PODCAST

Palestine in 2023: Unfolding Nakba and Genocide

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network · December, 2023

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

Yara Hawari 0:00

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

As we end the year 2023, the Israeli regime's genocide in Gaza continues. Bombs are still raining down on people's homes, on schools, on hospitals, and shelters. Meanwhile, the people in Gaza are being pushed further and further south, with fears that they'll eventually be exiled into the Egyptian Sinai desert.

The Israeli army has invaded and occupied the north of Gaza and seems intent on staying. Many say this is the Nakba of our generation, and indeed we have surpassed 1948 in terms of both the numbers of those killed and those displaced. This is a horrific moment in the Palestinian story, but it does not exist in isolation.

Rather, it exists within the broader context of continuous Zionist settler colonialism and erasure, and unwavering international impunity for the Israeli regime. And that's why in this podcast episode, we have collated some of the most important soundbites of all our podcast episodes of 2023. Together, they shed light on the Palestinian experience under settler colonialism, provide analysis on repressive policies, and highlight pushback and resistance by Palestinians and their allies.

Allies of the Israeli regime have been working hard in recent years to criminalize solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for liberation. These efforts have been so draconian that many argue they undermine the very fundamental principles of a democracy. Tariq Kenney-Shawa, Al-Shabaka's US Policy Fellow, explained why this is happening in the US and what this means for political movements beyond those related to Palestine.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 1:53

Across the US, a growing number of Americans are heeding calls to boycott Israeli goods and services. Unsurprisingly, Israel's apologists are stepping up their efforts at both the state and federal levels to shield Israel from accountability. And they're doing this by going straight for our First Amendment rights to free speech and political boycott.

And they're insisting that by criticizing a nation state's policies, we are somehow being inherently antisemitic. Since 2014, dozens of states have adopted laws designed to punish individuals and companies that refuse to do business with those who profit from the Israeli regime's occupation. And their message to us is clear.

Take action — any action — to hold Israel accountable for its crimes, and you will pay. They won't stop at boycotts of Israel. If these forces are successful, they will use it as a template to target the right to boycott just about anything that goes against their interests.

In fact, several states have already used these anti-BDS boycott legislations as a template for copycat laws that will criminalize other boycotts and other forms of protest, such as preventing businesses from boycotting fossil fuels and firearms industries. And for example, we're seeing in Kentucky SB205, which prohibits the state from entering into contracts with companies unless they submit written certification that they will not engage in a boycott of energy companies. So just to

reiterate my earlier point, efforts to clamp down on Palestinian solidarity by outlawing boycotts of Israel are just one tactic amid a larger strategy by reactionary elements on both sides of the partisan divide to undermine democratic values in the US. And if they're successful, these forces will undoubtedly direct their efforts at other forms of protest and free speech that are being leveraged in calls for justice.

Yara Hawari 3:41

This kind of high-level repression is not only happening in the US. Ben Jamal, Director of the British Palestine Solidarity Campaign, explained how this kind of repression is also happening in the UK and how it too has wide implications on British citizens' rights and freedom of expression.

Ben Jamal 3:58

This global campaign being waged by Israel to delegitimize the Palestinian struggle — and obviously that begins with targeting any form of Palestinian resistance, delegitimizing it, targeting human rights defenders on the ground that are defending the rights of Palestinians, usually through narratives of terrorism — but then also expanding globally to target any organization and individuals that are active in supporting the Palestinian struggle for liberation. And there, the most usual narrative that's used is to define any such activism as antisemitic, by conflating legitimate support for the Palestinian struggle with antisemitism.

And that campaign of delegitimization is very, very active in the UK. And where we see that playing out — we see it at the moment, for example, actively playing out in academic space, in universities. We have numerous examples of individual students being targeted for their activism, being accused of antisemitism, being subjected to disciplinary investigations by their universities.

