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People attend a vigil at Montrose Harbor, Aug. 20, 2024, in Chicago. (RNS/Bob Smietana)

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Chicago — August 23, 2024

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On Tuesday night (Aug. 20), thousands of cheering delegates packed the United Center to hear former President Barack Obama and other dignitaries lend their support to Vice President Kamala Harris' bid for the Oval Office.

About 20 minutes away, along Chicago's lakeshore, a more solemn gathering was being held. There, as the sun set and the city's skyline lit up, about 100 people from different faiths gathered to remember those killed in Gaza over the past 10 months in a vigil hosted by the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization.

Small clusters of older women and men, some wearing kaffiyehs, the familiar Palestinian scarf, greeted one another with hugs. Families with kids and young activists made their way to the lakefront, where they were met with a table topped with battery-powered votive candles, pins reading "Remember Gaza" and AFSC literature. On the ground stretched a long, wide ribbon, marked with the amounts spent on military spending around the world and serving as an illustration of the American military budget compared with that of other countries.

As the crowd gathered, a young mom swung her giggling daughter while the song "Sido's Dance" by Palestinian American musician Clarissa Bitar played over a speaker and a couple of joggers passed by.

The words "Remember Gaza," drawn in red and green chalk, adorned the concrete walkway along the lakefront near where the group gathered, sitting on a series of high steps facing the water.

For months, many in the gathering had been protesting, making calls to elected officials, watching accounts of the war in Gaza and raising their voices in support of an end to the conflict. Now, they were taking time to stop and to find refuge in their faith and the bonds of friendship.

"I believe many of us have souls that are tired," said Jennifer Bing, national director of the U.S. Palestine Activism Program for the AFSC, adding that many of the activists gathered were worn out from the news of bloodshed in Gaza, or from protesting and making calls for a cease-fire that many feel have gone unheeded.



A red ribbon illustrates the U.S. military budget during a vigil Aug. 20, 2024, at Chicago's Montrose Harbor to remember those killed in Gaza. (RNS/Reina Coulibaly)

"Our weary souls need to be nourished by our community of the faithful," Bing said. "We hold each other up so we may continue to work for a world we still believe is possible."

A series of speakers from different faith groups, some with family or colleagues in the Palestinian territories, then spoke to the gathering. Some read poems or offered prayers, while others shared stories of loved ones lost to violence.

Among the first speakers of the evening was Laura Boyce, AFSC's associate general secretary for U.S. programs. For Boyce, advocacy for Palestinians reflects her Quaker belief that "there is that of the divine in all people."

Above all, Boyce and the AFSC want to be "very clear that we need to see a cease-fire."

While the city of Chicago is bustling with rallies and protests this week, Boyce said this interfaith vigil complements other such solidarity actions by offering a quiet change of pace. For her, this is just one of many ways to work toward the ultimate goal of a cease-fire and arms embargo.

During the vigil, Boyce read a message written by [Firas Ramlawi](#), an AFSC colleague in Gaza, addressed to those gathered at the vigil. Ramlawi sent his thanks and said the "unwavering support and steadfast belief in our just cause" was a grounding constant for him, said Boyce.

"We are human beings, longing for life in all its details, striving to live with freedom and dignity, because there is so much on this earth that is worth living for," said Boyce, quoting from Ramlawi's message. "Let us be tireless in our efforts to end this violence."

Boyce added that in times of strife, "you just have to keep trying," to which some replied "Amen!"

Fidaa Elaydi, a Chicago attorney who was born in Gaza and still has family there, told of her aunt Zainab, who she said was killed during the war. Elaydi described her aunt as a kind, giving woman, dedicated to their family.

"She fled, hoping to find shelter, and instead, met her fate," Elaydi said.

Elaydi, a mother of four, also spoke about being [pregnant](#) when the war in Gaza broke out, and how the war overshadowed the joy of having a new child, knowing other children were not safe. She said that while she was bringing one new Palestinian life into the world, she felt despair witnessing Palestinian deaths daily.

"It was especially difficult to feel joy or happiness at the birth, or the kick, or the movements, or the milestones in my child when I was watching Palestinian mothers bury their children throughout this genocide," she said.



