Kyle Cristofalo: Hello and thank you for being with us today. My name is Kyle Cristofalo and I serve as the Director of Advocacy and Government Relations at Churches for Middle East Peace [CMEP]. CMEP is a coalition of 27 national Christian denominations and organizations that are working to advance a peaceful, just, and sustainable solution to the conflict in Israel/Palestine and for conflicts throughout the Middle East. We are honored to have with us today noted Palestinian human rights defender Issa Amro.

Issa has been here in the United States speaking before members of Congress and at public events. Issa is the founder and coordinator of Youth Against Settlements [YAS] which is based in Hebron where he lives. It works with youth to stand against settlements and the abuses that people in Hebron are facing as a result of the occupation.

Beyond his work with youth on settlements, Issa has been internationally recognized for his human rights work, especially for a campaign that he developed with Breaking The Silence to give Palestinians access to cameras to document the abuses that they were facing from Israeli settlers. He was also named as the human rights defender of the year in Palestine in 2012 by the UN High Commission on Human Rights.

Issa is currently facing 18 indictments in Israeli military courts and he will speak more about that in just a bit. He was also recently detained by the Palestinian Authority [PA] for speaking out in favor of a journalist who called for the resignation of PA leader Mahmoud Abbas. Upon his detainment, CMEP issued a press release calling for his immediate release and we are glad he is with us today and that he was released, though we know that took longer than we would have hoped for. So, again, we are honored to have Issa with us and look forward to this next little bit.

So Issa, I was wondering if you could tell us about your work with Youth Against Settlements: what prompted you to start the organization? Tell us a little about what it is and what work you do.

Issa Amro: YAS is a Palestinian non-violence group. We are working to recruit Palestinian youth to stand against the occupation and against the Israeli settlements in our city. We try to teach them how to practice non-violent resistance, we hope that our community reaches civil
disobedience and at YAS we do a lot of capacity building for Palestinian youth, like how to use social media as a platform to make change, how to use the video camera to document human rights violations, as well as teaching them about their legal rights and how to defend themselves from the Israeli occupation and Israeli discrimination apartheid in Hebron.

We organize campaigns to end the closure of streets, markets, and shops in the city of Hebron. One of them is the Open Shuhada Street Campaign, and it’s every February. We call our friends all over the world to show solidarity action with Hebron to put high pressure on the Israeli government to end this closure in Hebron. We just launched a campaign we call “Segregated and Unequal” which is about highlighting the segregation and inequality in the city of Hebron and we are calling on the international community to intervene and put pressure on Israel and on their own countries to pressure Israel to stop the segregation policies and division and isolation of Palestinians from their own streets and their own markets and their own houses.

We organize tours for international and Palestinian visitors to see the human rights violations and this is a call for all those watching us now to come and visit us and see with your own eyes the situation in Hebron. We started YAS after we felt that there was a big need to use Palestinian youth’s energy to stand against the occupation and on the other hand to counter the settlement expansion and settler violence in the city. So we started in 2007 to educate the youth on how to use non-violence as a tool to end the occupation and end the Israeli settlement in our own city. We didn’t want to react to violence by using violence; we use non-violence as the best methodology to end the occupation.

We organize olive harvest campaigns, we organize direct action like sit-ins, and we try to protect the Palestinian identity of the city of Hebron by installing our own signs, renaming the streets which settlers tried to rename from their Palestinian names to Israeli Hebrew names. We try to establish a kind of infrastructure for the Palestinian families to remain and stay in the city of Hebron. The situation in Hebron under Israelis is hard and difficult and the Israeli government announced that they would give the Israeli settlers the right to establish their own municipality in the city of Hebron which means we will have two municipalities in the same area: one for the Palestinians and one is run by the settlers and it will control the Palestinians that live in the H2 part of the city.

We have around 1800 shops closed because of the closure policy. 1000 apartments became empty because of the continuous attacks and checkpoints and by the closure which was imposed after the Ibrahimi mosque massacre in 1994. 23 checkpoints restrict the movement of the Palestinian people, around 120 movement barriers. Divided roads -- roads where they ask you what is your religion and according to your answer: if you are a Muslim you walk to the left side, the dirty side, or if you are Jewish or a visitor you will be [directed] toward the main road. That is the reality in Hebron which we are trying to change.

