

On Martyrdom

December 9, 2023



[This article is one of several articles on Palestine-Israel that will be appearing in our Winter 2024 issue.]

It is October 8, 2023. I am at a protest at Duwar al Manara, a roundabout in the center of Ramallah, with hundreds of others, young and old. The city, usually lively and bustling at all hours of the day, is closed today, mourning for the already hundreds of Palestinians killed in just twenty four hours. A young man sitting on someone's shoulders yells, his voice cracking:

"ya im al shaheed neyalik, ya reit imee badalik."—"Oh mother of the martyr, how lucky you are. If only my mother were in your place."

He yells it again and again. My eyes fill with tears as other young people in the crowd repeat the chant, shouting from the pits of their stomachs. My body heats up, flushed with grief, pride, and overwhelming love.

Since that day, I have heard this chant every day at Duwar al Manara, and it shakes up something inside of me every time. All these beautiful Palestinians, each one's existence itself a miracle, yearning for martyrdom. It feels like a tragedy, and it is. But it is also a reflection of the indomitable spirit that has kept our people alive.

Martyr, or *shaheed*, literally translated, means "witness." And the act of martyrdom, *istish-had*, means "to witness." Martyrs are witnesses to the injustices by which they were killed, and in turn, their communities bear witness to their deaths. It is a title of honor used all across the Arab world to describe a person murdered in a struggle for freedom and justice. This honor is not reserved solely for those who take up arms in this struggle, but anyone whose death is caused by an oppressor, including journalists, teachers, medics, and children.

One of the most common beliefs amongst Zionists about Palestinians, employed to dehumanize us and blame us for our own oppression, is that we do not value our own lives or the lives of our children. Israeli officials and Zionists repeat ad nauseam the claim that Palestinian militants use children as human shields. A quick google search of "Palestinian human shield" reveals countless

examples, including a video published by the IDF in May 2018, during the Great March of Return. The video plays a lullaby with the sound of gunfire and the words “where are the children of Gaza today?” After showing children amongst the protestors at the border fence, it then repeatedly displays the word “here” in all caps across the screen. Golda Meir, former prime minister of Israel, is famously known for saying that peace will only come “when [Palestinians] love their children more than they hate us.” This quote has made its rounds again in the last two months as the Israeli propaganda machine works tirelessly to manufacture global consent for this current iteration of Palestinian genocide.

Every few feet in the West Bank you will find a poster, mural, or monument dedicated to a *shaheed*. At the funeral of a martyr, when their body is brought out of their home—wrapped in white cloth and a Palestinian flag—the women in their family will *zaghrif* through their tears, an ululation of celebration usually reserved for weddings, graduations, births. The bodies of martyrs, unlike those of other deceased people, are not washed in preparation for their burial. Instead, they are kept as they are, in their clothes and their blood. This state is considered to be the purest by virtue of their martyrdom.

When Bassel Al-Araj, beloved Palestinian intellectual and activist, was murdered by the occupation forces, his father was asked to identify him through a photo of his dead, brutalized body. Upon seeing the photo, he exclaimed, “yes that is Bassel. May Allah bless you, my boy, I’ve never seen you look more handsome.”

More than just honoring martyrs, Palestinians celebrate martyrdom. But that is not because we don’t love life; in fact, it is because we love life enough to fight for our right to a dignified one.

To see our extraordinary love of life, you only have to see the youth of Akka diving from atop the city’s ancient walls into the Mediterranean Sea, or families gathered after prayer on the large steps of Damascus Gate in the Old City, cracking nuts and laughing in the cool evening breeze. You only have to see my family sitting around a *tabla* under our Jerusalem grape vines, singing Abdel Halim Hafiz in unison. You only have to see my grandma, older than the state of Israel, dancing her dance with her hand on her hip, forgetting all her aches and pains. Or attend a Mohammad Assaf concert—as I did on October 6th—and see the old and the young singing and dancing, sweat dripping down their faces as they dance *dabka* hand in hand.

But under military occupation, families cannot sit on the steps of Damascus Gate, the area now surrounded by military outposts staffed by 18-year-olds with baby fuzz on their lips and M16s in their arms. In fact, since 1980, most Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza are not allowed to travel to Jerusalem at all. And most Palestinians won’t ever jump off the sea walls of Akka, because they will never make it to the Mediterranean Sea. Most Palestinians, trapped by an apartheid wall and checkpoints, will never visit the ocean. My family, whose home is now surrounded by settlers, no longer sits outside under our grape vines. Our yard, where my mother grew up, was once a haven from which you could see much of East Jerusalem. That view is now covered by straw matting installed to protect us from settler attacks and intimidation.