We see the same tactic used against academics. In the vast majority of those

cases — and there is now an organization called the European Legal Support Center that is very, very active in providing support to individuals and organizations under attack — in most of those cases, the disciplinary proceedings do not proceed to anyone having action taken against them because the allegations are entirely spurious and can be shown to be so.

But obviously what it does is create a chilling effect. So it toxifies the issue of Palestine and it makes people very cautious about putting their head above the parapet and being vocal in their advocacy for Palestinian rights. So we've got that dynamic, and then that colludes with another dynamic, which is a government in the UK — I would say successive Conservative governments in the UK — that have been bringing in a whole range of laws that in lots of ways are clamping down on the right to protest. We've had a whole bevy of laws, the policing bill, laws that are affecting the right to strike, and most recently the Public Order Act. And what that is doing is in very serious ways attacking the fundamental right to protest.

Yara Hawari 6:28

So we know that this repression of Palestinian solidarity is happening, and many of the ways in which it is happening. But why is it happening? Maha Nassar, historian at the University of Arizona and an Al-Shabaka member, gave us an explanation in the context of the attempts to criminalize the chant "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

Maha Nassar 6:47

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 part of, 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 of 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 to 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 — that these are demands for Palestinian freedom, and these are attempts to criminalize the demands for Palestinian freedom.

Yara Hawari 8:35

And just as we are seeing cracks within the network of global state support for the Israeli regime, we're also seeing cracks within the Israeli regime itself. In their thousands, Israelis took part in so-called pro-democracy protests over the last year. These protests were largely aimed at Netanyahu's coalition and their efforts to erode Israeli Jewish democracy through various judicial reforms, but they were also an expression of anger at Netanyahu's attempts to evade corruption charges. Ameer Makhoul, activist and an Al-Shabaka member, shared with us why these protests are about saving the Israeli regime from itself and upholding militant settler colonialism.

Ameer Makhoul 9:11

The other aspect of the Israeli demonstrations — they are very militarized

demonstrations. The military voice, the security voice is very high. People are saying that we are going to the army, we are protecting the Israelis, we are protecting all citizens. So we don't agree that we will be led by ministers who are not serving in the army, like Ben Gvir and Smotrich. They are totally Israeli. They have very strong Israeli identity, which is very deep Zionist identity — that we have to protect our state, to defend it in order to be able to overcome our enemies.

This is the language of the debate. Nobody is speaking about occupation. Nobody is speaking about changing the regime. Nobody is speaking about making it a state of all citizens, not only for Jews. The opposition to Netanyahu are in line with Netanyahu in supporting the Jewish state. All of them support the law to confiscate the citizenship of Palestinians. So it's not a matter that anybody wants to change the nature of the state. They want to keep the nature of the state.

Yara Hawari 10:32

Indeed, many in the West viewed these protests as a battle between liberal and right-wing Zionism and had high hopes for the former to win out. Muhannad Ayyash, professor of sociology at Mount Royal University and an Al-Shabaka member, explained what liberal Zionism is and how it is a core pillar of the Zionist movement.

Muhannad Ayyash 10:50

Liberal Zionism is today's sort of dominant force on the left wing of the Zionist movement, which itself is not that dominant anymore, as you rightly point out. Israeli politics have veered further and further to the right. But liberal Zionism basically presents itself as the defender of human rights, international security, law and order, progress, democracy, toleration of diversity, respect for ethnic, racial, religious, and gender diversity, and so on and so forth. So that's its place in the larger Zionist movement. It speaks the language of Israel as a liberal democracy that promotes European, Euro-American progress in civilization and modernity in

general.

So some of its main principles or tenets: it proclaims that the establishment of the Israeli state is the only way to secure Jewish safety and security. It sees the Israeli state — like the Zionist movement, as it is Zionist — as the only way to resolve the so-called Jewish question of antisemitic Europe. And it views the land, the historic land of Palestine, as the rightful place where that project should unfold — that this land is really the land of Israel and that Israeli Jews have an inherent sovereign claim to that territory. And therefore, 1948 becomes a central event that it views as unquestionable.