We are trying to defend Palestinian rights peacefully by advocacy here on Capitol Hill or all over the world because Palestinians can’t end the occupation alone. As a human rights defender who’s on trial and who they want to shut off and they don’t want my voice to reach you or the
international community, I am now facing 18 military charges. Many of them are about inciting to non-violence and my participation in civil disobedience and peaceful protest. I hope that you stand with me and with all Palestinian human rights defenders and peaceful activists who are trying to peacefully resist the occupation to make a better future for all Palestinians and everybody in the world.

**KC:** Thank you, Issa. So there was a lot there that I hope we can unpack. Just for those viewing this today that might not be aware: you mentioned the Open Shuhada Street [Campaign]—can you tell us how long that road has been closed, what that means for Palestinians who live in Hebron? Just a little bit of background for those who might not be aware.

**IA:** Shuhada Street is our “Time Square” in Hebron—it’s the main shopping area, it’s the main touristic area, too, and the street is big, it connects all the south and north and east and west parts together, it’s the heart of the city. All the shopping areas are there: the markets, the vegetable market, the fruit market used to be there. In 1994 on the 25th of February, a fanatic settler went into the mosque and killed 29 Palestinians while they were praying.

After the massacre the Israeli government imposed a curfew on the Palestinians. We were victims and we were punished as victims. They closed all the streets, the markets, the shops, and from that time until now the quiet transfer policy started, and the Israel occupation with the settlers started their policy to displace the Palestinians from that area and by time the closure increased. In 2008 they increased it more and in 2015 they just started another increase. By time, they’re trying to take over that part of the city and make it look like it’s part of Israel.

We try to highlight that action from the Israeli government, how they are working to destroy the Palestinian identity of the Palestinian city of Hebron – *el-Khalil*. They confiscated a lot of yards, a lot of open spaces where we can’t walk or play anymore. I used to play near the mosque in the park there, and now I’m not allowed, as a Palestinian, to reach that area and it all started after that 1994 Ibrahimi mosque massacre.

**KC:** Thank you. So you mentioned how YAS and your own work is grounded in non-violence so I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what led you to embrace non-violence, how is that work like in Palestinian civil society, just the landscape?

**IA:** Historically non-violence is part of the Palestinian culture from opposing the British Mandate in the 1930s to the First Intifada, which was really 80% non-violence and civil disobedience and community resistance. We try to practice non-violence out of that it strengthens Palestinian civil society and it makes everyone in the society—women, children, elders, youth, men and women—all equal and have responsibilities to resist and they have their own role in the resistance.

I started it after the Israeli occupation closed my university in 2003 and for me it was about challenging the Israeli military law which closed my university, to continue my education and get my engineering degree. I managed with other students to reopen the university after being closed for six months by the Israeli military. From that time I worked hard to practice
non-violence against the Israeli apartheid wall, against the eviction of certain Palestinian villages around Hebron. Then I started my activities in the old city of Hebron to defend the Palestinian people there and defend our rights and try to protect the Palestinian identity and oppose the settlement expansion and settlement project in the city of Hebron.

KC: It has been stated before that the Israeli military or Israel do not distinguish between violent and non-violent protests. I’m wondering if you think that is true, and if so does that impact at all your strategy or do you remain committed to non-violence regardless?

IA: For me non-violence is an ideology and a tactic and a strategy. I can’t personally do any other kind of resistance. I only can do non-violent resistance and it’s the best tool to end the occupation. For me and for many Palestinians, non-violence is the best tool to end the occupation, and the Israeli occupation doesn’t distinguish between any kind of resistance, and the best example is me and what is happening to me now to be indicted for my non-violent work and human rights activities and documentation of human rights violations by the Israelis.

I think that the Israeli occupation wants the Palestinians to give up and to accept being without any political rights and to make them live without any equality or justice or freedom. It’s not about Israel defending itself from the Palestinian people, it’s about Israel defending its occupation, defending its apartheid, discrimination, and segregation which is everywhere in the West Bank and especially in Hebron.

KC: Obviously as the leader of YAS, you work a lot with Palestinian youth, so I’m wondering if you could share with us how you think the youth that you are working with are feeling. We often hear in the States that Palestinian young people are uncertain if the occupation will even end in their lifetime, and I think in the US we also see millennials and young adults who are skeptical of the political process, thinking ‘does their voice matter?’ So I’m wondering, with the youth that you work with in Palestine and Hebron, do you think that they’re hopeful that their work will result in a better future, or is there still sort of despondency?