At the Aug. 20 vigil, Annie Sommer Kaufman, a Chicago-based Yiddish translator who also teaches Talmud, read a poem from a friend, who said she could no longer pray after hearing about the death of children during the Gaza war. (RNS/Bob Smietana)

Annie Sommer Kaufman, a Chicago-based Yiddish translator who also teaches Talmud, read a poem from a friend, who said she could no longer pray after hearing

about the death of children during the Gaza war.

She told those gathered about the Jewish tradition of Shabbat — of taking time away from the noise of the outside world and reconnecting face-to-face with those around us.

"I know this is a long struggle that takes a lot of endurance," she said. "I also know that this is a time of great change, violence and agitation—and we really need each other to help us stay in it for the long haul."

Paula Roderick, a member of United Methodist Kairos Response, which has long called for peace in the Middle East, said she's been concerned about violence in Gaza since the late 2000s. She recalled visiting Israel and the Palestinian territories in 2008 as part of an interfaith group — and said she has been involved in peace activism since.

That's involved protests and grieving for the lives that have been lost to violence.

"I'm just grieving. This is not my first vigil for Gaza," said Roderick, who gave a prayer to end the vigil. "I wish it were."

Roderick, an attorney, said her faith also motivates her activism. The United Methodist Church tells her that the loss of life in Gaza and in any war is wrong — and motivates her to do something about it. She also believes in the power of working with people from other faith traditions.

Roderick pointed to resolutions passed by the United Methodist Church calling for the end of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories and to the end of U.S. support for military occupations in any part of the world.

"We just can't keep having our money go to fund military occupations," she said.

"We are able to follow what is happening with individual families, not through a news media outlet but directly through posts they are making themselves," Daniel Lakemacher, a Quaker and Iraq War veteran who is now part of an anti-war veterans group said. The veteran, who has been protesting this week outside the Democratic National Convention, added that "The people who are being killed are not just numbers."

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Among the last to speak was Deanna Othman, a Muslim Palestinian woman and attorney in Chicago. She took the microphone to offer a prayer for her people at the end of the vigil. She quoted a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that stressed the need for action in the face of evil — and not just words or feelings.

"First and foremost, we pray that we are among the people of action who change evil with our hands and who speak out firmly against it," she told the crowd.

Othman is a board member of the American Muslims for Palestine's flagship Chicago chapter and an experienced interfaith organizer. She said in an interview that she believes in the importance of interfaith work but urged other Muslims to not participate in interfaith organizing with groups that "want to place Palestine on the back burner but then engage in other types of interfaith efforts."

"We should not be engaging with people who will not acknowledge the humanity of Palestinians, who will not acknowledge their right to exist in their land and the justness of their cause."

Daniel Lakemacher, a Quaker and Iraq War veteran who is now part of an anti-war veterans group, has been protesting this week outside the Democratic National Convention. He said the vigil serves a different purpose than the protests. The protests, he said, were about issues. The vigil is about the people who have been killed in Gaza.

"It's a solemn time of remembrance," he said. "It's an opportunity to be in solidarity across many different faiths. All are welcome to grieve together."

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He said protesters opposed to the war in Gaza — along with everyone who sees images from the war — are processing the war in real time, with images streamed on social media platforms such as TikTok and X from inside the war zone.

"We are able to follow what is happening with individual families, not through a news media outlet but directly through posts they are making themselves," he said.

Lakemacher, who said he grew up in an evangelical Christian home where supporting Israel was part of his faith, said his time in the military turned him into an

anti-war activist. He is concerned that a belief in Christian Zionism — with which he grew up — has influenced the U.S. response to the war in Gaza.

He hopes it will also remind people of the human cost of the war.

"The people who are being killed are not just numbers," he said.

One of the last speakers was Nader Ihmoud, editor-in-chief of Palestine in America magazine. Ihmoud read the names of journalists who have been killed during the Gaza war. As he did so, some of those gathered placed glowing votives along the ground, outlined by the words "Remember Gaza" written in chalk.

After each name was spoken, those gathered at the vigil responded with, "We remember."