



PODCAST

Palestine in 2021: Victories and Challenges

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network · December, 2021

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

Yara Hawari 0:00

In this episode of Rethinking Palestine, we put together the best bits of all of our episodes this year to give you a roundup of Palestine in 2021. Of course, you can still listen to the episodes in full on all the major podcast platforms. Please don't forget to subscribe, and if you enjoy our work and want to see more, please consider donating to Al-Shabaka on our website.

In January 2021, Israel's leading human rights organization, B'Tselem, published a position paper identifying the Israeli regime as one of Jewish supremacy and apartheid from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Many in the international community applauded this as a groundbreaking shift in narrative and a welcome act of solidarity with the Palestinian struggle.

But something that was missing from much of the mainstream discussion on this was that the apartheid framework has a long history in Palestinian discourse and intellectual production, forged by solidarity with the Black struggle in South Africa and recognition of very similar structures of oppression.

Moreover, we saw what Dr. Lana Tatour identifies as a liberal configuration of the framework of apartheid.



Lana Tatour 1:21

Apartheid as a crime against humanity is a powerful legal framework, and this is something that we certainly need to mobilize. Having said that, we need to be careful in how we understand apartheid, because we can have different understandings of apartheid.

So what I described before is a particular genealogy for thinking about apartheid and the history of the use of apartheid in the Palestinian context. Another trend that we are seeing is actually a liberal reading of apartheid. I know it sounds slightly counterintuitive in a sense, but the idea is that we see apartheid merely as a question of equality — as a liberal question of equality or inequality that exists between people, rather than a colonial question.

And I think this is what we have been seeing with the intervention that Peter Beinart made a few months ago when he was calling for one binational state. And he was constantly referring to South Africa, but he was referring to it as an instance of inequality that could be remedied by equality.

Similarly, the reading of B'Tselem's report — the Israeli human rights organization that was just released calling Israel an apartheid regime — has a very particular reading of apartheid, one that doesn't take settler colonialism, imperialism, and race into consideration. So apartheid — even when they call Israel apartheid, if you look at the report, they don't even mention racism.

And they distinguish the apartheid in Palestine from South Africa as saying the apartheid in South Africa was based on race, while in Palestine, on nationalism. So in many ways, their understanding of apartheid — and this understanding of apartheid is becoming quite dominant, in particular liberal circles, especially among some more progressive liberal Zionists. It's like Beinart or the liberal Israeli, the radical Israeli left. We are seeing a reworking of the framework of apartheid in a way that goes against the intellectual legacy and the activist legacy and history



of the Palestinian struggle and understanding of apartheid about Palestine — but not only in relation to Palestine, again also in relation to how the Third World liberation movement understood it.

Yara Hawari 4:16

Israel suffered another blow to its reputation on the international level just a few months later, in March, when the International Criminal Court prosecutor launched a formal inquiry into alleged crimes in the 1967 Occupied Palestinian Territories. This was the latest move in Palestine's lengthy ICC journey, which began over a decade ago.

Some legal experts are cautiously optimistic at the possibility of pursuing justice for Palestinians at the ICC, but there are also those who have been less optimistic, citing the many challenges that lay ahead and institutional issues within the ICC itself. Al-Shabaka member and PhD researcher Rania Muhareb summarizes this rather succinctly.

Rania Muhareb 4:53

The ICC really provides an important avenue to address Israeli impunity. Its role may be limited in terms of the pursuit of Palestinian rights, but again, this is not the only avenue at our disposal. And there is a need for more concerted efforts.

Together with an ICC investigation, there need to be also effective measures by states — sanctions to bring to an end the illegal situation, including the apartheid regime imposed over the Palestinian people — and other effective measures in order to end Israeli impunity, remembering again that the ICC has a very specific mandate in terms of pursuing individual perpetrators but does not look at questions of state responsibility, for example, in prolonging the oppression of Palestinians.

So this means that the ICC needs to be considered together with other avenues



and not as an avenue on its own. We know that states in the past — some states — have pursued justice in their own courts for perpetrators of serious crimes against Palestinians. These have not succeeded, as I mentioned, due to political pressure, but the obligation remains there.

