

## **Keeping Hope Alive for All Gaza's Children: Dr. Mona Qasim El-Farra**

by Lucia Wilkes Smith

*Imagine this scene: Young children, horrified by the continuous sound of drones (unmanned aerial vehicles), dash to hide under a table in the family home.*

*As peace activists in the U.S., we might think of children frightened by hovering drones in the skies above Afghanistan, Syria or Yemen. And those certainly would be real scenarios. However, the particular children described by Dr. Mona El-Farra huddle tearfully beneath tables in the Gaza Strip, and the drones are dispatched from Israel. The ominous buzzing sound of surveillance drones continues, ebbing and surging over Gaza, 24 hours a day.*

On a Sunday afternoon in November, Dr. Mona El-Farra spoke with an audience in Minneapolis via Skype from Manchester, England, where she is visiting one of her adult daughters. The event was sponsored by the Middle East Committee of Women Against Military Madness (WAMM).

Dr. Mona was born in Khan Younis, Gaza, and is committed to enduring the hardships of life in Gaza because, as she said, "I have a small family in the United Kingdom, but my larger family is in Gaza. That is my home." She especially is dedicated to caring for all children inside Gaza, which has remained a land under brutal siege by the government and military practices of Israel during the past 11 years. Eight refugee camps still operate within Gaza to provide housing for refugees forced from their familial homes in 1948, when war established the state of Israel. [Note: In 1988, during the "first Intifadah," I participated in a study tour including Israel, the militarily Occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In Gaza I met with Palestinian people inside the Burat refugee camp and saw the Jabalia camp from a distance. At that time I couldn't understand why restrictive conditions would keep refugee families in camps over a 40-year period. That was nearly 30 years ago!— Lucia Smith]

As a physician, Dr. Mona sees patients in the clinics that serve the populations of the refugee camps. Her activities on behalf of children are enhanced through her role as director of the Middle East Children's Alliance and the chairperson for the Palestinian Red Crescent Society of the Gaza Strip. The self-governing territory that came under Israeli occupation after the Six-Day War in 1967 is home to nearly two million Palestinians and one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Bordered by Israel and Egypt on the Mediterranean coast, the Strip is about 140 square miles, the size of the U.S. city of Detroit (pop. 700,000).

The Skype conversation with Dr. Mona was possible only because she had managed the rare and difficult process of temporarily leaving Gaza. She emphasized that people in Gaza do not exit for luxury travel. A family necessity demanded Dr. Mona's attention, and she was delayed by Israeli technicalities for nine months before she could begin the journey to her final destination in England by first exiting Gaza and entering into Egypt. The actual crossing of the border from Gaza to Egypt took 45 hours. Most people trapped in Gaza do not embark on such a hard and dangerous crossing of the border unless they must travel for medical care – such as

chemotherapy for cancer treatment – that is not available to them in Gaza. Still, their travels often are stalled or even denied by authorities.

Dr. Mona detailed the ordeal of a personal friend who sought medical support inside Gaza that should ordinarily be uncomplicated. The woman was expecting a baby in 2014, during a time of more intense Israeli military attacks against Gaza [Israel’s Operation Protective Edge, which lasted for 51 days in July and August of 2014]. The woman realized it was time for her to rush to her regular hospital where she had given birth to her two older children. No ambulances were available because they were in use transporting people injured in the attacks so instead the woman was driven by family to a nearby hospital, which was then hit by bombs. The young mother and her baby survived. Dr. Mona said: “But why should *any* woman and newborn infant have to go through this experience?”

According to Dr. Mona, hospitals throughout Gaza undergo awfully difficult conditions: necessary medications are unavailable; medical equipment cannot be purchased, repaired or replaced; electrical gaps occur when regular electrical systems fail and the hospital emergency generators must be activated.