As far as liberal Zionism is concerned, 1948 was a war of independence. It was a war where Israel was created to safeguard Jews from across the world and protect themselves against the aggression of Arab states who were hostile to the idea of creating the Jewish state in the land of historic Palestine. And some of them will acknowledge the so-called tragic dimension of that founding — that is, the displacement and expulsion of the indigenous Palestinian inhabitants — but they ultimately view this as a righteous, valid, and legitimate war of independence that should no longer be open to any kind of serious decolonial critiques. So therefore, any kind of Palestinian critiques of the foundation of the Israeli state — that becomes, I think, the most critical element of liberal Zionism. Don't touch 1948.

Yara Hawari 13:24

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From liberal Zionism to neoliberalism, Asmaa Abu Mezied, a gender and economic justice expert and an Al-Shabaka member, explained how the donor community through the aid and development sector is complicit in the depoliticization of the reality in Palestine, and particularly with regards to the energy crisis facing the

West Bank and Gaza.

Asmaa Abu Mezied 13:56

Energy crisis in Palestine — donors treat it as a humanitarian or a development issue. So by providing Palestinians with capacity building, technical capacity building, by investing in technology-related solutions, by investing in solar power, for example, Palestinians supposedly should be able to solve the issue or lessen the amount of energy crisis that they have. And this is a very depoliticized view of an issue that is very political in its core.

The issue with electricity and the energy crisis is very political because in order to have energy security and energy independence, you need to have control and sovereignty over your natural resources so that you can work toward coming up with solutions that benefit the Palestinian community. But in the whole structure in which Palestinians are living, they do not have any control over their natural resources because the Israeli regime is controlling these natural resources. So what the international community ends up doing is really providing Palestinians with painkillers and very short-term solutions, rather than addressing the big elephant in the room, rather than addressing the root causes, which is the role of the Israeli regime in perpetuating and maintaining the energy crisis.

So any solution — if we want to talk about sustainable solutions — it really needs to challenge the role of the Israeli regime and it also needs to hold them accountable for all the challenges Palestinians face. And I'll just give an example of Palestinians in Area C, where they need to have permits to establish any solar energy system, and usually they get denied these permits. But even in donor-supported projects that establish solar panels, these solar panels are being destroyed and there is no accountability for the Israeli regime for destroying this infrastructure that has been paid for by the international community.

Yara Hawari 16:07

The donor community in Palestine is also complicit in increased political repression of Palestinians in the West Bank from the PA, the Palestinian Authority. Alaa Tartir, Director and Senior Researcher of the MENA program at SIPRI and Policy Advisor at Al-Shabaka, explained this in the context of the security coordination and the so-called revolving door policy.

Alaa Tartir 16:29

The Oslo Accords in that sense was a security arrangement, or a security agreement, in effective terms — to sustain the status quo, and not an agreement to make the Palestinian people living in the West Bank and Gaza in particular closer to statehood or to freedom. And the key element of that framework, of that security framework, is the so-called security coordination or security collaboration paradigm. And security collaboration or security coordination takes different forms, different shapes, and the revolving door policy is one of its components.

What we call in Arabic the revolving door policy is effectively a mechanism to operationalize the overall security framework agreement or arrangement or coordination that is put in place with the Oslo Accords. And this revolving door is a transactional and operational protocol, whereby Palestinians — activists, freedom fighters, opposition members — are imprisoned by the Palestinian Authority or the Israeli regime, and then directly or indirectly handed over or handed back to one of those, the Palestinian Authority or Israel. So for example, the Palestinian Authority can arrest a Palestinian and a few days, a few hours, a few weeks, a few months later, the person would be arrested by the Israeli regime for the same charges.

But it is precisely when there is an intifada, or there is an uprising, or there is a heightening in terms of resistance, and there is a new peak of resistance or larger mobilization — that's when the revolving door policy gets utilized and instrumentalized. So it is by design, designed to do that at that time, when

Palestinians are mobilizing, when Palestinians are resisting, when Palestinians are acting together to resist the oppression by the Israeli regime.