In 2019, for example, the last UN Commission of Inquiry on the Great March of Return reminded states of their obligations under the Rome Statute, but also under the Fourth Geneva Convention, to prosecute or extradite perpetrators of grave breaches in their own jurisdictions. So this is an important obligation that remains there and should be pursued alongside an investigation by the ICC into the situation in Palestine.

Yara Hawari 6:30

In March 2021, Israelis went to the polls to vote in their fourth general election in two years. This seemingly endless cycle of elections and political deadlock was a result of a failure by Israeli political leaders to form a coalition government.

Now, a major part of this story, which has been routinely overlooked by the mainstream media, is the Palestinian citizens of Israel and their united slate of political parties, the Joint List.

Al-Shabaka member and co-editor of *+972 Magazine*, Amjad Iraqi, explains the significance of this list and what it means for the Palestinian community in Israel.

Amjad Iraqi 7:06

In the five, six years since its establishment, the Joint List has had quite a significant impact. It was the first time that Palestinian citizens of Israel have one single address. It's not just an MK here and an MK there, but there is a united political body representing the community.

It also took much more of a high-profile status compared to another institution



called the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel, which has been a long-standing institution that represents civil society groups, political parties, as well as parties that do not run for the Knesset. But the High Follow-Up Committee has really reduced in its visibility and impact in the community.

So the Joint List took this very important space to say that we are the political leadership and that we are uniting the community around a common political agenda. Which essentially boils down to: national equality for all citizens in the state inside Israel, and a complete end to the occupation — no questions asked — for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. And finding this balance between asserting their Palestinian identity with utilizing their Israeli citizenship.

There's been a positive impact, for example, in international advocacy — the way that not just Israelis but also internationals are now aware that there's such a thing as Palestinian citizens. For people to hear and listen to a political party in Israel that's not just talking about the idea of a Jewish and democratic state, but that they're asserting themselves as the sole democratic camp in the Israeli political spectrum.

The biggest irony of the list was that there was only one political camp promoting true equality and the end of the occupation. And that political party was led by Palestinians. So that had an enormous impact on international understanding. It really shook, I think, much of the Israeli political understanding of Palestinian citizens, even if they disagreed with it.

So they forcibly asserted themselves in that respect. But ultimately, the list — for all of these added benefits — still suffers from a huge amount of flaws and internal issues. And this major political project may have come to its rather dreadful end.

Yara Hawari 9:07



Two months after the Israeli elections, we saw the Unity Intifada erupt — a Palestinian uprising across colonized Palestine, where Palestinians en masse took to the streets in shared struggle to protest and resist settler colonialism across various geographies in a variety of ways.

In Sheikh Jarrah, the catalyst of the uprising, we saw the mobilization of mostly young Palestinian activists heeding the call to save and protect the neighborhood. In Haifa, we saw demonstrations and shared struggle. And later, when Palestinians were attacked by Jewish Israeli lynch mobs, we saw those same Palestinians organize themselves into collectives to defend the vulnerable.

But protests and confrontations with the Israeli army and police were not the only features of this uprising. We also saw a nationwide strike on the 18th of May, which had massive participation from Palestinians all over, as well as by those globally in solidarity.

So how did the case of Sheikh Jarrah inspire the Palestinian masses? Al-Shabaka member and environmental researcher Dr. Muna Dajani has some answers for us.

Muna Dajani 10:11

Palestinians all over — all across Palestine — are experiencing the same apparatus and the same mechanisms of dispossession. If we talk only about expulsions from homes based on these false claims of ownership and these false claims of Palestinians being mere tenants in their own homes, we've seen that once the Sheikh Jarrah movement and the Save Sheikh Jarrah mobilization started taking shape, lots of Palestinians said: this is happening in Yaffa, this is happening in Lyd. The same mechanisms have been used by the settler colonial state against Palestinians wherever they are, whatever the political realities are for those Palestinians. And whether these Palestinians have Israeli citizenship, or whether you are a mere resident in Jerusalem, or whether you are a Palestinian ID holder in the West Bank, in Gaza — we are all Palestinians facing the same



methods of dispossession everywhere. And this is why I think the Sheikh Jarrah case has been so unifying for Palestinians everywhere.

