

OUTLOOK REPORTING**Between anguish and resilience: Reflections from Bethlehem**

As we mark one year since the Israel-Hamas war began, Teri McDowell Ott checks in with Bethlehem-based mission co-worker Doug Dicks.

BY **TERI MCDOWELL OTT & DOUG DICKS**

PUBLISHED: OCTOBER 3, 2024



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Photo by Cole Keister on Unsplash

[Read Teri's conversation with Doug in October 2023.](#)

**Teri:** [We spoke a year ago](#), right after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, not far from where you live. At that time, you described the situation on the ground in Israel: a long line of cars at the gas station, worry about Bethlehem's food supply being interrupted. You also described the mood as quiet, with both Palestinians and Israelis in shock.

**What is life like for you today?**

Doug: It was in Bethlehem – which is in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian Territories, or Palestine – where I saw the line of cars at the gas station. Not in Israel. Palestinians suspected, and they were right, that Israel would respond swiftly and harshly to Hamas's deadly attack on October 7. Little did they know it would last well into a year — and perhaps beyond!

Fortunately, the Bethlehem area has not experienced the violence demonstrated in other parts of the West Bank. At least, up until now... That doesn't mean that Israeli soldiers have not been inside the city. Their operations have, thus far, been in the refugee camps in the Bethlehem area, of which there are three. However, this past week, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) partner Dar al-Kalima University experienced some damage to its property. Israeli soldiers passing by on foot opened fire at the building, destroying three security cameras and damaging a large, plate-glass window on the new hospitality/restaurant center.

Israeli settler violence in the West Bank has spiked since October 7. Entire Bedouin communities have been forced off their lands, many at gunpoint, by these radical settlers who are supported, directly and indirectly, by the Israeli army. There is a sense that the final battle for the West Bank has begun.



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The Israeli army only recently acknowledged the warning of Israel's *Shin Bet* (equivalent to the FBI) that "Jewish Terrorism" in the West Bank is on the rise. This is exactly what *Shin Bet* and the Israeli army called these aggressive actions.



A destroyed Gaza Strip. Image by hosny salah from Pixabay.

As for the mood and the situation today, people are still in shock that this war has gone on for so long, that so many Palestinians have been killed with U.S.-supplied bombs and weapons. The death toll in Gaza today is well over 41,000, 70% of whom the Palestinian Health Ministry estimates to be women and children. In other words, massive numbers of non-combatants are being killed. Gaza is witnessing an unprecedented number of children amputees. In September, Palestinian health authorities and the United Nations initiated a vaccination program to counteract the outbreak of polio in the Gaza Strip.

Both Israelis and Palestinians are traumatized by the events of the past year. For the most part, [Israelis don't want to know what is happening in Gaza](#). They just want Hamas to be crushed so that another October 7 will not happen again.

Palestinians feel that the world treats them as less than human. The events of the past year attest to this fact. What the Palestinian population of Gaza has endured should not be permitted. Yet, the world has stood by and let it happen. Palestinians, and people of conscience, are shocked and horrified that Israel has been allowed to pummel this small strip of land into the ground, denying food, water and medical supplies to a population of 2.1 million people. With rare exceptions for limited, controlled military tours, no foreign journalists have been allowed into Gaza. The administration of President Joe Biden has, by and large, supplied and equipped Israel with the money and the military hardware to cause death and destruction. This is reprehensible, to say the least.

**Teri: As the beginning of this conflict unfolded a year ago, you were worried about the people taken hostage by Hamas, the 2.1 million people in Gaza seeking shelter from Israel's bombs, the damage to relationships between Arabs and Jews that you've seen form over the years, and the threat of this war broadening. Clearly, these are still concerns. Do you have new, or deepened concerns now, 12 months later?**

Doug: As for the conflict broadening, that has already happened and continues to happen. Israel is fighting a war with Hezbollah on the northern front, and there are daily reports of rockets and drones hitting the northern part of Israel from South Lebanon. Much of the north has been scorched and burned by these missiles and drones. More than 60 thousand Israelis have been displaced from northern cities and towns. Iran has launched two attempts at sending missiles, rockets and drones towards Israel — the first back in April and the latest just recently, in August.





A message from the Israeli hostages' families in March 2024. Photo by Doug Dicks.

Of course, I worry about the Israeli hostages in Gaza. I cannot imagine the anguish that their families have endured and continue to endure. Weekly protests are held in Tel Aviv and other cities, calling on the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to make a deal with Hamas, to bring the hostages home alive, and to end Israel's war on Gaza.

I also worry about the Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, the horrific conditions under which they are being held, and the torture and rape they are subjected to, all of which have been well documented. Many Palestinians are being held in Israeli prisons without any due process of law, under what is called "administrative detention." This usually lasts for six months, and at the end of the six months, can be overturned for an additional six months. Today, the number of Palestinians in Israeli prisons is [over 9,000](#).

