

## The Stones Cry Out Delegation From the Ground in Palestine to the US Government and Churches

February 27-March 4, 2024

“Nothing has changed, and everything has changed.” These are the words of Sam Bahour, Palestinian-American businessman and activist who spoke to our delegation.

Nothing has changed because the deadly oppression of the Palestinian people has been ongoing for 76 years. Everything has changed since October 7, the day Hamas fighters pierced the walls of the concentration camp called Gaza. As followers of Jesus, we embrace non-violence and so grieve for all who have died, including the victims of the Hamas attack. Nevertheless, as our Palestinian friends reminded us, the violence did not begin on October 7; it must be understood in the broader context of at least 17 years of Israel’s inhuman strangulation of Gaza by land, air, and sea, 76 years of a continuing Nakba (since 1948), and over a century since the rise of Zionism.

In the past 150 days, Gaza has become a killing field. Israel’s response against the Palestinian people is disproportionate by orders of magnitude. The atrocities perpetrated by the IDF on Gaza by land, sea, and air are broadcast before our eyes, on our phones, in real time. We watch in horror. Entire families die in their beds under Israel’s bombs. Apartment blocks, schools, hospitals, churches and mosques, markets are leveled. Relief and food convoys are denied entry at the Egypt border.

Mass starvation is rampant. On February 29, Gazans in the north rushed to grab bags of flour from rare relief. Israeli soldiers responded with a massacre of starving civilians seeking food; at least 100 died. Lethal infections and diarrhea, lack of clean water and medicines will kill thousands more in the coming weeks and months. The UN representatives on the ground, no strangers to tragedy, call this “the worst humanitarian crisis that they have ever seen.” We conclude it is nothing less than an attempt to wipe Palestinian history, tradition, and culture from human memory, the very definition of genocide.

We are a delegation of 23 American Christians, pastors and lay people, activists all, some who have been to Palestine and Israel often, a few who have lived and worked in the region, and a few who are visiting for the first time. We have been urgently called by our Palestinian sisters and brothers to bear witness to this abomination and return to the US with their message. To put our visit into context, the “Flour Massacre,” as it is now called, was taking place in Gaza less than 50 miles from where we sat listening to Sam Bahour.

Let us be clear: it is our faith, our shared faith, our shared humanity, that compelled us to be here, in the land where our faith was born. But it is also as US citizens that we’ve come, knowing that US tax dollars, **our** tax dollars, are funding this crisis. Our government, the administration and Congress, bipartisan, supports these war crimes.

We met with Palestinian leaders – clergy, laypeople, civil rights lawyers, NGO leaders, and the director of UNRWA. We asked each one to share what they would say to policy makers in Washington DC, to our churches, to our communities in the US.

- The Palestinians with whom we spoke fervently believe in nonviolent resistance. They say, “Hear our voices.”
- They feel abandoned, forsaken by the world, to face the genocide of their people alone. Our visit and solidarity comfort them and gives them courage to carry on.
- The genocide in Gaza is now in its fifth month, and the world has done nothing to stop it. Palestinians are incredulous. There is palpable anger, righteous anger, even from clergy, from activists devoted to non-violence. They want no more high and mighty lectures from the West about values, democracy, equality, and human rights. The sheer tonnage of US hypocrisy is epic in its scale in the bombs paid for by the US that Israel drops on Gaza.
- **We call for a cease fire now, including hostages held by Hamas and political prisoners held by Israel.** No mincing words. No equivocation. NOW!
- We heard again and again that while our eyes are fixed on Gaza – and rightly so – there is a “slow massacre,” a “slow genocide” taking place in the West Bank. **While there is genocide in Gaza, ethnic cleansing is exponentially increasing in the West Bank** “under the radar.”

- **End the occupation of Palestine by Israel. Stop illegal settlements.** The West Bank is not Samaria and Judea. It is Palestinian territory and Palestinians cannot continue to exist as stateless people without human rights.
- Children as young as 5 years old are arrested, abused, tortured, and held in prisons without trial for months or years. Night raids into Palestinian homes occur every night. They are tried in military, not civil, courts. Confessions are extracted by torture.
- There are 700+ checkpoints in the West Bank, an area roughly the size of Delaware, Joe Biden's home state. Restricting freedom of movement is a tool of torment to make daily life unbearable for Palestinians. IDF teenagers with machine guns man these checkpoints and kill Palestinians with impunity.
- Home demolitions have increased. We visited a man whose home was demolished two weeks earlier. His crime: he was a spokesman for Palestinians in Silwan, a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem. We sat under a tarp in his yard amidst the rubble. Israel is ethnically cleansing, stealing, and Judaizing his neighborhood, Silwan, on the hills below Jerusalem. The large Silwan neighborhood has been zoned for demolition by the Israeli government to expand an archeological site and create a theme park. The home demolitions would displace hundreds of people from their homes. Israel uses home demolitions as a potent weapon used for ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. **We call for an end to Israel's policy of house demolitions of Palestinian homes.**
- The knee-jerk reaction by the Biden administration to cut off funding for UNRWA (based on unfounded Israeli allegations against a few employees out of thousands) was unjustified. **We call for the full restoration - and increase - of UNRWA funding immediately.** UNRWA is the only organization that can deliver mass human services to Gaza. The UNRWA West Bank Director told us the agency cannot continue unless donations are restored. To withhold food and relief from starving people is a war crime. It comes as no surprise that the accusations against UNRWA employees were levied just two days after the International Court of Justice announced its findings that Israel is credibly guilty of genocide, the crime of all crimes.
- This is a US war; the weapons are US made. The money is US money. The shameful United Nations veto against a cease fire is US policy. We say it again loudly and clearly: **This is a US war!**
- The US selectively applies international law. Compare the US response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the US response to Israel's open genocide in Gaza and its takeover and oppression in the West Bank. The world is watching. We continually heard the words applied to the United States - "hypocrisy," "double standard."
- The nations supporting a ceasefire, who continue their support of Palestine, the South Africa ICJ case - the Global South understands and is making their voices heard. **The people of the Global South see the hypocrisy.**
- The West's response is profoundly racist. Again, compare the response to Ukraine, a predominantly white Christian country, to the response to Palestine, a predominantly Arab Muslim country. The world is watching. **The people of the Global South see the injustice.**
- They - and we - say to our churches: Both those who unconditionally support Israel as well as those who are silent, not wanting to offend, **"You are complicit in Israel's genocide of Gaza!"** Following Jesus, listening to Jesus' Gospel message, loving your neighbor, even your enemy - that is our call. It is morally derelict that some Christians insist on undying loyalty to Israel. Scripture is not to be manipulated to crush one of God's peoples for the gain of another. We heard from many about the scourge of Christian Zionism. It is equally sickening to be silent in the face of evil.
- Nonviolent resistance can only succeed if people of good conscience take bold and decisive action in support of the cause. The Palestinian people cry out, "Hear our call. Take up our cross with us."