I think a lot of commentators and a lot of people and the residents themselves describe it as an ongoing Nakba. And I think this is why all Palestinians have witnessed through their live feeds what the youth of Sheikh Jarrah — especially Mohammed and Muna and many others who were on the ground sharing live footage of what type of brutality they're facing from the settlers and from the Israeli soldiers and police.

And everybody saw in it their own dispossession, their own stories of Nakba of their families, parents, and grandparents. So Sheikh Jarrah in a way describes and symbolizes that experience. And I think this is why we see it being also shared so widely. And the fact that Palestinians from all over the spectrum — even Palestinians in the diaspora, as we've seen — are saying no more, we are going to act this time, because this is another existential threat to not only our existence on the land but our memory of the place and our future in this place.

So I think it really is such a strong case. And I think what's really interesting is how it linked so easily and so smoothly to what's happening in Silwan, what the Palestinians in the Naqab, in the Galilee, in the West Bank, and in Gaza — we were all in this together. And I think that's what unified more and more the Palestinian case and the Palestinian experience.

Yara Hawari 12:37

During this time, Israel started a bombardment campaign of Gaza for about 10 days. Over 250 people were killed, including 66 children, in Israeli airstrikes. Not only were people massacred, but vital infrastructure was destroyed, including the main road to the main hospital, a main COVID testing clinic, residential buildings, a media center housing international media stations, and much more.



As expected, during this time we saw huge international media coverage of the events. Something that was interesting was that in the media coverage, we saw different non-official Palestinian voices hitting the mainstream outlets in ways that I think we've never seen before. And these voices were using language that is seldom heard on mainstream media.

Al-Shabaka member and digital rights expert Marwa Fatafta explains more.

Marwa Fatafta 13:35

I think it would not be an overstatement to say that what we have witnessed during the past few weeks is a narrative breakthrough. For decades, Palestinians have been dehumanized through and through in international media — in the way their suffering under Israel's brutal occupation has been negated or dismissed, how they are vilified as terrorists or instigators of violence, whilst the colonizer and the occupier is portrayed as the victim. And also in the way Palestinian life has always been relegated to a lower status, justified by "Israel's right to defend itself."

This time, however, we see Palestinian voices being centered more prominently. Palestinians were given airtime on American and international TV stations. I, however, would not give the sole credit to those outlets, but rather to young and intelligent Palestinian journalists, analysts, and activists who are able to reflect and describe the Palestinian struggle eloquently and unapologetically — as well as their power to refuse being ambushed by Western TV journalists or presenters asking questions in bad faith or out of ignorance.

Mohammed El-Kurd from Sheikh Jarrah was such a powerful and refreshing voice, telling the truth as it is — unfettered and uncensored. Some of the media highlights for me were John Oliver's segment on Israel's war on Gaza, where he killed the unremitting myth of "both sides" propagated by the international community. That segment was a sign that the walls of traditional media are starting to crack, and the reality of Palestinians is coming to the so-called



mainstream media.

Another example that comes to mind is the *New York Times* front-page coverage of the 62 Palestinian children killed in Gaza during Israel's airstrikes, which is really a first.

This being said, I think we should not be delusional that those examples are the exception and not the rule. International media houses continue to cover the violence on the ground without contextualizing it, bringing the unarmed occupied people to an equal footing with the occupier, which, as you know, is one of the most powerful military powers in the world.

At the same time, as more accurate terms describing the reality of Palestinians — the reality of apartheid, settler colonialism — started to make it into the mainstream lexicon, we saw and read leaks of editorial instructions being circulated to journalists and media personnel banning the use of such words under the pretext of partial reporting.

Yara Hawari 16:14

Now, of course, social media also played into this narrative shift that Marwa talked about, and we saw a huge amount of mobilization online and on social media platforms. Whilst this year we saw it being used in ways it hadn't before, over the last decade social media has increasingly become a site for political activity.