Palestinians love life so much that we are not willing to live it like this. We are not willing to live under indefinite military occupation, under siege, in Bantustans, deprived of our natural resources and of our dignity, under violent rule and a puppet government that hands over its dissenting youth to the occupier.

And more than loving life—we love each other. Anyone who has been to Palestine knows this. I am a child of Palestinian parents in exile and grew up in Brooklyn. After being unable to travel to my homeland for five years, my partner and I quit our jobs to fulfill a longstanding dream of mine: to live

in Palestine for the maximum number of days Israel permits me to be here: ninety. When I (somewhat recklessly) hit another car in my first week, the driver and passenger of that car immediately ran to my grandmother in my passenger seat to make sure she was okay. Although the accident was absolutely my fault, they calmed me down and praised God for everyone's safety, especially my grandmother's, who they also called "grandmother." The driver assured me that I would not have to pay a shekel for the repairs. He was driving his employer's vehicle and he would take responsibility so that his employer—a large egg distribution company—would cover all of the costs. I was, after all, "*bint el balad*"—daughter of the country.

After we dropped the car off at a garage to be repaired, he drove my grandmother and me home, gifting us four dozen eggs. I was anxious for days while the car was being repaired, unable to imagine that there was not some sort of catch to this man's inexplicable kindness. There was not, and I was ashamed at the American individualism that let me doubt him.

Last week, I saw someone fall while riding a motorized scooter, and twenty people rushed to be at his side, lift him up, give him a drink of water, check on his scooter, and help him get home safely. Being in Palestine for the first time, my partner could not comprehend the kindnesses she received. She comes from an Indian family and thought she knew the heights of hospitality and generosity. Palestinians, she said, blew all the other Brown cultures out of the water. Within days, every shopkeeper in Ramallah was committed to teaching her Arabic. They fed her free falafel and waited patiently as she slowly formulated each sentence, gently correcting her mistakes (of which there were many).

"Ma ikhlaqnash in'eesh bil thul, ikhliqna in'eesh b-hureeya." Palestinians remind the world at every turn that: "We were not created to live in degradation, we were created to live in freedom." We were created to live in freedom, and yet, none of us have ever known freedom on our land.

During the First World War, the British asked for the Arabs' assistance in overthrowing the Ottomans, who had controlled the region for the last twenty generations. In exchange, they promised independence in the form of nation states—a modern artifact imposed on former colonies after the demise of imperial rule. Although most Arabs were in fact granted this independence, the British promised Palestine to European Zionists for the creation of a "national home for the Jewish people." Following three decades of colonial rule under the British Mandate, Palestinians lived under Israeli and Jordanian rule until 1967, and since then were entirely subject to settler-colonization by the state of Israel.

Since 1920, the strategies employed by the British and Israelis to repress Palestinian demands for self-determination have been disturbingly similar. The first organized iteration of Palestinian resistance to the settler-colonial project came in the form of a 6-month strike against the British in 1936, one of the longest in colonial history, in protest of British support for the Zionist state.^[1] That strike brought Palestinians nowhere closer to their goal of self-determination, despite lip service by the British to the contrary. Eventually, Palestinians took up more militant resistance in what is known as the "Great Revolt of 1936-39."^[2] Thousands of Palestinians suspected of having participated were arrested and subjected to military tribunals. The homes of those believed to be involved, and the homes of their families, were demolished. Hundreds were executed and thousands were indefinitely detained without charge. Movement leaders were deported or detained outside of Palestine in what the British themselves called "concentration camps." By 1939, ten percent of the adult male population had been killed, injured, deported, imprisoned, or exiled.^[3] Each of these tactics is used regularly by Israel today, most frequently in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.

In the face of such imperial violence, martyrdom has been an inevitability of Palestinian life for most

of the last century.

