

**Yahya Ashour**

### **I Don't Want YOUR Peace, I Want Justice**

Nakba in 1948: as Zionists were occupying Palestine and creating Israel, my grandfather was forced, together with other Palestinians, to leave Beersheba, a central city in the Negev Desert, south of Palestine, where he lived and worked. He ended up in Gaza, which was not yet occupied – he lived there until he died. I wasn't born yet, but I always heard my father talk about my grandfather's stories in the desert until he died too. My father inherited the refugee status, and I inherited that from him, and I wish I wouldn't have to pass it down to my children.

Ben-Gurion, the primary founder of Israel, once said, referring to Palestinians: "The old will die, and the young will forget." Seventy-four years later, he continues to be proven wrong. The 800,000 people who were forced out of their Palestinian cities and villages became around 6 million living around the world – they have not forgotten – are still identified as refugees.

I, for one, wish that I could forget! But how can I forget when I'm always – and by always, I mean every moment – reminded of the Israeli complete list of crimes and human rights violations against Palestinians - against me! Continuous state terrorism by their "defense" army and police, settler colonialism, apartheid and racism, ethnic cleansing, and Judaization. How can I forget when, most of the time, I was scared for my life of their continuous heavily armed military aggressions, assassinations, imprisonments, and the bombing of houses, hospitals, farms, mosques, and libraries? When I'm under siege where I can't always find water, electricity, gas, reliable internet, jobs, high-quality food, or goods? The list goes on and on. It sounds almost unbelievable, and I think that's the point. Israel has no red lines or limits, and its oppression has exceeded human imagination and the ability to process and sympathize. It's all funded and supported by the nowadays "soft and kind" white supremacist colonizing powers – the US and the EU.

Since the first day I arrived in Iowa, whenever anybody asks what it is like to live in Gaza, they always have the same follow-up question: have you considered living somewhere else? I always get overwhelmed by this question. I find it, as innocent as it is, somewhat offensive. Do these people think that this thought never came across my mind? The question only puts pressure on me, the oppressed, to take action and free myself from misery. The question does not cause nightmares to the oppressor, and it tries to innocently free the already-free people from their responsibility to do something to help make a change.

But I always hold my frustration because I'm always worried that I'm going to scare away possible supporters. I'm always worried that I'm going to sound like "too much" for their free ears. I find myself explaining how hard it is to leave everything behind. Your parents, family, friends, childhood, house, language, books, souvenirs, and your ambitions. How hard it is even to leave Gaza, how we leave when we are permitted to leave. How hard it is to make Gaza leave your mind when you leave Gaza – it never does. I inherited one refugee status and don't want to pass down two of them to my children.

I'm 24 years old; I survived five wars and countless Israeli attacks on Gaza. I lived my whole life under the Israeli occupation, including 15 years under siege and still counting. I don't know if I will ever taste freedom and justice, but I can't afford to lose hope; I have no other choice. I don't know how to answer when people ask me what it feels like to survive all of this. One day I have anxiety, and one day, I have depression. One day I have to deal with trauma, and the next day I have the whole package delivered to

me by the Israeli military to protect Israeli taxpayers, who are all necessarily illegitimate settlers, all living in a stolen land from the Palestinians. For every Palestinian who leaves, there are probably ten new Zionists who didn't need to leave wherever they came from, arriving in Palestine to settle as Israeli "citizens". They take not only our resources but also our lives.

Today, Palestinians around the world are calling for boycotting, divesting, and sanctioning Israeli businesses, culture, and academia, hoping to put pressure on the Israeli government and settlers to end the occupation and give full justice to the Palestinians. This is how the world is acting to stop the war on Ukraine. But can the world give us the same care package, or do we have to change our skin color? Only those who don't suffer from all kinds of Israeli-Zionist oppressions daily will continue to see Israeli settlers as normal citizens, and Israeli culture as culture. They will also have no problem with the two states' solution that's supported by the white powers of the world. These people don't speak for us and can't tell us what we can and can't think. Peace can never be achieved before justice is.

Palestinian people are now asking for their full rights in the land that belongs to no other people but them because whenever Palestinians are asked to tune down their demands, they are forced to lower their demands some more and are given nothing but more misery and more disrespect. This happens when the oppressor is given a platform to justify its doings.

Palestinians have been forced to be silent for years, and they are still not well presented by the BCC, CNN, and the New York Times – they are being censored on social media platforms. But here I am, speaking truth to power; my silence will bring me nothing but shame, and if speaking up has consequences, at least I'll face them with my dignity! I know this one day will come when Palestine will be free from the river to the sea.

As a refugee who doesn't want to be a refugee anymore, I find it very hard to resist the heaven that I'm living in now, but I also find it highly overwhelming not to have something to worry about. This calmness, greenness, and beauty somehow feels more painful than war. I ask myself: isn't it torture to leave prison only to find that you have to return to it soon? But without this torture, nobody would learn about prison. I hope people will still remember my message and my poems will still reach you when I return to the biggest open-air prison in the world: Gaza.