Yet whilst it's been a useful tool in mobilization, it's also been used by state authorities and regimes as a tool to repress. In recent years, an increasing number of Palestinians have been reporting that their rights of expression are being suppressed by dominant social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This has included the removal of content, the blocking of accounts, and restrictions on access.



Al-Shabaka member and Assistant Professor at Birzeit University, Dr. Amal Nazzal, explains how Israel uses social media platforms to surveil and detain Palestinians.

Amal Nazzal 17:08

What is purely illegal here is that the censoring system identifies suspects — not real suspects — based on a prediction of violence. It's only predictions that the person who posted such a post or video or an analysis of something online might do in the future, any type of attack. And what is illegal is that this cyber unit and the whole monitoring system of Israel is illegally monitoring our online data, and based on some suspicious analysis of this unit, some Palestinians in Israel [are targeted].

What makes it also even worse is that any Facebook profile that is marked as suspicious by the system and these units is a potential target for a direct arrest. Actually, the law — the illegal law, actually — of this cyber unit allows the arrest to happen within 24 hours. And Israel's main accusation will be that these Facebook accounts posted material that constitutes incitement of violence, of course.

So based on what I have just discussed regarding how this Israeli policing system of cybersecurity works and operates, the recent number of Israeli and Palestinian Authority security forces arrests was around 800. So 800 Palestinians were arrested by Israeli and Palestinian Authority security forces based on their posts on social media, in particular Facebook, because Facebook is the most popular social media platform.

Yara Hawari 18:43

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At the end of June, activist and outspoken critic of the Palestinian Authority, Nizar Banat, was arrested and beaten to death by the Palestinian Authority security services. Many dubbed it a political assassination, leading Palestinians across the West Bank and beyond to protest and demand justice for Nizar Banat and his family.

But the chants soon escalated into a larger call for the fall of the regime and for the end of PA President Mahmoud Abbas's reign. The protests in the West Bank, particularly in Ramallah, were met with extreme violence and repression at the hands of the security forces, including the use of Israeli-manufactured tear gas and stun grenades, as well as beatings and arrests.

Al-Shabaka policy advisor and researcher Dr. Alaa Tartir sheds light on why this type of repression was carried out.

Alaa Tartir 20:06

The techniques that the Palestinian security forces use vary according to the time and depending on the severity of the crisis that they are facing. But what is important to keep in mind is that policing is indeed the key element in all of that. And policing — or controlling with an iron fist — is the most defining feature, whatever it takes.

So they use different kinds of security forces in uniforms, but importantly, not in uniforms. And that is also not something that's happening today. This happened years ago. When the Palestinian Authority was established — just a quick reminder — when the Palestinian Authority was established, Edward Said at the time mentioned that Arafat had established several security forces, five of which were intelligence services tasked with spying on each other.



That is relevant to the realities of today. The mushrooming of all these security forces meant that the activists protesting on the ground didn't know who was controlling them, who was attacking them. And that is not happening by incident — that is by design, that is by structure. And this is what authoritarian regimes are good at: to confuse the protesters about who's attacking them.

We need to keep a clear fact in our mind: that the security establishment of the Palestinian Authority is also a Fatah establishment, and vice versa. So these actors, or the security personnel, are also factional. They are led by the factional politics. They can easily be instrumentalized.

And these techniques that are used in the streets are important. The visible ones — the repressing of the protesters, the violence, the excessive use of violence — are the ones that we see. They are the visible ones that can be documented in the media. They can be exposed. But what is also more dangerous, maybe arguably, are the invisible ones — the techniques, the tactics that are used mainly in the PA prisons that we don't see on cameras, that we don't see visibly.

Over the years, there have been rather scary accounts of all these torturing techniques that the Palestinian Authority security forces used against Palestinian protesters and Palestinian critics of the Palestinian Authority. Many of these techniques are very similar to the ones that Israel uses in Israeli jails. And there are replicas, but it comes even harder when it is practiced by Palestinian national security forces.

