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**Church of Scotland Delegation into Gaza
June 2018
Joint Report by
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(St Andrews Jerusalem & Tiberias)**

Without justice and love, peace will always be a great illusion.
(Archbishop Helder Camara)

*Even the city carries ruins in its heart, Longs to be touched in places
Only it remembers*
(Anne Michaels, Phantom Limbs)



In 2015 a United Nations report warned that Gaza could become 'uninhabitable' in five years.¹ Three years later, the situation is much worse. With 97% of the water not fit for human consumption, around 60% unemployment rate amongst the youth (rising to 65% for female graduates), and (according to UNRWA) with 80 % of its population relying on food aid, the situation is deteriorating by the day.

Gaza is approximately the same size as the Isle of Jura. Whereas Jura has a population of around 200, Gaza's population is just over 2M, which according to a BBC report is one of the youngest populations in the world.² This young generation, who have no responsibility for the conditions which they are having to survive on a daily basis, are having to endure the triple hardship of the Israeli blockade, a Hamas government and the Palestinian Authority based in Ramallah who have frozen salaries and halted provisions coming into Gaza after the attempts to reconcile Fatah with Hamas failed.

You don't need to visit Gaza to sense the desperation felt by those who are living there. Over the last few months the international media has covered 'The Great March of Return' demonstrations at the military border/fence that separates Gaza from Israel. According to the Middle East Monitor, at the time of writing this report 123 Palestinians have died as a consequence of live fire on the part of the Israeli Defence Force, and it is estimated that those wounded exceeds 14,000.³ The rising number of casualties is a sickening barometer of the despair felt by the population of Gaza

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that they are ready to lose their lives at the security fence at the hands of the IDF who have used live fire against the crowds, many of whom were protesting far back from the fence.

- ¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/gaza-becoming-uninhabitable-as-society-can-no-longer-support-itself-report>
- ² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/gaza-becoming-uninhabitable-as-society-can-no-longer-support-itself-report>
- ³ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180605-123rd-victim-of-israels-attack-to-unarmed-palestinian-demonstrators/>



Gaza also has a beautiful coastline, which is undeveloped and yet would be a thriving coastal resort if the blockade were lifted and there was a political settlement for its long-suffering people. Both Gazans and Israelis we've spoken with recall times when this was once the case and Gaza's beaches were as vibrant and diverse as those in Tel Aviv and Haifa. One of the cruel ironies now is that the people of Gaza cannot swim in the sea, because it is so heavily polluted. With only 3 hours of electricity a day, and limited construction materials allowed in, Gaza cannot operate its sewage plants, so raw sewage is released into the ocean. In the searing summer heat, you see Gaza's children playing on the hot sand, but unable to cool down in the Mediterranean.



In June 2018 a delegation from the Church of Scotland visited Gaza to meet with some of our partners. We support a number of organisations run by both Christians and Muslims. The Christian community is a tiny minority in Gaza, roughly 1,000 people, and yet provides vital services for the whole community, and so we would like to highlight the work of two of the Christian organisations we support. In addition, we are including links to other organisations and will focus on their work in future reports. We hope that by so doing, you will be able to pray for them and draw attention to what they are doing in difficult circumstances.



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Below we highlight a brief snapshot of a few of them, and list our other partners in Gaza at the end of the report

Al Ahli Hospital

The Al Ahli hospital is run by the Anglican Church, and it is inspiring to see the high level of care they provide in such a challenging context.

Their Vision Statement is:



To continue providing the finest medical care possible under the most adverse circumstances to the marginalised and vulnerable poor people whose livelihood are threatened by the effect of human-made disaster, with special attention to the refugee and the poorest of the poor. The hospital is committed to building people's capacity and competence alongside the development and maintenance of an adequate standard of diagnostic and clinical services.

We were privileged to meet with Dr Suhaila Tarazi, the hospital director, who gave us a picture of the challenges facing the medical community in Gaza. Due to restrictions by the Palestinian Authority, 43% of basic medicines are now at zero stock. As a result, patients are often sent home without antibiotics or painkillers, and risk of infection is high. Facilities for cancer diagnosis and initial operations are available, but further treatment in Gaza is not possible due to the extreme shortage of drugs. And, of course, the lack of electricity is an extreme drain on the hospital's resources. Two donated solar panels ensure the emergency room and operating theatre have necessary electrical supplies, but the other departments rely on expensive generators.