Likewise, the increase in Israeli settler violence throughout the West Bank is worrying. Oftentimes, [the Israeli army either participates in, or stands idly by and allows the violence against Palestinians to occur](#). (See also: ["State-backed deadly rampage by Israeli settlers underscores urgent need to dismantle apartheid."](#))

Every time a Palestinian is killed, we are told by the Israeli army and media that they are a "terrorist." [Israel has gotten by with this rhetoric for decades](#). But the real terror is the fear, harm and destruction that the Israeli army – and now well-armed Israeli settlers – are inflicting on the civilian population of the West Bank.

We know the names and we see the faces of the Israeli hostages on posters throughout the country. Palestinians, on the other hand, are simply treated as numbers. Yet, they also have names, families, hopes, dreams and ambitions. They, too, want to live with freedom and dignity.

There are roughly 7.2 million Palestinian Arabs and 7.2 million Israeli Jews living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea — a parcel of land roughly the size of New Jersey. This is the land Christians, as well as our Jewish and Arab siblings, consider holy. If Palestinians and Jewish people cannot co-exist, what will the future hold for this sacred place?

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**Teri: As you've followed the news coverage of this tragic conflict, what do you think has been missing? Or what has not been emphasized that you would think ought to be emphasized?**

Doug: What has been missing, by and large, is first-hand coverage from Gaza. For years, Israel has enacted a policy of "collective punishment" against the Palestinian people. Collective punishment is a sanction or punishment imposed on a group or community for an act that a member of that group is accused of committing. It is prohibited by the Geneva Convention and international laws of war to "minimize harm to civilians and

civilian structures, as Human Rights Watch puts it. Israel denies this accusation, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. ([See, for instance, this article by Human Rights Watch.](#))



A banner on the side of Israel's Ofer Prison reads, "United We Will Succeed." Photo by Doug Dicks.

Since the start of the war, no international journalists have been allowed in Gaza outside of rare military tours. More than 100 journalists and media workers, the vast majority Palestinian, were killed in the first seven months of war in Gaza, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). The CPJ has determined that at least five of these deaths were the direct result of targeted attacks the organization classifies as murders.

As reported by Al Jazeera, Gaza's media office has the number at more than 140 killed, which averages to five journalists killed every week since October 7.

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In May of this past year, Al Jazeera's offices in East Jerusalem were raided, and they were forced to relocate to Amman, Jordan, to continue broadcasting news. The Israeli government has since voted to continue to disallow them from working and broadcasting from Jerusalem. They maintain an office in Ramallah, Palestine, just north of Jerusalem. However, that office was raided late in September, and they have been forced to shut down for 45 days by the Israeli government, which accused them of inciting and supporting terrorism. The real reason is clear: Israel does not want Palestinians' narrative of immense suffering to be broadcast or shared with the outside world. See: ["Israel closes Al Jazeera bureau in Ramallah: All you need to know"](#)

In addition, there has never been an official Commission of Inquiry by the State of Israel into the events of October 7, 2023. This is important to note because if there is no official Commission of Inquiry, the questions as to *why* October 7 happened are not being answered, those responsible for lapses in security are not being held accountable, and the current prime minister, who has been charged with fraud, bribery and breach of trust in three cases filed in 2019, continues to stay in power.

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Following the events of October 7, Itamar Ben-Gvir, a far-right politician and Minister of National Security of Israel bragged about having handed out 100,000 gun permits to the Israeli public. Today, it is common to see Israelis walking the streets of Israel's cities with assault rifles slung over their shoulders.



In July, it was revealed by the Israeli daily newspaper Ha'aretz (The Land) that Israel invoked what is known as “the Hannibal Directive” or “The Hannibal Protocol.” It allows the Israeli military to use any force necessary to prevent Israeli soldiers from being captured and taken into enemy territory, including killing captive Israeli soldiers. Ha'aretz reported that the directive was enacted on October 7, 2023, and that the lives of Israelis – soldiers and civilians alike – were sacrificed so they would not be taken captive. It is unknown how many Israelis were killed by their own people in this manner. The Israeli army has stated publicly that it is conducting internal investigations of what transpired on October 7 and will share the results with the public.

The tragedy of October 7 didn't occur in a vacuum. The history between Israel and Palestine does not justify the terror of October 7, but it does explain where such anger, violence, hatred and killing came from. The leaders of Israel speak about their right to defend themselves. People under occupation or repression also have that right. You can only oppress a people for so long, before they rise up. British journalist Jonathan Cook used to be based in Nazareth and wrote a very telling article about the events of October 7. This is his opinion, but it is based in fact, and I believe much of what he said is true. You can read it here at: [Israeli torture chambers aren't new. They are what provoked the violence of Oct 7 \(jonathan-cook.net\)](https://jonathan-cook.net/).