And there are enough reports out there — of human rights organizations, local and international, from different researchers — that documented all these techniques of torturing. And that is unacceptable. But in reality, unfortunately, it happened.

But linking also these techniques and the reaction of the Palestinian Authority with this iron fist of security establishment with what's happening now — it is obvious



that the political and security leadership of the Palestinian Authority will push back against any effort that aims to challenge or shake the fundamental pillars of the status quo.

And this is exactly what is happening now, because that status quo — although it is damaging to the Palestinian people, and this is why they are revolting against it — is convenient and conducive to the Palestinian leadership and its security establishment.

Yara Hawari 23:40

Now, of course, it's not just the PA that imprisons and detains Palestinians. The Israeli incarceration regime has devastated Palestinian society. Since 1948, it is estimated that one in five Palestinians have been incarcerated, and that figure since 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza alone has reached 800,000 individuals. Today, there are about 4,650 political prisoners, 200 of which are children.

Those with West Bank or Gazan IDs are subject to a military court system with a 99% conviction rate. Incarceration and prison is something that most Palestinians know very well. Either they, their parents, or their friends have seen the inside walls of a prison. It's cyclical and has become a very normalized facet of Palestinian life.

In September, one story in particular brought Israel's incarceration regime into the spotlight once again. Six Palestinian political prisoners tunneled their way out of the heavily fortified Gilboa prison and escaped to freedom. Palestinians everywhere celebrated their escape, and although it didn't last long, it captured the hearts and minds of Palestinians everywhere.

Here is Al-Shabaka member and Harvard PhD candidate Randa Wahbe explaining why.

Randa Wahbe 25:02



I think this week has been a moment where Palestinians have felt very uplifted and inspired by these six prisoners who were able to liberate themselves. As you know, over a period of about 9 or 10 months, since December 2020, they had been slowly excavating a tunnel using one small metal stick — a spoon — that they had managed to hide in their cell. And that is how they freed themselves. And Gilboa is one of the most notoriously secure Israeli prisons.

Israel has often used this prison as an example of their surveillance and intelligence. So for these six prisoners to be able to liberate themselves and taste freedom for five days has greatly opened up, I think, for Palestinians everywhere, the ability to dream about how we might see freedom one day. And how this dream is really planted in us by these prisoners who have reminded us of the power of will and determination.

And this morning, I was reading a communication from one of the lawyers of Mohammed al-Arda. He's one of the four who were captured a few days ago and finally was able to see a lawyer today. And Mohammed told him — which he relayed to the public — that during these days of freedom, he had wandered around the orchards of Marj Ibn Amer, and he ate cactus fruit, *sabr*, for the first time in 22 years. And that for that moment, he forgot the bitterness of prison.

And I think for us, this really gives inspiration and also shows how much Palestinians, no matter the hardships of imprisonment, can really still continue to see liberation and freedom. So this moment has been particularly important for Palestinians everywhere — to really see that the fortified Israeli system of incarceration has holes and can be penetrated. That has been crucial, when the system has been built to monitor Palestinians and to keep Palestinians feeling that they are always under the eye of Israeli surveillance.

Yara Hawari 27:00

In September, the US House of Representatives voted to provide Israel with \$1



billion in renewed funding for its Iron Dome missile system. This was an addition to the \$3.8 billion in military financing that the US has already provided to Israel in 2021.

Of course, the US has long been a financial supporter and ally of Israel. Indeed, it's vital for the US's imperial and capitalist interests in the Middle East, and this relationship has played a key role in shaping the politics of the region ever since.

Although still pretty unshakable, we're seeing some cracks in the narrative that defends the military aid to Israel. Let's listen to Al-Shabaka member and former visiting US fellow Nadya Tannous sharing some important insights into those cracks.

Nadya Tannous 27:53

In light of the developments on the ground in Palestine during the Unity Intifada — and for the US context, still being in the shadow of the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor uprisings — some of the pushback from the grassroots level really caught on at the congressional level.

So on May 5th, Congress was notified of the \$735 million commercial sale of precision-guided weapons to Israel, which initiated a 15-day period when Congress members may object. And that's routine. So what happened then between May 5th and May 20th was gruesome. It was an onslaught of Israeli colonial violence, including airstrikes on Gaza that killed 243 Palestinians.

