News



Amira Musallam protests during a nonviolent march against illegal settlers' annexation of Palestinian land in Beit Jala, West Bank, to which Israeli authorities responded with the use of force and stun grenades, in August 2024. (Courtesy of Amira Musallam)



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On the night of Nov. 15, 2000, 12-year-old Amira Musallam laid on the floor of her family's home in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, as tanks and helicopters fired into the neighborhood. Bullets tore through the walls. Small rockets struck nearby houses.

"It was from 6 p.m. until the next day," she recalled. "We were under bombing from tanks and helicopters and we couldn't leave the house."

Musallam, her parents and her two sisters had taken shelter in what they believed was the safest corner of the house. It proved not to be. Projectiles began hitting the room where they were hiding. With no ambulance able to reach them and the U.S. embassy declining to intervene, the Palestinian American family made a desperate choice: They crawled along the ground outside toward a neighbor's house positioned slightly downhill.

"Thank God we weren't physically injured or harmed," Musallam said. "But our house was partially bombed."

The attack came early in the Second Intifada and marked a turning point in her life. The childhood she remembers — choir rehearsals at her local Catholic church, scouts meetings and afternoons spent wandering the hills above Bethlehem — ended that night.

More than two decades later, Musallam is still living in the same conflict, now in a leadership role within a small but growing movement that tries to shield civilians from violence without weapons. The environment surrounding that work, however, has grown more volatile as the regional war widens and the situation in the West Bank deteriorates.

In an interview with the National Catholic Reporter, Musallam described her early years as surprisingly normal for a Palestinian child living under occupation.



Iranian missiles fly toward Israel March 16, 2026, amid the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran, as seen from Hebron, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. (OSV News/Reuters/Mussa Qawasma)

Even relations between local Palestinians and Israelis felt less tense than they would later become, she said. As a child, she remembers climbing the nearby hills with her father and encountering Israeli children from the Gilo Israeli settlement above their neighborhood. Israeli shoppers frequently visited Bethlehem as well.

That sense of ordinary life began to unravel in 2000 as violence escalated across the region. Islamist armed militants fired toward nearby settlements; Israeli forces responded with heavy fire into Palestinian residential areas. Catholic families like Musallam's found themselves caught in the middle.

The attack on her home forced the family to flee for months, moving between temporary residences while fighting continued. When they finally returned, they were joined by international volunteers from a group called Women in Black, who

lived with them as a form of "protective presence," hoping their foreign nationality would deter further attacks.

One evening a new volunteer arrived for dinner — an Israeli-American Jewish woman.

"She started crying and kissing me and telling me, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry for what my people are doing to you,' " Musallam recalled.

Related: Unarmed civilians seek to de-escalate violence in West Bank

The encounter changed her perspective on the conflict. Even as a child, she said, she realized that the violence did not define every individual involved.

"I realized that there are good people in this world," she said.

From that point forward, she began participating in dialogue meetings, peacebuilding workshops and activism focused on nonviolence for more than two decades. But the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and the war that followed prompted her to return to activism.

In 2024 she joined a team assessing whether unarmed civilian protection programs — already used in several global conflict zones — could be implemented more systematically in the Palestinian territories. The project eventually became Unarmed Civilian Protection in Palestine (UCPiP), an initiative Musallam helped cofound and now leads as head of mission.

The idea is simple but risky. Volunteers from abroad, along with Israeli and Palestinian activists, accompany vulnerable communities, monitor tensions and document incidents in the hope that international visibility will deter violence.

Musallam said her childhood experience with protective presence influenced her decision to join.



Amira Musallam protests during a nonviolent march against illegal settlers' annexation of Palestinian land in Beit Jala, West Bank, to which Israeli authorities responded with the use of force and stun grenades, in August 2024. (Courtesy of Amira Musallam)

Escalation across the West Bank

The conditions in which the group operates have grown steadily more difficult. Musallam said an expansion of Israeli settlements and rising violence in parts of the West Bank has become a daily, unsustainable emergency.

"Things have been escalating too fast," she said. "You sleep at night and you say you saw the worst the day before, but you wake up to even a worse nightmare."

She says settlement activity has spread uncontrollably in recent months.

"You go from Bethlehem to Jericho, where you used to see one outpost and one settlement," she said. "Now, every 10 meters, you will see a new outpost."

Movement restrictions have also tightened. According to local activists and church officials, hundreds of gates and checkpoints now control access to Palestinian towns and villages.

The wider regional conflict that broke out on Feb. 28 after the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran further intensified the pressure. Iranian retaliation strikes on Israel and attacks by the Shiite armed group Hezbollah from Lebanon have expanded the war beyond the Gaza Strip, creating new security measures throughout Israel and the Palestinian territories.



