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Searching for Peace in the Holy Land

By Bridget Moix



CMEP Leaders at Mount of Olives



Hassan and Bridget at Church of the Holy Sepulchre

As our plane descended into Tel Aviv on Jan. 11, a small rainbow arced over the Holy Land. I had come looking for signs of hope amid a time of devastating violence and suffering in Israel and occupied Palestinian territory. This small sign of God's promise encouraged me for the work ahead.

I was in the Middle East with Hassan El-Tayyab, FCNL's legislative director for Middle East policy, and eight other faith leaders as part of a peace delegation organized by Churches for Middle East Peace.

The trip was planned well before the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas and Israel's subsequent bombing campaign and the war in Gaza.

But once the Israel-Hamas war began in earnest, it became even more pressing to join faith colleagues in what became a peace mission. It was also an opportunity to listen to and learn from communities directly affected by the violence.

We traveled to Israel, the occupied territories, Jordan, and, Lebanon, meeting with a wide range of religious, political, and civil society leaders. We spent two weeks crisscrossing checkpoints and border controls as the war raged and violence escalated around us.

We met with ambassadors, prime ministers, royalty, religious patriarchs, local faith leaders, human rights defenders, humanitarian aid workers, students, and peacebuilders.

At each stop, we shared our calls for a ceasefire, protecting civilians and returning hostages, and we pointed to the need to address the root causes of the violence, including the military occupation and blockade of Gaza.

As we traveled, tensions continued to spiral well beyond Gaza. At the Ramallah Friends School in the West Bank, we heard the nightly gunfire and military flyovers that have become standard since October. We heard firsthand accounts of weapons being distributed to settlers, extrajudicial killings, detentions, and torture. Before we arrived at our last planned stop in Irbil, Iraq, attacks near the U.S. Consulate killed civilians, causing us to cancel this part of our trip.

The reality of the threats facing Palestinians, Israelis, the region, and the world became more evident each day. Gaza is the epicenter, but a broader war was unfolding all around us. As children at the Ramallah Friends School asked: Why is the United States sending bombs to kill us?

I am a Quaker and a peace advocate. We have a long history of seeking a just peace in the Middle East. But I am also an American citizen, and my government's complicity in this war and mass killing is unavoidable. I learned so much from my recent trip, but this is what Congress, and the American people need to know.

The war is already rapidly expanding. De-escalation and diplomacy are needed across the region. As one political official explained it, "If the West Bank explodes, the war will enter a whole other level."

This must be avoided. A comprehensive, permanent ceasefire is needed now. The only way to save both Gazans and the hostages, both Palestinians and Israelis, both the Holy Land and our common humanity, is with a ceasefire.

Focusing on diplomacy will be incredibly difficult in the aftermath of the attack on an American outpost in Jordan. But the United States must exercise restraint, choosing diplomacy over war. Humanitarian aid must be funded and allowed into Gaza.

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FCNL's Bridget Moix (third from left) and Hassan El-Tayyab (second from right) joined other faith leaders to visit the West Bank, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. They met with many faith and political leaders, including Mohammad Shtayyeh (center), prime minister of the Palestinian Authority.

Grassroots Pressure to End the War in Gaza Grows

By Odeliya Matter

Photo by DAGFoto/FCNL

As the war in Gaza enters its sixth month, grassroots advocacy for a ceasefire continues to grow stronger. Each single lobby visit, each letter to Congress, each phone call to Capitol Hill, and each letter to the editor is adding pressure to end this catastrophic violence. In the process, it is also helping to save lives.



Early in the war, U.S. officials called efforts to press for a ceasefire “repugnant” and “disgraceful” as they doubled down on unconditional support for Israel’s indiscriminate military campaign.

But the tone of the conversation in Washington, D.C., has significantly changed since then due to both the worsening humanitarian disaster and the outpouring of grassroots pressure.

Now, nearly 80 members of Congress have called for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Responding to mounting Congressional pressure, Vice President Kamala Harris recently called for an immediate six-week ceasefire. President Joe Biden said that an Israeli ground offensive in Rafah, where 1.4 million people have sought refuge, could result in restrictions on U.S. military aid to Israel.