And at the tail end of the 15 days, then-representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Mark Pocan, and Bernie Sanders proposed a series of bills designed to halt this transaction — the \$735 million commercial sale.

On May 13th, Representatives Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, Cori Bush, Rashida Tlaib, and others in the Squad gathered in the US Congress and publicly expressed support for the Palestinian people. And they called for an end to funding Israeli



military aggression. And that was a big deal. I had never seen — we had never seen — something like this done on the floor.

And I think even newcomer Representative Marie Newman called on the State Department to condemn the ethnic cleansing of Sheikh Jarrah as a violation of international law. And they used terms in both cases, like apartheid, to describe Israel as a state. Again, language never before spoken in those halls by people in power.

And those words were inherited from years of grassroots organizing, advocacy work, and solidarity initiatives on behalf of the Palestinian people and their right to self-determination — our right to self-determination.

Also the presentation — when I think about Cori Bush, for example — she connected militarized policing, anti-war movements. They connected anti-occupation, anti-apartheid with social justice and collective liberation with Palestinian liberation.

And in the so-called United States, grassroots movements of Palestine supporters have taken to the streets en masse across all major cities this summer and late spring. And they called out the grotesque imbalance of power and poked holes in the stale peace discourse that distracts from Israeli military aggression, expanding systems of control, and all the racist tropes that equate Palestinian resistance with terrorism.

And they hold us to an aesthetic standard that Israel does not confine itself to and the US would never hold Israel to, right? This is the obvious double standard between the support of the colonizer and the colonized.

And so I think online and social media campaigns that have critiqued the US's direct contribution to the onslaught against Palestinians have also demanded that political representatives do something about this. And so the US's blank check to



Israel has been particularly front and center in terms of folks bringing it forward and saying, this is ridiculous, we have to do something.

Yara Hawari 31:18

In October, we saw some major news stories break about Israel's cyber surveillance of Palestinians — from the hacking of Palestinian NGO staff phones whose organizations have been criminalized by the Israeli regime, to the mass deployment of facial recognition software to be used against Palestinians across the West Bank.

Mass surveillance of Palestinians by the Israeli regime is nothing new. And whilst this level of technological sophistication is novel, it is important to contextualize it within the panoptic reality that Palestinians have always experienced since the establishment of the Zionist settler colonial project in historic Palestine.

Indeed, Palestine has become a laboratory for these kinds of surveillance technologies, and this has had serious implications for the rest of the world. Digital rights expert and advocacy advisor for 7amleh, Mona Shtaya, explains why.

Mona Shtaya 32:12

Colonial and oppressive regimes usually agree on one point, which is the oppression of people. For this, the Israeli regime usually sells these technologies to other repressive regimes in general, and to regimes in the Global South in particular. And this has an impact on the safety of people first.

And contrary to the image that security companies and governments usually export — that these technologies are important to maintain the safety of people — I see that in the first place, it violates people's safety and privacy, and it works to normalize militarization and securitization in people's subconscious, thus violating their right to privacy.



And because oppressive regimes and colonial regimes usually do not allow anyone to criticize them, they use these techniques to prevent people from expressing their right to freedom of opinion and expression, and thus preventing them from their right to self-determination.

So we feel with all oppressed people who usually suffer with their governments, with the regime, because of the use of surveillance technologies — especially those imported from the Israeli regime.

If we have a look back into other regimes' histories, like the UAE regime for example, we can see how they also use the same technology — which is NSO, or Pegasus — against their political opponents. For example, there is a human rights defender who passed away a couple of months ago called Alaa al-Siddiq, and she was living in the United Kingdom because she couldn't go back to the UAE. After her death, they discovered that there was NSO spyware on her mobile phone.

Also, Jamal Khashoggi was having such spyware on his mobile phone. In Morocco, the government was using surveillance technologies, specifically NSO, against their political opponents and against human rights defenders and lawyers in the previous years. They have a long history of how they are using that.