An Ethiopian Christian woman prays at the locked doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Old City of Jerusalem March 4, 2026, on day five of the U.S.-Israel war with Iran. The church and other religious sites as well as stores were locked shut by order of the Israeli government as Iranian ballistic missiles were fired at Israel. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)

Christian communities are among those affected. Residents of Jerusalem and nearby areas reported constant air raid sirens and the threat of falling debris from intercepted rockets. In one recent incident, shrapnel landed in parts of the Old City near churches and religious institutions, as reported by Aid to the Church in Need, a pontifical foundation that works to protect Christians in conflict and persecution areas.

The conflict has deepened economic hardship in the West Bank. Israeli authorities have closed many border crossings, leaving thousands of Palestinians unable to reach their jobs in Israel. Christian schools in Jerusalem have lost large portions of their teaching staff because many educators live in the West Bank and can no longer travel.

"I try to pretend I'm not afraid in front of the children, but this has been the worst experience of my whole life. We have never faced anything like this," said George Akroush, director of the Development Office of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in a statement.

The conflict has also halted humanitarian shipments to Gaza and complicated church efforts to reopen Christian schools there.

On March 16, Pope Leo XIV received a phone call from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, in which the two discussed the escalating violence affecting the West Bank and Palestinian citizens.

"During the conversation, the Holy Father reaffirmed the Holy See's commitment to achieving peace through political and diplomatic dialogue, as well as through full respect for international law," a Holy See Press Office statement said.



Pope Leo XIV welcomes Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to a meeting in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Nov. 6, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Violence and shrinking attention

Musallam says the shift in global attention toward the wider war has reduced scrutiny on events in the West Bank.

"In the last 10 days, we have had seven Palestinians who were killed in villages in the West Bank, seven shot by settlers," she said. "All the eyes are on Iran and Lebanon … and nobody is paying attention to the West Bank."

Her organization has also seen its workload increase dramatically. Communities once monitored by Unarmed Civilian Protection in Palestine have been displaced, forcing the group to expand operations to multiple areas at once.

One example is Ras Ein el-Auja, a village in the Jordan Valley where the organization previously concentrated its work, and where the local Palestinian community said it

has been erased after intensified violence from illegal Israeli settlers, according to a CNN report.

"It was one community of 700 people," Musallam said. "They were expelled and forcibly displaced in January."



Amira Musallam walks during a nonviolent march led by women of multiple organizations to protest illegal settlers' annexation of Palestinian land in Beit Jala, West Bank, in August 2024. (Courtesy of Amira Musallam)

Now, she says, the organization attempts to cover several different communities simultaneously.

"Instead of protecting one community, one area, we are doing it in four different areas," she said.

Logistical challenges multiply quickly. Road closures during the latest escalation left volunteers stranded in Jericho, forcing the organization to rent an additional house

to accommodate them.

"Every day there is something new that we have to adapt to," Musallam said.

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Faith and frustration

Musallam's activism is rooted in her Catholic upbringing. She described her faith as the moral foundation for her work.

"Everything I do comes not only from my family and childhood, but from my faith," she said. "I'm a Christian, and I believe that helping others is one of our pillars."

Yet she expresses frustration with what she sees as insufficient institutional support from church structures during moments of crisis.

Her concerns reflect a broader challenge for Christians in the Palestinian territories, whose numbers have declined sharply over the past century. Today Christians make up roughly 1% of the population across Gaza, the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem, and many continue to emigrate due to economic and political uncertainty.

Musallam's work has attracted international attention. In 2025 she received the Peacemaker in Action Award from the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, joining a global network of activists working in conflict transformation.



The Rev. Mark Fowler, CEO of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, speaks during an interfaith working retreat in November 2024. (Courtesy of Make Beautiful)

The Rev. Mark Fowler, an interfaith minister and the CEO of the organization, told NCR that women working in peacebuilding often face structural obstacles long before they enter conflict zones. In many societies and religious traditions, he said, women are expected to intervene only after violence has already occurred.

For women whose work is rooted in faith or spiritual motivation, those expectations can become an additional burden. According to Fowler, women peacebuilders frequently confront skepticism simply for occupying multiple roles at once — religious actors, community leaders and mediators in situations shaped largely by male-dominated political and military structures.

Yet that same trust can become women's greatest strength. In many conflict situations, he said, women are often the first figures people turn to for help or

mediation, like in Musallam's case.

"I think that there is a reconnection to the power and the dignity of women that would aid us greatly as we reconsider our connection as religious and spiritual people to even the idea of war," Fowler said.

More than 25 years after the night her family crawled through gunfire to reach safety, Musallam said she continues to operate in the same conflict landscape — now more fragmented and more dangerous than she remembers as a child.

Her motivation, she said, remains unchanged, despite the lack of financial support makes her civilian protection work harder and slower.

"Violence brings only more violence," she said. "And blood brings more blood."

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