How many Palestinians beyond the 30,000 must be murdered, plus 8,000 estimated dead under the rubble, for Israel to be satiated? For the US to decry the killings? For the world to intervene and say, "No"?

We say it again: **This is a US war.** We are party to genocide. We give Israel a free pass. Israel continues to violate international law with impunity. The slaughter could not happen without the backing of the US government. Our tax dollars provide billions in aid to Israel, weapons, and full cover for Israel's crimes. The fighter jets, bombs, tanks, chemical weapons are US made. The US vetoes UN cease fire resolutions.

The US believes it is in its geopolitical interest to protect Israel, believing Israel is key to the strategic military, economic, and political interests of the US. On the contrary, as Israel's genocide in Gaza and ethnic cleansing inside Palestine continue, Israel and the US are less safe, they are pariahs on the world stage, with other countries looking to China and Russia for support. The US is a shield and bank for Israel to commit war crimes. Our adversaries are watching and exploiting our moral failing to perpetuate their own.

We heard various political solutions offered, but all agree that Zionism - and support by the US government and Christian Zionists in the West - is the problem. **The racist, settler colonial project that is Zionism must be rejected out of hand, dismantled, and a system of government based on equity, human dignity, and full civil, political, and human rights created.** Zionism makes Jews around the world less safe and contributes to antisemitism. If the US wants to be Israel's friend, it must realize that this genocidal action fosters even more acts of antisemitism and disgust for the US. It is in no one's interest, no one's.

**We call on the United States to follow international law, including support for the recent ICJ ruling declaring a "plausible case" for Israel's genocide in Gaza. Palestinians no longer want to hear Western and US platitudes about democratic values and equal rights. The words are a lie.** The US needs to apply the values that it espouses equally - democracy, human rights, equality, and equity. Put up or shut up.

Each of the speakers with whom we met were activist leaders committed to non-violence. Each refuses to hate; they acknowledge that Palestinians over the years have compromised for peace. The response has been more illegal settlements (major towns, illegal outposts with populations in the tens of thousands) in the West Bank, more checkpoints, more restrictions of movement, more killings, more children imprisoned.

No form of resistance is allowed, none. Violent resistance leaves no one safe and leads to more violence. Israel and US decry violence but at the same time actively suppress nonviolent resistance and muzzle nonviolent activists. One nonviolent speaker told us that he was arrested on October 7 and tortured. When released, the IDF ordered him to leave his home for *his own* security. When he refused, the IDF forcibly removed him. They wanted him to leave to steal his property for a military outpost.

The world condemns Hamas. But years of non-violent resistance, including BDS, is - and has been - rejected out of hand. Hypocrisy. Double standards. That same activist said, **"Violence is condemned. Non-violent resistance, BDS, and others are rejected. This shows what they really want. They want us gone."**

### **In conclusion:**

Zionism is a force of destruction. Vicious and hateful "settlers" do the dirty work for the state, with impunity and protection of the IDF, the police, and the courts. The settlers are armed with automatic weapons and present bold menace in the streets. Their assaults on Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank go unpunished. We encountered a party of settlers, parading through the streets of Hebron while the IDF protected them, their machine guns cocked and pointed at us, a group of Americans as they hustled us out of the way. Many of these violent, extremist, fascist settlers are now leaders in the Israeli cabinet.

Last week a US Air Force serviceman immolated himself in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington DC. His act of self-sacrifice reverberated across the globe. Every day Palestinians mentioned him, they said they will remember him long after he has become just the answer to a trivia question in the west.

His name. **Aaron Bushnell.** We conclude with his words:

"Many of us like to ask ourselves, 'What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?' The answer is, You are doing it now. Right now.

"I will no longer be complicit in genocide. I'm about to engage in an extreme act of protest, but compared to what people are experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers, it's not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal. Free Palestine."

And we, too, say "Free Palestine!"