In a systematic manner, these regimes are using these against journalists who could criticize them, against political opponents, activists, and human rights defenders. And it's clear that these colonial and oppressive regimes — they have one mission, which is to surveil people and prevent people from living in a safe world without having this kind of feeling of being surveilled and monitored all the time.

Yara Hawari 34:54

In November, the Israeli regime opened up its borders to tourists who met the various COVID requirements after over 18 months of being pretty much closed —



only to close down again after the discovery of the Omicron variant.

Now, we may think of tourism as a rather benign aspect of the Israeli apartheid regime, but actually it plays a key role in legitimizing and expanding Israeli theft of Palestinian land. And Christian Zionist tourism is particularly ostentatious in its disregard for Palestinian rights, as Halah Ahmad, former US policy fellow, explains.

Halah Ahmad 35:27

It's very important to understand the role of Christian Zionists here and the dominant role that they then play as tourists in this economic engine for the continued theft of Palestinian land.

The major advocacy organization in the United States that represents Christian Zionists is Christians United for Israel, and it boasts 10 million members. That is a hundred times as large as the membership that represents AIPAC, which is the most notorious pro-Israel Zionist lobby in the US. And Christian Zionists are the largest and most significant source of support for Israel, both as an electorate and as donors.

And in coordination with Jewish Zionist groups, Christian Zionists have successfully conflated Christian religious identity with support for Israel. And that's what it means to talk about this as a "rite of passage." This is an explicit effort to use tourism as a political tool — to use religious tourism especially to create support for Israel as part of a Christian identity.

The two things — Christianity and support for Zionism — would seem so distinct, particularly because Christian Palestinians have long preserved Christian traditions and belief in the Holy Land but are naturally opposed to Israeli apartheid, colonization, and oppression of Palestinians, which affects even their own practice of their faith — whether it's practicing or celebrating Easter or Christmas or whatever it may be, the occupation forces will no less obstruct their



lives as Palestinians.

So evangelicals believe that supporting Jewish migration to Israel brings them closer to the return of Jesus — oddly enough, when they also believe that Muslims and Jews alike would be annihilated.

There is a key case study of a Christian Zionist group that I talk about in the brief, which is really emblematic of the kinds of religious tourism that become extremely complicit in furthering the settler colonial agenda. The example is Passages. It's a US-based group that was modeled after the Birthright trips that are much more notorious, and they provide a free trip to Israel for Christians at over 150 universities across the United States. And over the past six years or so, they've brought 7,000 students to Israel.

Now, the trip itself is not apolitical, much as it is also meant to be ostensibly religious. It was the brainchild of former Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer, who hosted the launch of this program at the Israeli embassy in DC with none other than other former ambassadors Michael Oren and, most recently, David Friedman.

And the trip is meant to encourage this Christian support for the Zionist state. Quite cynically, the itinerary is quite explicit in its support for the Zionist colonization of Palestine. They visit the Syrian-occupied Golan Heights on the itinerary — and this is based on research that was done by Friends of Sabeel North America and alongside some Palestinian student solidarity groups on campuses. And they explore Israeli startup culture. They tour the Knesset. They learn about Christian and Jewish "persecution" in the Middle East.

And the idea here is that they are centering a very different narrative around Israel. First of all, leaning on that historic colonial mythology that Jewish settlement was this sort of modernizing force in Palestine — of the "uncivilized," as they would say, Palestinian population. This focus on Israeli modernity is very problematic in that sense. So what it does is it makes Christian tourism and



Palestinian oppression really two sides of the same coin — by reinforcing this idea of Jewish continuity in Palestine and really overlooking any of the land theft that predicates this tourism industry.

Yara Hawari 39:17

As you will have heard, Palestine has had a tough year in 2021. We experienced some highs and small victories, but also some devastating lows — all set against the backdrop of an ongoing pandemic and a continuous settler colonial project that seeks our erasure.

I hope that this podcast has given you some insight into this. But most of all, I hope it has shown you that Palestinians can speak, do speak, and will not cease to speak about all aspects of our oppression and our struggle for liberation.

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