FCNL’s grassroots advocates around the United States have made an enormous contribution to this momentum. Together, our network has generated over 625,000 emails to Congressional offices and conducted at least 170 lobby visits.

As Rep. Ro Khanna (CA-17) made clear, our voices are making a tangible difference. “They’re all, I think, very mobilized voices and have had an impact,” Rep. Khanna told the New York Times about the FCNL grassroots advocacy network. “They’ve had constituents reach out to different members of Congress, they’ve organized a lot of demonstrations in districts, they’ve done a lot on social media, they’ve raised a lot of awareness.”

Days after FCNL’s Advocacy Team from Kennett Square, Pennsylvania met with Rep. Chrissy Houlahan’s (PA-6) staff in February, the representative voiced support for a permanent ceasefire for the first time.

FCNL’s grassroots network is also shifting the conversation in the media, publishing at least 72 articles or letters calling for a ceasefire in publications across the country.

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One such article in the LA Times co-authored by longtime FCNL advocate, Jonathan Evans, encapsulates the urgent need for the Biden administration to use its leverage to push for a ceasefire.


"Over the past five decades, American taxpayers have invested more than \$7 billion to finance hundreds of projects in humanitarian relief and development in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, all under the banner of 'peacebuilding.' But the Biden administration is currently providing the weaponry that is killing the very people the government set out to help," Evans and his co-authors write.

Other advocates like Sacramento-based organizer Avinash Tiwari have found creative ways to strengthen grassroots advocacy for a ceasefire. He hosted a soccer tournament and information session for Bhutanese elders. Avinash connected their history to the Gaza conflict while motivating his community to support a ceasefire.

Quakers and friends around the country are proving that putting faith into action can yield big results. We must keep taking action for a permanent ceasefire to protect every civilian, bring all the Israeli hostages and Palestinian political prisoners home, and support lasting peace for everyone in the region.

Each day the Gaza war drags on, the consequence for civilians continue to be devastating. Since October 7, more than 31,000 Palestinians and over 1,476 Israelis have been killed, while 134 hostages remain in captivity in Gaza.

The United Nations continues to warn of unprecedented famine in Gaza if urgent action is not taken to increase humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, the U.S. government has suspended funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the largest humanitarian group in Gaza.

Odeliya Matter is an FCNL lobbyist for Middle East policy. To act, visit fcnl.org/ceasefire. 

Q&A: Children Support a Ceasefire in Gaza

Early this year, Hassan El-Tayyab returned to Ramallah Friends School in the West Bank (pictured left). In talking with students, he asked them if they support a ceasefire in Gaza and their hopes for Palestine. Their interviews were recorded and can be viewed on instagram at [fcnl.org/RFS-Interviews](https://www.instagram.com/fcnl.org/RFS-Interviews).



Mira, Grade 6



"I support the ceasefire because each child must have the right to live in peace and freedom. The ceasefire will preserve the innocent lives of children. Not to mention half of the population in Gaza are children."

Serena, Grade 7



"I support a ceasefire in Gaza because over 70% of the homes there have been bombed, and millions of people have been displaced from their homes in just a span of over 100 days. My hopes and dreams for the future are to see Palestine free and to be able to see all the children reunited with their families."

Jesed, Grade 6



"I support the ceasefire because it's been past a hundred days. People are suffering with no food, water to drink, or any healthcare. It's sad seeing their demolished house and them getting cold because of the weather. So please, I want a ceasefire."

Layla, Grade 6



"Since the war has started, my family has been watching the news nonstop, watching the dead bodies of the children and Gaza citizens. Because of that, I fully support a ceasefire in Gaza. I hope that in the future my family will be able to achieve their goals, and Palestine will have peace and be a free country".

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As it stands, the United States is complicit in this war and the atrocities against civilians, meaning we can also help stop them. The United States provides Israel with more than \$3 billion annually in military aid, and the administration has sent additional weapons without congressional approval since Oct. 7.

