PODCAST

"From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free," with Maha Nassar

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The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Maha Nassar 0:00

Really, in ten simple words, this phrase signifies to Palestinians their personal ties, their national rights, and their future vision for Palestine. The chant is really at its root about saying no to colonial partition schemes that deny Palestinians connections to their homeland.

Yara Hawari 0:25

From Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari, and this is Rethinking Palestine.

Over the last month and a half, hundreds of thousands have hit the streets all over the world in solidarity with the Palestinian people, and in particular with Palestinians in Gaza who are facing an ongoing genocide at the hands of the Israeli regime. These global protests have been united through their chants. One such chant, which has come under scrutiny, is "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

In the UK, the previous Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, attempted to brand it

as incitement. More recently, Elon Musk, owner of X, formerly Twitter, has said that those who use the phrase on his platform will have their accounts suspended. For Palestinians and their allies, this is yet another attempt to criminalize solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and Palestinian expression.

Joining us to discuss the origins and significance of this chant is Maha Nassar, an Al-Shabaka member and associate professor in the School of Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Arizona. Maha, thank you for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Maha Nassar 1:35

Thank you so much, Yara, for having me.

Yara Hawari 1:37

Maha, perhaps you can start us off by telling us about the historical roots of this chant.

Maha Nassar 1:43

I think it's important to note that this chant itself has its roots in Palestinians' deep and intimate connection, not only to Palestine but to their specific ancestral towns and villages within Palestine. As you know, Yara, whenever two Palestinians meet each other, anywhere in the world, one of the first questions they ask each other is, "What balad are you from?"

What town or village in Palestine are you from? Even if they're third-generation refugees, even if they've never stepped foot in their homeland, their connection is not only to Palestine but to specific locales in Palestine. And that predates the advent of Palestinian nationalism, which predates the political movements that we often associate with Palestinian nationalism.

These are ancient ties and roots that generations of Palestinians have identified

themselves by. And so this connection to Palestine that they have, it's not abstract, but rather it's deeply rooted in very specific geographic locations. And those geographic locations run the gamut of historical Palestine.

They span everywhere from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. And so given this reality, this lived, intimate, personal reality that Palestinians have, and the ties they have to their land, the chant is really at its root about saying no to colonial partition schemes that deny Palestinians connections to their homeland.

And this is an ongoing struggle. For a century now, Palestinians have insisted time and again that they oppose the partition of their land. For one simple reason: that these partition plans have all been based on colonial racist logics of ethnic cleansing. The British Peel partition idea, for example, from 1937, had it been implemented, would have led to the forced removal of a quarter million Palestinian Arabs from their lands.

So Palestinians were saying no to being expelled from their land. Many of your listeners will be more familiar with the 1947 UN partition plan that divided Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state. The catch there was that half a million Palestinians living in the lands that were slated to be part of the Jewish state would have had to make a cruel choice: to either live as a minority in their own lands or to leave.

And by 1947, tens of thousands of Palestinian Arabs had already been kicked off their lands. So they knew that accepting partition would be acquiescing to their own destruction. Now we also know that in 1948, over 750,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from their homes during the 1948 Nakba. Unlike most other war refugees in the world, who are able to return once the fighting stops, Palestinian refugees were unable to return because Israel had declared itself to be a Jewish state and, of course, Palestinians were not Jewish.

And so ultimately, their homeland was not free to take them back in. And so that's

the historic principle behind the chant. The specific formulation came into use following the 1967 war, in which Israel occupied the remainder of historic Palestine. And remember too, this was also a time when Israelis and Americans and many in the West denied that there was even such a thing as the Palestinian people with ties to their land.

Golda Meir's famous quote about there being no such thing as a Palestinian people — that quote was from an interview that she gave in 1969. So in the context of the late 60s, in which the land of Palestine was now under Israeli colonial control, and in which Palestinians' own identity and claims to the land were being systematically denied, Palestinians needed to find a way to both assert their national rights, assert their political ties, and also lay out an alternative vision of peace.

And that's the context in which the call, "a free Palestine from the river to the sea," started to gain traction, first among Palestinian refugees living in exile, and then among Palestinians living under occupation.

Yara Hawari 5:51

So obviously this chant has its geographic significance for Palestinians. It's recognizing that Palestinians are from villages and towns across colonized Palestine. What else does it signify for Palestinians?

Maha Nassar 6:06

I think that it signifies — really, in ten simple words — this phrase signifies to Palestinians their personal ties, their national rights, and their future vision for Palestine. So I've already talked a bit about the personal ties and the deep intimacy that Palestinians have to specific towns and villages in historic Palestine.

I've said a little bit about the national rights that they've put forth as being both a national entity, the Palestinian people, and as having national claims to the land,

being the land of Palestine. So I want to say a few words about the idea of a future vision. So when Palestinians were saying no to partition, they weren't just saying no.