Overall, living conditions in Gaza are dismal. Predictions are that Gaza will be uninhabitable by 2020—or sooner. Electrical power operates only two to four hours each day. Up to 95 percent of water systems are polluted—some are salty, some simply are contaminated by filth. Incidences of water-borne diseases and renal diseases have increased in recent years. Sewer systems are inoperable or erratic. An Italian researcher and professor found some illnesses of children in Gaza that he attributes to contact with white phosphorus in the air or water. [“Militaries may legally possess and use white phosphorus, except when loaded into munitions used in populated areas, which is prohibited under international law. The U.S.-led coalition in Syria has been accused of using munitions loaded with white phosphorus.”—Anne Barnard, *New York Times*, 10 June 2017.]

Still, Dr. Mona describes herself as “cautious, but hopeful.” She views South Africa’s emergence from its apartheid system as a feasible model for the establishment of a single, egalitarian, democratic state for Israeli Jews and Palestinians (as opposed to a “two-state solution” that seems unattainable). She is hopeful about the future of Gaza because she witnesses continuing struggle against oppression and hardship and in support of peace. Dr. Mona is inspired by the sense of social solidarity within Gaza. Her evidence is that “people still are willing to volunteer.”

Examples of volunteer commitment emerge through projects of the Middle East Children’s Alliance (MECA). Dr. Mona’s group oversees fundraising and construction of water purification systems for kindergartens (preschools) and for schools so that children will, at least, have clean water when they come to school. Seventy-five of the smaller purification systems have been installed to date, at the cost of \$5,000 per unit. Dr. Mona reports that MECA also solicits funds for donating books to schools, “because reading is so important!” Professionals and volunteers alike have observed that an unusually high percentage of children tend to practice violence against one another when they experience harsh conditions and poverty in their daily lives. These adults have determined that children find comfort and support through stories, games, and music.

MECA works to provide these seemingly simple pleasures for children so they may have a sense of easier, more normal, and peaceful lives.

Certainly the children, and all people of Gaza, live on a daily basis with the aftermath of the 2014 bombings by Israel – three major attacks plus many lower-level destructions – and continued repression and constant threats of future violence. A majority of destroyed homes still need to be rebuilt. People do not have freedom of movement within Gaza or to and from other parts of Palestine or neighboring countries where their extended families might live. According to Dr. Mona, mental health experts estimate that individuals need eight to 10 years to heal from such trauma as the bombings of their homes. She understands that 450,000 children in Gaza are suffering mental health aftereffects evidenced by inability to sleep, nightmares, and bedwetting. Among adults, similar symptoms occur: anxiety, sleeplessness, domestic aggression, and increases in relationship breakdown and divorce. Therefore, MECA programs directed to the well-being of children are extended to their parents for education regarding trauma and anxiety.

MECA encourages all the children of Gaza to receive an education because the psychological health of children improves as their education improves. [The organization provides college scholarships for older students. Through its Teach Palestine program younger children learn about Palestine culture and history.] MECA also promotes play. Participation in sports, especially for girls, is important because within some traditional households the girls are relatively homebound. When the girls play sports and even join teams, they often feel more empowered. Children are also taken to the seashore beaches for swimming and play. Though the Gaza coast stretches about 25 miles along the Mediterranean Sea, many children have not seen the sea previously because of travel restrictions and safety concerns. [The Palestinian Environmental Quality Authority has designated more than half of the seaside water as polluted by sewage due to persistent electrical outages that incapacitate Gaza's treatment of waste water, which is discharged into the sea.]

Young girls kicking a soccer ball or boys splashing in the Mediterranean present more optimistic images than kids hiding under the dining room table as drones swoop in the skies above them. Dr. Mona told her Minneapolis audience, "Let the children play and heal!" Those who heard her words sincerely wish to join Dr. Mona in her cautiously hopeful perspective.

*Lucia Wilkes Smith is active on WAMM's Middle East Committee, Board of Directors and Ground All Drones Committee.*

**To learn more about the Middle East Children's Alliance and Dr. Mona Qasim El-Farra:**  
go to [MECAforpeace.org](http://MECAforpeace.org).

**ACTION:** Join the weekly Vigil to End the Occupation of Palestine. Every Friday, 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. at the corner of Summit and Snelling, St. Paul.