These numbers are not trivial, nor are the lives they are costing. Our government must be held accountable and do more to help prevent atrocities and potential genocide.

A viable, irreversible path to justice, dignity, and peace for both Palestinians and Israelis is needed.

It will take new approaches to leadership on both sides. But there are people now working in good faith, and their vision for a just and peaceful future together must be given space. The United States and the broader international community must hold the rights of both Palestinians and Israelis equally and support future arrangements that recognize the self-determination of all.

Throughout our trip, we sought to listen deeply, share openly, and speak courageously. People across the region welcomed us with grace, hospitality, and solidarity. We learned more than we could absorb and received gifts of the spirit with every interaction.

We left strengthened to return to our work of advocacy and truth-telling at home, knowing that as Americans we have a responsibility and a role to play in ending this violence and seeking a lasting peace in the Middle East.

Originally published by Religion News Service. Bridget Moix and Hassan El-Tayyab also wrote "Six Lessons from Our Wartime Journey to Israel-Palestine," published by Inkstick Media and available at fcnl.org/sixlessons.



Bassel, Grade 7



"I support a ceasefire because over 30,000 people have been killed in Gaza, and over half of them are children,

maybe my age, younger, or older. Some have dreams, maybe like mine or different from mine, and it's over a hundred days of nonstop bombing. It's just a horrible scene. And my hopes and dreams for the future is that Palestine will be a free country so that all the Palestinians will have the freedom of going wherever they want and feeling like it's their country for good. And that's my hopes and dreams and that's why I call for ceasefire in Gaza."

Luca, Grade 8



"I hope for a ceasefire in Gaza because there are children that are hungry without a home that are just like me and

the other students here at the Ramallah Friends School. They deserve to live in peace with their families and go to school and live safely and healthily. My hopes and dreams for the future are just like the children in Gaza and the children around the world, which are to live safely, happily, freely in our land, and we should grow up to be able to contribute to the world and travel the world if we want to and live in peace with our families."



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Cover Photo: Muslim men take a break from protests for daily prayers in front of the White House. Photo by DAGFoto/FCNL



Advocates Protect Peace Funds

By Ursala
Knudsen-Latta

As the world faces high levels of violence and more active armed conflict than at any point since World War II, FCNL advocates successfully lobbied to protect critical funding for international peacebuilding.

On March 23, Congress passed the FY 2024 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 118-47), a package that includes the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPs) bill. This bill contains three core accounts that support conflict prevention and peacebuilding: the Complex Crises Fund, Atrocities Prevention, and Reconciliation Programs.

Despite a 6% cut to the SFOPs bill, the final agreement protected funding at FY23's level for Atrocities Prevention at \$6 million and Reconciliation Programs at \$25 million and secured over 90% of FY23's level for the Complex Crises Fund at \$55 million.

FCNL advocates were crucial in protecting these funds for which they have been lobbying for more than a year. Leading the way were the over 130 FCNL Advocacy Teams, the only national network of volunteer constituent advocates supporting these three accounts.

They organized 520 lobby visits in 48 states, collectively urging Congress to invest in peace. Participants to the November 2023 Quaker Public Policy Institute organized an additional 130 lobby visits in one day, calling on their members of Congress to invest in peace.

As Congress negotiated the FY 2024 spending package, the advocates worked together to educate them on the cost-effectiveness of peacebuilding. They shared the stories of peacebuilders working around the world in preventing violence and healing communities.

Although FCNL welcomes the FY 2024 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act's peace investments, we are disappointed in many other aspects of this package. These include billions of dollars in military assistance and a nearly 20% cut to the Shelter and Services Program to provide transition shelter, support services, and transportation for asylum seekers and migrants.

The package also grants a whopping \$825 billion to the Pentagon and bans funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency, the largest humanitarian aid program in Gaza.

In the face of deeper proposed cuts to overall foreign assistance programs, FCNL advocates persisted, and Congress eventually decreased it by only 6%.

Ursala Knudsen-Latta is FCNL's legislative director for peacebuilding. 