Yara Hawari 18:43

Amidst this deepening repression and entrenchment of colonial occupation, Palestinians, as they have done since 1948, are pushing back. Rashid Khalidi, history professor at Columbia University and an Al-Shabaka member, came on the podcast to tell us about the theft of his family's land in Jerusalem and the legal case around it.

Rashid Khalidi 19:03

I think the case is important, not because any of the people involved in it has any sense that they're going to recover their property — certainly not in the short term. That's not the point. The point is, first of all, to highlight something that is constantly — as you suggested in one of your earlier questions — obscured in media coverage, which is just the theft of Palestinian property, of Palestinian land. Not just the theft of a country and not just the ethnic cleansing of a country, but the seizure of people's livelihoods — agricultural and urban, private property, bank accounts, rugs, books, everything that they owned — was stolen from them after they were driven out of their homes in 1948. And as you say, this is never talked about. So I think any spotlight that can be put on this general issue is all to the good.

The second thing is, I hope it will, at the very least, embarrass and ideally stop the US government from formally accepting — through taking this property and building an embassy on it — Israel's theft of Palestinian land. Now Israel stole the land, and that's an issue that can only be dealt with in the very long term. But the US government is about to build on that property and thereby consecrate through that building its acceptance of this theft — formally accept, in other words, what Israel has done. And hopefully bringing up this issue can stop that, or at the very

least cause maximum embarrassment to the people who are doing it.

Yara Hawari 20:43

On May 2nd, 2023, political prisoner and leader of the prison hunger strikes, Khader Adnan, died. Basel Farraj, assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies at Birzeit University and an Al-Shabaka member, explained the significance of his struggle and that of the wider struggle of Palestinian political prisoners.

Basel Farraj 21:03

What Khader Adnan symbolizes is not just the hunger striking for liberation, or the attempt to kind of force your jailer to give you your freedom — and in his case, it's his freedom through his death basically, this time, his martyrdom. But I think his martyrdom is perhaps also a call to action for us to relook at what Palestinian prisoners mean. Why did these people — why have they spent most of their lives behind bars? What does it mean to have a national movement which is not able — not in the past, it's in the present — not able, or had not been able yet, to liberate all of its prisoners, all of its members of the struggle? And particularly to think about those who have lingered for decades behind Israel's walls, including for instance Walid Daqqa, who as listeners might know has been diagnosed with a very rare disease.

And I think here we have Khader Adnan, and we have also the triumph of the six Palestinian prisoners who managed to dig their own way to freedom. So, in a way, I think it's a wake-up call, and also perhaps an assertion — of the Palestinian prisoners, and by prisoners I mean us outside prisons and those inside prisons — an assertion of our desire for freedom, a desire for freedom that we have to work for, that will not just be simply given to us. Again, as in the 1970 hunger strike, where prisoners had won their right to address their jailer as jailer through struggle — they basically made that confrontation clear between them as prisoners, as

captives, and between the prison authority as their jailer, as their occupier.

Yara Hawari 22:49

For many Palestinians, imagining a future free of Zionist settler colonial domination is difficult. The constant process of erasure that Palestinians face means that surviving the ever-deteriorating present takes priority. Sarona Abuaker, a poet, artist, and worker in Palestinian education, and Danah Abdulla, designer, educator, and researcher, co-developed a discussion-based game called Countless Palestinian Futures and came on Rethinking Palestine to discuss how this project seeks to challenge temporal domination and stimulate the imagination by helping people develop tangible outcomes and ideas around Palestinian futures.

Sarona Abuaker 23:25

Palestinians, essentially, like our return and other people's returns, have been snatched from us. And it's been placed within a very hegemonic process dictated by the UN and by the IMF and all of these governing bodies. And when Palestinians have attempted to implement their return — whether through the Great March of Return, or what we saw during the Unity Intifada, with people in Jordan and in Lebanon walking back to Palestine — we see the very material ramifications of that. And so hopefully this game is a very humble, small way of us not seeking that permission.

