News



Palestinian supporters rally for Palestinians in Gaza, Friday, Oct. 13, 2023, in Miami. For Palestinian Americans, there's a sense of helplessness and hopelessness as many struggle to hear from their families in Gaza. Amid a fuel and water shortage, no electricity, and now a forced evacuation in the north, administering and sending aid to civilians in Gaza is near impossible. (AP Photo/Marta Lavandier, File)

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When not leading prayers, attending marches or checking on community members, Anwar Arafat, an imam of a large Memphis, Tennessee, mosque, has been glued to his phone. His spare moments are consumed by reading the news and checking WhatsApp for updates from his sprawling Palestinian family in Gaza. So far, none of his family members have been killed. But the situation is only growing more tenuous.

"A lot of families now in Gaza have been dividing themselves up," said Arafat. "I have three uncles that are there. They've divided their kids up among themselves and then they've divided where they're staying, so that if the building is destroyed, the entire family isn't lost."

Since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel and Israel's retaliatory airstrikes on Gaza, the death toll is reported to be at least 1,400 in Israel and 4,300 in Gaza. Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip has left millions of Palestinians without access to basic supplies even as convoys carrying water, food and medical equipment begin to arrive. Tragedies like the destruction of the al-Ahli Hospital and the historic Saint Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church, both in Gaza City, have added to the devastating loss of life.

As the death toll in Gaza continues to climb, Palestinian Americans across the U.S. are holding teach-ins on the history of Palestine, hosting marches, calling representatives, praying and fundraising in the hopes that they can eventually send supplies to Gaza. Many are doing so amid constant fear and grief.

The Palestinian Americans interviewed for this story reported struggling to sleep and eat. Samar Sakakini, who attends an Antiochian Orthodox church near Canton, Michigan, told RNS she'd been hospitalized due to anxiety over the crisis. Terry Ahwal, who is Catholic and lives near Detroit, described the Palestinian communities

near her as experiencing "pure horror and pure terror."

"It's complete and utter devastation," said Hannah Moushabeck, who lives in Massachusetts and is the author of the children's book "Homeland: My Father Dreams of Palestine." "You know, we have experienced tragedy before. We have experienced frustration at our government and governments around the world. But this last week has been utterly horrifying and unprecedented to a completely new level."

Amid the heartbreak, faith communities have been a source of empowerment for many Palestinian Americans. In New Jersey, where roughly 3% of the population is Muslim, mosques across the state have hosted "know your rights" lectures, teach-ins on the Palestinian occupation and prayers specifically for Gaza, according to CAIR-NJ Communications Manager Dina Sayedahmed.

Masjid Al'Nuha in Teaneck, New Jersey, hosted a community healing event on Oct. 12 and a week later hosted a free self-defense class "in light of recent events and heightened hate crimes."

At Arafat's mosque in Memphis, where he estimated roughly 1,000 people attend on an average Friday (including, he said, Christian Palestinians who come for the community), people began collecting funds for Gaza "before we even asked."

"Everybody in the mosque, everybody in our community is affected by this in one way or another," said Arafat. "Either they have relatives there, or extended relatives and friends, or they have the human, spiritual bond to the people." The funds will be donated to large charities like United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the Palestine Children’s Relief Fund, he said.

Arafat added that his mosque has been encouraging people to call their representatives and has been doing extra supplications for those in Gaza.

"For us, our life is our prayer. And our prayer is our life. We have to act upon the prayer," he said.

For Arafat, that meant attending national protests in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 20 along with a small contingent from his mosque. Marching gives Arafat a way to channel the fear he feels for his family in Gaza as their stockpiles of water and fuel dwindle. Each time a family member leaves for the marketplace to replenish

supplies, he told RNS, they say final goodbyes in case they never come back.

"That sense of helplessness, where we can't do anything, gets slightly alleviated when we're able to join others who feel the same way," he observed.

While Arafat was in D.C. on Oct. 20, Walaa Kanan, a social worker and Palestinian American community organizer, was at a public park in Toledo, Ohio, for the latest of several events she has helped coordinate in the last week. A twist on the usual Friday prayer, a local Imam led a jumu'ah sermon and prayer in the park for more than 200 attendees, followed by a protest and march to the office of Marcy Kaptur, the U.S. Representative for Ohio's ninth district, to call for an end to the violence.

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Kanan said she and the other Toledo organizers wanted an event that paired faith and activism. For many Palestinian Americans in the area, the two are inseparable.

"As religious people, we believe in asking God for guidance and strength, all those things, and putting in prayers," she said. "The flip side of that is also doing what you can on the ground, so combining those two very necessary things."

While community solidarity has been a source of hope — Kanan said she has been amazed by the turnout at last-minute events for Gaza — local organizers, many of whom are Palestinian themselves, are feeling the weight of compounded stress. Kanan told RNS she has been waking up nauseous and dizzy each morning.

"You still have to go to work. You have to take your kids to school, you have to do whatever it is you have to do," she said. "So you're trying to go through those motions while also trying to organize, while also trying to educate, while also experiencing grieving. This is not a time to say, 'I'm stressed and I can't.' People in Gaza need us."

That support, Kanan said, is not just symbolic.

"I keep saying this: If enough Americans didn't want genocide to be happening in Gaza it wouldn't be happening. It's happening because we’re funding it."

Biden's recent trip to Israel has heightened the frustration of many American Palestinians who believe the president's support of Israel translates to funding the

killing of civilians in Gaza. From her vantage point, about 25 miles east of the heavily Arab American community of Dearborn, Michigan, Sakakini believes Biden is going to lose significant votes in the 2024 election. She plans to vote for an independent candidate and knows plenty in the Palestinian American community angered by Biden's foreign policy.

Ahwal, who is on the executive committee of the American Federation of Ramallah Palestine, is one of them. She called RNS from a metro in D.C. on Oct. 19 on the way to advocate for peace in a meeting at the White House.

"What I cannot comprehend in my life, is how could we, if we want peace, how could we arm the oppressor? It’s absolutely mind boggling," said Ahwal. "We are very, very sad that Israeli casualties died, because human beings are human beings. We all belong to one human tribe, and for us to use violence is counterproductive." Ahwal said that colonialism is wrong under any circumstances, and bombing people is never the answer. Instead, people of all faiths should be calling for the killing to end.

Arafat, too, acknowledged that "the loss of civilian life in Israel is precious," but called out politicians who frame the loss of civilian life in Gaza as "collateral damage" or a "price to pay in order to weed out terror."

"The double standard is terrible, and we don't stand for it," he said.

At a time when despair seems unavoidable, faith is a reassurance for many American Palestinians who feel unmoored by the magnitude of the crisis in Gaza. Kanan said her Muslim faith is both a source of strength and a grounding for her commitment to justice. And for Arafat, faith provides solace when reason and logic fall short.

"I feel so fortunate to be Muslim. Our faith is a very rich faith," he said. "We are reassured throughout the Quran about the trials and difficulties that we face in this life and the wisdom behind why some of these things might be happening.

I can tell you without a doubt, if we didn't have that spiritual guidance, I think I'd be losing my mind. Truly, truly, my faith has been the rock that we can stand on."