. Perhaps, but it is a democracy without a constitution that has occupied and militarily ruled the Palestinian people in East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank for fifty-seven years while land continues to be confiscated and the people's quality of life deteriorates. Lack of leadership to address the reason for the violence has contributed to the carnage we are now experiencing.

South Africa, a country that has experienced apartheid, understands the Palestinians and their oppression and has accused Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinian people. While the UN's International Court of Justice did not clearly rule that Israel is guilty, it did find South Africa's claims plausible that Gazans are in need of protection from genocide, as reflected in an overwhelming fifteen to two decision.

But do we really need to name genocide before we call for an end to the killing of children? One of the songs we sang in the Cannon House rotunda before our arrests was Michael Mahler's "How Can We Be Silent?" "when we know our God is near bringing light to those in shadows, to the worthless, endless worth?"²

In a continued call for a permanent ceasefire, Mennonite Action headed back to Washington, DC, this summer with a march from Harrisonburg, Virginia, that culminated July 28–30 in a multiracial, interfaith coalition gathering. The coalition promoted a theology of liberation and peace—in contrast to a theology of domination, hatred, and violence promoted at the Christians United for Israel Summit that occurred simultaneously. Coalition partners included Christians for a Free Palestine, IfNotNow, Jewish Voice for Peace–DC, Faith for Black Lives, Rabbis for Ceasefire, Hindus for Human Rights, and others. Activities throughout the weekend included interfaith services, civil disobedience, nonviolence training, a lobby day, and an all-inclusive rally.

1 Jonathan Kuttab, *Beyond the Two-State Solution* (Washington, DC: Nonviolence International, 2021).

2 Michael Mahler, "How Can We Be Silent," (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2003).