IA: The Palestinian youth are very disappointed and hopeless and they see that the situation is getting much worse, especially after the right-wing government speeches and statements about dehumanizing the Palestinian people and attacking them and attacking the children, detaining them, intimidating them not to participate in any kind of resistance.

But me and my group and our youth, they are always optimistic. They work hard out of their duty to act good and to be the people who light a candle not to condemn the dark. This is what we do in our group: we try to give the Palestinian youth a hope that they can resist and get support from the international community for their peaceful resistance. This is what we are trying to do: to give them a hope that they are not alone and they are not isolated and they are not left without any external support, because non-violence and youth always seek external support for their non-violent campaigns and grassroots work. I think grassroots activities, actions, and groups can make change and this is what we are doing in YAS.
KC: Your work is obviously focused in Hebron, but do the youth you work with have interactions with, or are there efforts to bring in, youth from other parts of the West Bank, from Gaza, from Palestinian citizens of Israel or those living in East Jerusalem? What is that like?

IA: We try to establish a network for non-violent activists and the youth in the West Bank. And now we have a small network where we can share our activities and have joint actions and protests all over the West Bank. The main obstacle is the Israeli occupation: because of the checkpoints there is no geographical continuity between the Palestinian cities and villages, but we try to use social media and internet as a kind of tool to connect with other cities. Especially Gaza, as we are not allowed to visit Gaza and Gaza youth are not allowed to visit the West Bank because the Israeli occupation doesn’t let us meet face to face. We try to meet through social media tools and use it to discuss what we can do for the future together.

KC: Thank you. So going back to the court case in Israel, the military court case that you will soon have to go through later in October, I’m wondering if you could, for those watching, teach us about the differences between Israeli military and civil court? Are there different standards of proof of your innocence that you would have to prove and would there be a difference between an Israeli soldier that would be before an Israeli military court and you as a Palestinian?

IA: There are two sets of laws in West Bank. I am, as a Palestinian, under Israeli military law which means that I have no right to protest, I have no right to practice my general assembly and by law I am guilty until I prove the opposite. So when the soldiers in Hebron arrest me, I need to show evidence, and usually we show video evidence, that what the soldiers are saying is not true. At the same time they can control me for a few days—from four to eight days—without seeing a judge and it’s a kind of punishment that has happened to me many, many times that I was arrested for a few days then I was released without even going to court.

In the military court it’s a military judge, and the judge usually does what the prosecutor wants. It’s not a court, it’s a show. You are already convicted: the conviction rate is more than 99.5%, which is really impossible to get any kind of justice in the military court. The military court exists to strengthen the occupation and shut off any Palestinian who tries to work to end the occupation even peacefully. They consider any kind of actions against the occupation—even gathering of some people for political reason—and may take you to jail for ten years. That is the military system.

On the other hand, the civil system, which applies only on the Israelis, gives much more rights to the Israelis and they don’t even enforce that civil law on the settlers. I was attacked and my nose was broken by one of the settlers. They found him guilty and after four years on trial the penalty for that settler—who was found guilty by the Israeli judge—was suspending him for one month from Hebron. If I was the one who attacked him and broke his nose, I would get a few years in jail for doing that.

KC: While you’ve been in the US this trip here in DC, you’ve had the chance to be on Capitol Hill and you’ve met with elected officials in both the House of Representatives and the US Senate. I was wondering if you could share with us what that was like? What has the reception
been like? This is not your first time here in the US. For those watching, if you’re not familiar: Issa’s case in this past several months has garnered a lot of interest from US policymakers. Over 30 members of Congress—close to 40 in fact—signed a letter to Israel calling on them to act with justice towards Issa and a second to the PA when they detained him just a few weeks ago. So I’m wondering if you could share what the reception’s been like, what have you shared, what you can publicly tell us of what you’ve shared with members of Congress as they consider their best ways to be supporting peace in Israel and Palestine?

IA: First of all I want to thank all of the American people and organizations and congresspersons who signed the letter and they are standing with me against my trial and it made a huge difference on the Israeli court. They are very careful and are trying to show that it’s not easy to put me in jail for my human rights and non-violence activities. So it was a big achievement to get more than 32 congresspersons to sign that letter indicating my human rights work and standing with me against the military court. I see a lot of reception from the congresspersons, from many organizations.