Danah Abdulla 24:08

I've just remembered one really nice — I wouldn't say a really nice response, but it was a discussion that took place regarding the return question: are these different statuses of Palestinians — one with an ID card, one from Gaza, one from Jordan — do they remain? And is it something that's going to be stamped on me if I return? I think that was a very powerful question and thing to think about.

And it's amazing how much context changes, how who's in the room changes the responses. Because that experience — I think the crowds of people we played with generally in London are quite homogeneous. I'm not saying that Palestinians are, but you're more or less from similar spaces. Whereas in Lebanon it wasn't, and so they were concerned with very different things than what we are concerned about.

Sarona Abuaker 25:02

In the second iteration at Mayday Rooms, I remember one of the responses that I found to be really interesting — and Danah, you just pointed it out — was that it depends on the context, creates the response. And it really forces us to grapple with, I think, the facade of nationalism, but also the very real questions we are facing, like who are we beyond this crisis in many instances? And one of the questions we asked was about what kind of education would we teach — something along those lines.

And someone's first immediate response was, well, we have to first agree on a shared history, one unified history. And I found that to be so, so fascinating. Because what does that history then look like? What is the necessity of an agreed shared history in order to then live together? I don't know — I don't have the answer — but I think that's part of the fun.

Yara Hawari 25:59

Many human rights experts have asserted that the Israeli regime's latest assault on Gaza amounts to genocide. At the time of recording, over 20,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli bombs, with at least a third of them children, and many more thought to be trapped under the rubble. Meanwhile, millions of people around the world have gathered in the streets of their cities and towns, declaring solidarity with the Palestinian people and with Gaza.

Organizations and groups have also issued statements condemning the Israeli

regime, not only for its most recent onslaught, but also for its decades-long colonial occupation of Palestine. There have likewise been efforts at direct action to shut weapons factories down and prevent the shipment of arms from reaching the Israeli regime. Yet this widespread international solidarity has been facing repression and an Orwellian crackdown from governments and various different actors.

I spoke with Layla Kattermann of the European Legal Support Center and Diala Shamas of the Center for Constitutional Rights for further insight on this suppression of mobilization. Together, they offer concrete advice for how to resist such efforts to stifle Palestinian solidarity and to continue standing with Gaza amidst this unfolding genocide.

Layla Kattermann 27:09

There's also a big defiance achievable through numbers. The demonstration bans in Berlin — although the police really try their best to prevent any assembly or protest from happening — when there are a lot of people, they can't do much. So even though there's a demonstration ban in Germany and there was one in France, people still went on the streets in huge numbers, so huge that the police couldn't do anything. Of course, they can still be violent, but people stick together and march regardless.

And apart from that, I think it is the time to speak up and out against what is happening, more than ever before. A lot of people are doing so. It is, I think, also the time to join forces — to connect with other people, whether at your place of employment or study or elsewhere, who share the same passion or will to do something about it, and to organize together. Smear campaigns, for example, which target a person, usually aim to isolate that person from society. It is always easier to attack one person than a group. So there's definitely strength in numbers when it comes to defying the current repression.

Diala Shamas 28:25

And remember, you're not alone. Speak out about the repression rather than be silent about it — it's actually really helpful to be doing that.

I think historically we've gone back and forth on this question of whether we want to be sort of advertising how difficult it is to speak about Palestinian rights, because we don't want to be discouraging folks from doing it. But at this point we're well past that point — everybody knows that this is happening. And I think when you speak out, you also draw support and solidarity and also can build organizing.

So organizing within your professional network or community — we've seen really inspirational models of artists coming together to support each other. We've seen people in the medical profession offer up support and help finding employment when someone's lost a job. I think that's kind of the level at which we're seeing solidarity, and it's a really important way to be building resilience in these moments of heightened targeting.

Yara Hawari 29:27

Thank you for listening to our final episode of the year, and we at Al-Shabaka continue to have hope that Palestinians will one day experience freedom.

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