Four days before that first protest at Duwar al Manara, I am walking back from my music class and see a little boy trailing behind his mama carrying a pack of new toy trucks. He trips and falls, dropping his toys. He cries loudly and a young man and I help him up. A third person collects his toy trucks and hands them to him. "*Baseeta, baseeta*" I tell him, as I rub his back, which translates literally to, "it's simple, it's simple" or more accurately, "It's okay, you're okay." An older man standing nearby hears me and adds, "ah, *baseeta* wallah—oh people of Palestine how many beatings you will endure." That's the thing—there is almost no set of circumstances that protect a Palestinian from a beating at the hands of his oppressor. We are killed walking to school, providing emergency medical care to protestors, while harvesting our olives, and when we are reporting in our press gear. We are beaten in our coffins and our dead bodies are regularly detained. So perhaps, as my friend Ghazi told me, "Either you go to them, or they will come to you."

So much of life as a Palestinian is defined by a loss of agency, calculated to destroy our spirits. There is almost no part of Palestinian life that is untouched by arbitrary and seemingly random acts of Israeli control and violence. One morning, Israel might set up a new military checkpoint with absolutely no warning, and prevent thousands of people from getting to work, school, doctors' appointments. It can use an air strike to blow up a mosque in a refugee camp in the West Bank. It can break into our homes in the middle of the night, pull us out of our beds, blindfold us, beat us and detain us indefinitely without charge or any semblance of due process. It can record this torture and post it on social media. It can shoot and kill a young girl looking for her cat on the roof of her home. It can detain and torture children in solitary confinement and prevent their families or lawyers from contacting them. Settlers can burn our ancient olive trees and light our homes afire under the protection of the military. These settlers can shoot and kill four Palestinians at once, and then at the funeral procession, in broad daylight, kill two more—a father and son.

Israel can do almost anything, with impunity. So martyrdom and the celebration of martyrdom is about claiming agency. It is about reframing the losses of our people, of our bodies, as victory. Because even if we have nothing else, we have our resistance.

Martyrs are proof that we are still fighting, that we have not given the colonizer what it wants most, second only to our complete decimation: our docility. When we recognize and celebrate martyrs, we are celebrating the fact that we have not given up, nearly one hundred years later.

As a Palestinian in the diaspora, I am wary of romanticizing the struggle of Palestinians living every day of their lives under Israel's boot. So I asked the following question to a few of my friends, 15-year old Tamer who leads the daily protests in Ramallah, and shopkeepers in my neighborhood who have become good friends: "Why is martyrdom such an honor for Palestinians?" Each of the people who answered this question said that resistance is a natural response in the face of occupation and land theft. It is the only option for people who live under systematic humiliation and degradation. "Of course we love life, everyone loves life—but they steal life from us," Tamer told me.

While Western media portrays Palestinian resistance fighters as antisemites or religious fanatics, history tells us that armed resistance has been employed by people of all faiths, and people of no faith. My friend Kifah, whose very name means struggle, sees Palestinian armed resistance as a continuation of the struggle against imperialism by the Cubans, the Irish, the South Africans. He says Palestinians "learned and saw what gets you freedom, what language the enemy understands—which is violence unfortunately—so it's forced on us." Somberly, he says, "we were born in Palestine and this was our destiny."

In Gaza now, civil service workers like medics and rescue teams are unable to meet the overwhelming need for support. Most of the rescuing of people under the rubble is done by civilians, the majority of whom have also lost family members and friends, have been displaced, are hungry and thirsty, and in fear for their own lives. Yet they run to the scene of a bombed tower, dig through the rubble, carry bleeding children, men, and women in their arms and on their backs. In disbelief, they take turns kissing and rubbing the heads of the babies who are pulled out alive from under tons of concrete. With bare hands, they dig mass graves for entire families. And then they pray over them, and cry with those who knew them. Young people in overcrowded shelters play games with the children, sing and dance with them. Journalists allow these traumatized children to play with their cameras for a few minutes, to give them something to think about besides the terror they are enduring, to trick them into smiling for just a moment. Men and women in hospitals cradle babies whose parents are missing—dead perhaps—and hold them for as long as they need to be held. Doctors refuse to evacuate hospitals, despite threats that theirs will be next, refusing to abandon their patients. Instead, they sing. They tell the world, “We will stay here until the pain is over. We will live here and we will keep singing.”

So, we celebrate martyrdom because it is the ultimate manifestation of a love of life and a love of people, a love of the collective, and a refusal to accept anything less than a life of dignity. Palestinians celebrate martyrdom, not for the sake of dying, but because it is proof that we are still living. We long for a world where martyrdom is not necessary, not inevitable. Until then, as the saying goes, martyrs lay down and put their bodies as a bridge, so that others can cross.

^[1] Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resisting* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), 42.

^[2] *Id.*, at 42.

^[3] *Id.*, at 44.