I see a big move in American civil society speaking loud without any kind of concern about what will be the consequences and that is a brave action from many organizations and many congresspersons to criticize the occupation. I was very clear with them that we should distinguish between Judaism, the occupation, Israel, and the settlements. It’s not the same, it’s different, and if anyone criticizes the occupation it doesn’t mean he’s an anti-Semite or is against the Jews. I have many Jewish friends who support me and who resist the occupation with me. It’s not about any kind of conflict between religions: it’s about the occupation, Israeli illegal settlements, it’s about human rights violations, and standing with me and standing with the Palestinian human rights defenders and peaceful activists in Palestine means that the American leaders and American organizations and civil society are acting according to their principles and morals. We are moved a lot and motivated by the civil rights movement in the 1950s and ‘60s and we see it as one of the best examples that we should use to convince our youth and community that a non-violence movement can win and it won in the past.

KC: Thank you. So Issa we have at CMEP a network of supporters spread across the United States. They care deeply about justice in Palestine and Israel and an end to the occupation and justice for everyone who lives in the Holy Lands as well as the Middle East. I’m wondering if you could share with us some sort of advice that you have for that network of how they can best support the work that you are doing, the work of non-violence, the work of joint resistance to the occupation on behalf of a just and peaceful end to the conflict.

IA: I want to thank CMEP for their continuous support for justice and equality and for trying to teach the American public about the real situation in Palestine and Israel. Their intervention is very very important and we appreciate it and we feel that it’s going to help the effort to make peace. Without real pressure from outside, we fear that peace will not be achieved. I think we need more awareness in the American civil society and we need more awareness in American politicians and American celebrities so we want you to send letters to representatives, to the media here, to your families, your work to tell them about the situation on the ground. Send your
friends and your people to visit us on the ground and see the real situation. We want you to make a kind of support for the Palestinian grassroots movement and support for our campaigns. We have many campaigns on the ground from Palestine to the US. We work together to make a real change and we think that makes a difference.

KC: Thank you Issa. Issa’s next court date in the Israeli military court will be coming up very soon at the end of October. For all those that are watching, I want to really encourage you, if you are not already signed up with CMEP, we have an active email list and if you sign up for that you can go to our website cmepe.org, provide your email information as well as your address and zip code so that we can properly make sure you are getting updates about your member of Congress so that we can connect you with them. We are going to be following this case closely, not just in the next month but as it progresses because we know, as Issa said earlier, he is currently facing 18 charges and with the incredibly high conviction rate we do think that your voice will be important and your voice will matter.

It was absolutely incredible seeing that many members of Congress standing up for Issa and in support of Palestinian human rights and we need to make sure that they continue that work and that they continue to push on behalf of non-violent resistance which we at CMEP think is absolutely critical and we think needs to be lauded and really valued. So please do sign up for our action alerts so that when we need to motivate members of Congress to continue this stand, they will be hearing from the grassroots.

We also would encourage you: recently there was a US-based non-profit that was started specifically to support Issa and his work and so I encourage you to check out the website workingforpeaceandjustice.org which will also be giving incredibly up-to-date updates on Issa’s case so that you can be sure to follow what is happening. As Issa also mentioned there are opportunities to visit the region and that website will give you information on that as well.

Before we conclude officially, I just wanted to give Issa a chance to say any last words. I know there is a lot of your work that we were not able to get to. You were instrumental in introducing the idea of video, documenting via camera the abuses that Israeli settlers would inflict upon Palestinians, so if there’s anything else you would like to say, now is your time.

IA: I want to thank you for your great work and for your generous support for me and for Palestinian human rights defenders. I want to tell you that I will not give up. I will continue resisting the occupation peacefully in spite of the attacks and indictment and military court and threats I receive all the time from the settlers and the soldiers. Palestinians in general will not give up, but we will be stronger with your support, with your back-up. Support our human rights, support our political rights and support our freedom, justice, and equality to achieve just peace in the Middle East.

KC: Thank you Issa, and again thank you for your work and we again encourage you to visit our website, sign up for updates so that you can be kept up to date with Issa, his court dates, and
the progress of his work. Thank you again on behalf of CMEP, my name is Kyle Cristofalo and I thank you for joining us.