When asked what message she would like to give to Christians back in Scotland, Dr Tarazi said, 'We are part of a mosaic picture - whether Christians, or Muslims, or Jews - and we have to keep this hospital as a witness of Christianity working in Gaza ... we are small instruments to do God's work. We don't want to be beggars. We want to live in peace and dignity as fellow members of the Body of Christ. There is a duty of all the churches all over the world, if they want to keep Christianity alive in their countries, they have to pray for our churches here and our people here. I'll never lose hope. Politics always destructs things. Religion, especially Christianity, builds hope, builds people, builds future. And there is a duty upon all churches to help one another. We are all one body of one Lord, Jesus Christ'.

More information can be found on their website:

<http://j-diocese.org/index.php?page=129666024424&sub=129698368736>

Near East Council of Churches

The Near East Council of Churches organises the Church of Scotland delegations into Gaza, and their mission statement summarises the work they do:

The NECC is a Palestinian ecumenical church-related organisation aims at strengthening and

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empowerment of the Palestinian community in the Gaza Strip by providing educational and health services and contingency assistance regardless of faith, colour, gender, political affiliation or geographical locality.



The Near East Council of Churches runs three primary health clinics across Gaza. These health centres provide vital primary care to families living in refugee camps, where anaemia and malnutrition are common amongst the children. Funded by organisations such as Embrace the Middle East, UNICEF, and Act Alliance, they offer dental care, pre- and ante-natal monitoring, family planning, well-baby clinics, psychosocial support, and general primary care medicine. Because of the funding they receive, the NECC clinics have a policy of keeping a 6-month stock of basic medical supplies and therefore find themselves providing support that the government hospitals cannot. This has been an invaluable service to those wounded in the Great March of Return.

Dr Issa Tarazi, Director of the NECC, shared his views about the current situation: 'The crisis in Gaza is both humanitarian and political. But it is like a patient with appendicitis. Dealing with the humanitarian need is like giving the patient painkillers. It may ease the pain, but the appendix will eventually burst. Only a political solution can bring a cure to Gaza.'

More information can be found on their website:
<http://neccgaza.org/Page.aspx?id=NECC>

Conclusion

One cannot come away from Gaza unaffected by the conditions of despair and privation the people of Gaza are having to endure and the increasing intractability of a situation where three de facto authorities control nearly every aspect of the lives of all who live there. The ethos and ideology of Hamas is reproachable, and does not represent the views of the majority of Gazans. However, in not differentiating between the civilians and the Hamas leaders, the right-wing Israeli media and politicians are able to justify frequent 'retaliatory' airstrikes in response to rockets fired by groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad from populated places within Gaza (and more recently, incendiary kites launched from its border).. When air raids and the shelling from tanks hit a place as densely populated as Gaza, the vast majority of casualties will be civilian. The military blockade and collective punishment of the young population of Gaza will only serve to fuel more acts of desperation on the part of Gazans who have no future, no hopes, and no dreams that anything will ever happen for the better.

The Church of Scotland here in Israel and Palestine will continue to stand in solidarity with the people of Gaza, and to do all we can to support and encourage our partners on the ground who seek to bring hope and healing despite the daily challenges they face.

Kate McDonald & John McCulloch

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SOME OF THE OTHER CHURCH OF SCOTLAND'S PARTNERS IN GAZA:

Catholic Church

Below is an interview with Father Mario, on what life as a priest in Gaza city is like:
<http://en.lpj.org/2015/10/14/to-be-christian-in-gaza-interview-with-fr-mario-da-silva/>

We were struck by Father Mario's joy in the face of so much daily struggles, and for the love and devotion he has for his flock and the wider community around him.



Greek Orthodox Church

Bishop Alexius of the Greek Orthodox Church is a living testimony of joy and endurance in a context marked by real fear and threat. Below is an article relating how back in 2014 Muslims took refuge in the Greek Orthodox church of Saint Porphyrius.

<http://myocn.net/gaza-refugees-find-shelter-greek-orthodox-church/>

YMCA Gaza
ymcagaza.org/

Palestinian Centre for Human Rights
<http://pchrgaza.org/en/>

Atfaluna Society
<http://www.atfaluna.net/en/>

*There are various **women's centres** we have supported in the past, and we will provide more specific information on this after our next visit.*