They were also putting forth alternative visions for the future of Palestine that they wanted to see. It was a future that was rooted in the principles of democracy, equality, and unity. As early as the 1930s, Palestinians were appealing to international bodies, saying that they wanted, rather than partition, to have the international community apply to the people of Palestine the same principles they apply to everyone else in the world, which is self-determination, national sovereignty, and equality for all.

And so in 1946, the delegation of Arab governments proposed a unitary state — a state with a democratic constitution that would guarantee freedom of religious practice for all. And importantly, it also recognized "the right of Jews to employ the Hebrew language as a second official language." So even back then, before 1948, there was a recognition among Palestinian leaders and nationalist figures that the future of Palestine should be one of a unified Palestine, with equal rights for all, and with also a recognition of Jewish collective rights and cultural identity in Palestine.

Now we know that that didn't happen and that in 1948, Palestinians were expelled from their homeland and not allowed to return. And for those refugees, Israel represented a racist colonial country that privileged Jews over non-Jews. That's why you had a Jewish law of return but no implementation of a Palestinian right of return. And so many of those Palestinians sought to replace this racist colonial state that privileges one group over another with what they saw as a free Palestine that would be secular, democratic, and one in which Muslims, Christians, and Jews would live in their ancestral homeland equally.

And Palestinians across the political spectrum were quite clear about this. In the

late 60s, Fatah declared that its goal was to create a "democratic state capable of holding Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike," and in which all will have equal rights and obligations, irrespective of race, color, or creed.

The PFLP said that "when the democratic national liberation struggle achieves its objectives, i.e. a free Palestine," it went on to say, "every Jew living in Palestine will enjoy equal and full rights with other citizens." These calls were taken up by the Palestinian National Council, the highest decision-making body of the Palestinians in exile, when in 1969 they called for a Palestinian democratic state that would be "free of all forms of religious and social discrimination."

And so again, this idea of a unified, equal, secular, democratic state was a very popular one among Palestinians. And that was the alternative to partition. That was the vision of a free Palestine that people were talking about. And it remained popular among Palestinians, even as some of their leaders, starting in the 1970s, began inching towards the idea of establishing a truncated Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.

And I think it's important to note that even Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip — those who stood the most to gain from a two-state solution, the kind of two-state solution that was gaining traction in the 1980s — even those Palestinians were lukewarm to the idea. A 1986 poll found that 78 percent of respondents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip supported "the establishment of a democratic secular Palestinian state encompassing all of Palestine," and only 17 percent supported two states.

And so it's this broader spirit of, again, a unified, democratic, secular Palestinian state with equal rights for all that lay behind the call for a free Palestine from the river to the sea. And I think that's why it became so popular in the protest chants of the first intifada, or Palestinian uprising, from 1987 to 1992.

And it's this association with Palestinian secular nationalism that I think has gotten

lost in a lot of the current scrutiny around the phrase.

Yara Hawari 11:26

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It's interesting that you mentioned partition because I think the mainstream narrative is that Palestinians are rejectionists, that they rejected a partitioned state, that they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity, etc. But what they were actually rejecting is colonial partition and fragmentation, and I think that's what this chant is fundamentally about. And in spirit, it's an anti-colonial chant.

Maha Nassar 12:07

Absolutely, I think you are absolutely correct. So why are there attempts now to crack down on this chant? What is the political context of this crackdown?

So I see this current crackdown as part of a much longer legacy of attempts to erase the Palestinian people and to delegitimize their national claims. We know that settler colonial projects, by and large, try to eliminate the native inhabitants, whether it's through genocide, through ethnic cleansing, or by denying and erasing their indigenous connections to the land. And we also know from comparative studies of settler colonialism that these efforts are often rooted in racist depictions of the native population, of the indigenous people.

They're depicted as being transient, as being without real roots to the land, as being easily movable from one place to another, as being barbaric, as being inherently violent, as having no real legitimate national, religious, or political claims. And that settler colonial logic holds that because "the natives are so intransigently and unrepentingly violent, the settler has no choice but to kill large

numbers of them and to cordon off or contain the rest."

I'm speaking to you right now from southern Arizona, where the Tohono O'odham Nation was nearly annihilated by settlers in the 19th century, and the descendants of those survivors live in reservations not far from here, but on areas that are just a tiny portion of their ancestral homeland. And so I think about that settler colonial logic quite a bit, and I think it comes up here as well.

And so in the case of Zionist settler colonialism, they didn't annihilate the Palestinian people, but they did undertake an ethnic cleansing of them. That's what the 1948 Nakba is all about. And I think also, as importantly, since 1948, the logic of Zionist settler colonialism has been denying that Palestinians have legitimate ties to the land.

I recently wrote an article that shows how this narrative came to take hold in the West, including in the US, in the 1950s. It was largely through the popular 1958 novel *Exodus*. I'm sure many of your listeners have heard of it. And the 1960 film starring Paul Newman of the same name.

What emerges in the novel and in the movie is a narrative of what I call Nakba denialism, that rested on, and continues to rest on, three anti-Arab racist tropes. The first is that Palestinian Arabs are lacking religious or historical attachment to Palestine. The second is that they lack a sense of national identity. And the third trope claims that they're easily induced to commit acts of violence by their ruthless leaders.