Right-wing Israelis are [poised to “re-settle” Gaza](#) at the end of the war. What do they propose happens to the Palestinians who live there? This is disturbing, and the world should never allow this to happen.



Walking in Jerusalem, the prevalence of semi automatic weapons is everywhere. Photo by Doug Dicks.

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The U.S., Canada and other nations have begun to sanction Israeli settlers who have been engaged in violence against Palestinians. It's not enough, but it's a start. We need to continue to be educated about the ills of settler-colonialism, and all that that entails.

Gaza has been completely ruined. It will take years, perhaps decades, to clean up, repair and re-build. The trauma of the people living there cannot be underestimated. They feel forgotten, neglected and abandoned by the entire world. I believe what has taken place in Gaza, and what was allowed to take place, will be a dark stain on all of us.

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**Teri: Serving as a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) mission co-worker for 25 years, you said you've always felt supported by the church. Can you give us some examples of support you've received, or our partners in Israel / Palestine have received, that was especially meaningful or helpful?**

Doug: I am grateful the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has allowed me to stay here and to continue to do my work during what can only be described as a very difficult situation. I know that my colleagues are concerned about my well-being, but I am also thankful that they trust my judgment.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) was quick to spring into action and initiate solidarity grants to many of our partners, such as the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza and the Near East Council of Churches Committee for Refugee Work (NECCCRW). Likewise, we have provided psycho-social counseling to many of the young people in the Palestinian territories, such as Dar al-Kalima University and Al-Harah (“The Neighborhood”) Theatre. We have also reached out to several Israeli partners, such as Sindyanna of Galilee, a cooperative of Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Jewish women





“Bring them home now” — A message scrawled all over Jerusalem and other cities throughout Israel. Photo by Doug Dicks.

that produces award-winning olive oil and that host visitors to their center in Kufr Kana (Cana of Galilee); HaMoked (“Hotline”), an Israeli organization that provides free legal aid to Palestinians living under occupation and conducts strategic litigation and advocacy against Israel’s violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, who recently released a new report entitled “Welcome to Hell,” detailing prison conditions for Palestinians being held in Israeli jails. You can read the full report, [“Welcome to Hell: The Israeli Prison System as a Network of Torture Camps.”](#)

Likewise, and beginning last year, PDA provided grants to some of our partner churches to provide direct cash assistance and/or food baskets to families during the Christmas season, when celebrations were muted and when the economic downturn in tourism to the Bethlehem region greatly impacted the people’s ability to provide for their families.

We have tried to alleviate suffering, understand the trauma, share anguish, and provide a small window of hope in a very dark and tragic situation.

In addition to the good work of PDA, the Church of Scotland, under whose umbrella I serve, opened their hotel, The Scots Hotel, Tiberias, to Israeli families that were evacuated from communities near to the Lebanese border, providing a sanctuary and three meals a day.

In short, we have tried to alleviate suffering, understand the trauma, share anguish, and provide a small window of hope in a very dark and tragic situation.



The Al-Hassaina Mosque along Gaza’s seashore in 2019. It was destroyed by an Israeli bombing in November 2023. Photo by Doug Dicks.

The message of the church – really, of all people of conscience – needs to be clear. We care about both peoples — Israelis and Palestinians alike. At the same time, we must speak up and speak out when wrongs are being done and harm committed.

This is not a religious conflict. Nor is it a conflict that has been ongoing for thousands of years. It is a conflict over land.

Religious extremism needs to be named and needs to be confronted and rooted out. Likewise, the phenomenon known as Christian Zionism needs to be challenged. Christ will come in his own good time. No human actions will change that. In the meantime, we have work to do that might somehow usher in a foretaste of God's kingdom on earth. The dictates were given to us long ago, and are clear: "Love your enemy, do good to those that hate you; feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, welcome the stranger" (See Luke 6:27; Matthew 25:37-40).



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Lastly, we need our actions and our statements and our solidarity to lead to a just and peaceful resolution to this decades-long conflict. We have heard enough empty words and platitudes to last well into the future.

Arabs and Jews have historically not been enemies of one another. Christians need to find ways where we can be of help and encourage efforts toward peace, justice and reconciliation if it is still possible. I believe it is. Perhaps not in my lifetime, but for the sake of those affected, we must make every effort to do so. To do anything less would only leave both peoples with a future full of despair, hopelessness, instability and uncertainty.



### **TERI MCDOWELL OTT**

Teri McDowell Ott is the editor and publisher of *Presbyterian Outlook*.



### **DOUG DICKS**

Doug Dicks has served as a mission co-worker and Regional Liaison to Israel, Palestine and Jordan on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for 25 years.

His home presbytery is Shenandoah Presbytery, and his home congregation is Buckton Presbyterian Church, near Front Royal, Virginia.

He still believes in peace between Israelis and Palestinians.