And so through the deployment of these tropes, the *Exodus* narrative popularized key elements of Nakba denialism in the US by blaming the victims of settler colonial violence. And so since then, the way that I see it is that the standard pro-Israel narrative has continued to draw on these racist and orientalist tropes to say, in effect, that since the Palestinians have no legitimate ties to the land and no legitimate national claims, and since they have ruthless and barbaric leaders, their

calls to freedom can only be understood as being inherently threatening to Jews.

So it's a kind of circular logic, but it's one that at its root is based on deep, deep Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism. And so in recent years, we've seen several pro-Israel groups and other organizations seek to capitalize on these existing attitudes and this kind of latent and sometimes manifest Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism to try to shut down pro-Palestinian activism in the West.

So in the US, where I'm based, groups like the ADL, AIPAC, the Israel on Campus Coalition, and others put tremendous pressure on legislators, on university leaders, on government officials, on media personalities, to treat all calls for Palestinian freedom as hate speech in order to shut it down.

They do so through a kind of bait and switch. I think we can all agree that political speech should not be banned in democratic societies, and we can also agree that hate speech, including expressions of antisemitism, should not be sanctioned in democratic societies. And so the bait and switch here is to try to get Palestinian political speech, pro-Palestine political speech, including calls for a free Palestine, to try to get that political speech to be labeled as hate speech in order to ban it.

But that switch relies on a tacit logic that says Palestinians can't be allowed to live freely in their homeland because that's somehow threatening to Jews. How are Jews threatened? Why are Jews threatened? Well, it's because Palestinians are violent and they can't be trusted to live alongside Jews. So that's the logic, even if it's not stated overtly or outwardly.

When you drill down — well, why can't Palestinians and Jews live alongside one another? What would be the threat of a free Palestine? — then you see some of that logic come through.

Now I want to be really clear that I don't think all critics of this phrase are themselves bigots. There are people who say, you know, "I don't like this phrase, it

makes me uncomfortable, but I don't think it should be banned." And so there, I think there is a conversation to be had about what a free Palestine from the river to the sea can look like.

As I've mentioned earlier, there is a very rich and well-documented history showing that for Palestinians themselves, a free Palestine from the river to the sea does not preclude equal rights for Jews. There are different ways in which a free Palestine could be enacted. People have lots of different ideas — their proposals and groups and working groups talking about two states, one state, binational state, confederation. Polls show that Palestinians themselves are not of one mind about this, but I think that's why a political process that's truly representative of all people is so crucial.

It's not up to me or you to come up with a single definition of what a free Palestine from the river to the sea should be and then impose it on people. But it speaks to a political process, one that would need to be democratic and inclusive, and one that would need to be based on shared principles. I would hope a shared principle could be freedom.

Yara Hawari 19:07

I think that's a really important point, Maha, that people who chant this chant aren't necessarily united in their visions for a future, but what they are united in are principles of freedom, justice, and liberation. And I think it's worth noting here that in this recent climate, we've seen draconian measures taken against people who chant this chant.

It's important to mention that people have lost their jobs or have faced serious professional repercussions for simply saying the chant. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib was censured for saying this. In Canada, a protester was arrested at a demonstration for chanting "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

And so we're really seeing draconian measures. And what's interesting is that we're fighting back. The movement is fighting back. In mid-October, a Dutch court ruled that the chant was protected by free speech. And there are many other legal initiatives that are really pushing back against this criminalization.

Maha Nassar 20:17

And I think that that pushback and the growing recognition of this chant as protected political speech is part of a larger push against those, as I said, deep-seated racist and Islamophobic tropes that seek a kind of knee-jerk reaction that portrays Palestinians, that portrays Arabs, Muslims, and their supporters as inherently violent or as inherently threatening.

And so that idea of "free Palestine from the river to the sea" being political speech is itself a recognition of Palestinians' legitimate political claims, their legitimate national identity, and their legitimate and longstanding — I should add — personal ties to the land.

So I do see the draconian measures that you mentioned, and there are many more that are happening, particularly across college campuses, which is something that I'm particularly attuned to. I see it as a testament in many ways to the success of the pro-Palestinian movement that has managed to put Palestinian rights and the Palestinian struggle for freedom front and center in the struggles for justice in the West today.

And I also see the pushback against this chant and the real draconian measures and punishments — from banning student groups to firing people from their jobs to actual physical threats against people — I see all of that as a recognition of the fact that the other side doesn't have a logical answer to the demand for Palestinian freedom. They don't know how to respond to the demand for Palestinian freedom, so what they try to do is criminalize the demand for Palestinian freedom. And I think that's what we're seeing.

It's very difficult to see, but I'm also heartened by all the people who are coming to see what's happening for what it is. These are demands for Palestinian freedom, and these are attempts to criminalize the demands for Palestinian freedom.

Yara Hawari 22:40

Maha, I think we'll leave it there on that very powerful last point. Thank you so much for giving this historical perspective on "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

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