

Repression, removing fear, and the struggle to end the Zionist project

Lecture delivered on Monday 26th May, at Radboud University as part of the Situating Palestine Seminar series.

This is a version of a talk I recently gave at Leiden University. It gives me immense pleasure to give it at my home university, surrounded by friends and comrades who have provided so much inspiration to me over the last 20 months. My research is ordinarily about Lebanon, about parasitic tech capitalism in a context of economic crisis. However, for the last 20 months I have struggled to talk about this, as both Palestine and Lebanon have suffered immeasurably at the hands of a Zionist state that is committed to racial domination, territorial expansion, and violent erasure. I believe it is our responsibility as academics, and especially academics who have materially benefited from working on the region, to put our efforts into stopping the genocide, and to ending Zionism once and for all. A small additional point here, I changed the title from 'the struggle to end genocide,' to the struggle to end the Zionist project. I did this because, as much as we should focus on the genocide, it is also our responsibility right now to focus on the Zionist colonial ideology and system that has enabled it. We must normalize the idea that Zionism must end. If not now, then when?

In this talk I want to think about how we can and should confront the current moment, as the genocide has ramped up again in recent months, while structures of power in the West (which are direct participants in the genocide) are mobilizing to ensure dissent is crushed and people shy away from talking about and acting to prevent genocide and the Zionist project. In this talk I want to grapple with my own, but also I know many others' emotional states of despair, paralysis, and fear in this moment. I want to think about our ethical obligation to not back down, to push the boundaries and keep speaking and acting to end genocide and the Zionist project. I want to consider how we might go about that, specifically emotionally, thinking about how we might combat and remove our fears.

This talk stems from a personal journey over the last year and a half, which began with being in Lebanon on October 7 2023, surrounded by Palestinians and Lebanese who have directly borne the brunt of Israeli violence for decades, as they celebrated the fact Palestinians had temporarily broken out of their concentration camp, and I was with them as they despaired in the days after as it became clear that Israel would commit a genocide. After a few weeks, I arrived back in the Netherlands to deafening silence. Alongside several incredible friends and colleagues, some of whom have been advocating for Palestinian liberation for years, we began mobilizing in and beyond university to get various institutions and companies (including the university) to take a moral stance and cut ties with Israel. For almost 20 months now, this has been met with inaction and continued complicity, and worse, it has been met with active repression.

For me personally, I have ended up in a situation where I have faced media hate campaigns, abuse, and threats, an unlawful arrest last December, and other forms of

disciplining that I am not in the position to go into here. I know that this journey reflects what many others have been through, and I have also had it relatively easy due to my privilege as a white British male academic. It is also nothing compared to what Palestinians go through on a daily basis. But, this journey, and the worsening repression, has forced me, and I know others, to reflect on how we should act in this moment, how we should navigate the potential consequences of resisting, and try not take a step back and push our own boundaries. This talk is not designed to preach to others on how they should go about resisting and working for a liberated Palestine, many have better ideas than me on that. It is designed to help us reflect on how we should each confront this moment, and how we might sustain the conviction to keep going.

Each of us has our own ways of doing this, and that is why I wanted to hear from binta, one of many students who have been at the forefront of the amazing student movement here. After the talk I would also love to hear from you about your own practices that enable you to carry on. This is an exploration of my own emotional process, and I hope it helps some of you.

We are living in a time of despair, of alienation, of paralysis. After a brief hiatus (which for Israel meant murdering 10 Palestinians a day rather than 100), Israel has again ramped up its genocide with more brutality than ever. Since March 18th, almost 4000 Palestinians have been murdered (officially), and Israeli and US officials openly boast about their plans to cleanse Gaza of Palestinians and steal their territory. I don't want to go into the devastating daily horrors of the genocide any more, other than to pay tribute to just a few of its victims in Gaza and the West Bank – Hind Rajab, Hosam Shabat, Basel and Mohammed Al-Ghazzawi, Fatema Hassouna. It suffices to say that people who still do not call what is happening a genocide should not be speaking at all. I am not here today to convince people that it is a genocide, that Zionism is irredeemable, or that we should cut ties to Israeli universities which are so deeply complicit in it. If that much is not obvious by now there is not much I can say. My talk is addressed to those of us who are trying to keep speaking and acting, in whatever capacity we can, to stop genocide and end Zionism.

Over the last 18 months, our institutions, our governments, our media, our companies, and our universities, have done next to nothing to end their material complicity with this genocide, and the broader Zionist settler colonial project. A word for our shameful university boards who have done everything in their power to avoid taking any moral stance on the genocide. Their role in this evil will not be forgotten, especially when in future decades they post pictures of their heroic students who stood up for justice on their university websites.

But worse than this inaction, over the last 1.5 years structures of power in the West have mobilized to ensure that dissent and resistance is crushed. In the US, we are seeing students and academics kidnapped from their homes for writing op-eds and participating in protests, Palestine Action activists in the UK are being tried for terrorism charges and facing decades in prison for doing the government's job for them and destroying drones produced to kill Palestinians, students and academic staff in the

Netherlands are being brutally beaten by the police – at the behest of university boards – for staging occupations and protests, and people all over the West are losing their jobs and livelihoods for speaking out against IOF crimes and the hateful ideology of Zionism. In addition, there are countless, countless everyday repressions that go unnoticed, the abuse, threats and harassment people receive, the internal disciplinary processes people face that never make it out in public because of the abusive practices of employers, and the judgements and hostility people receive from their peers. These forms of violence of course, as they always are, are most exercised on people of colour.

It is vital to note that these modes of repression are not new, just more intense and overt. As Steve Salaita reminded us in a recent article, ‘everyone is rightly terrified, but I insist on pointing out that plenty of us were terrified all along’, by us he means the anti-zionist advocates who have been silenced and vilified over decades.

These punishments and abuse are designed to instill fear in all of us, to paralyze and force us to take shelter. After carrying out a genocide, they must close ranks and make sure the genocide is quickly forgotten or cleansed. I use ‘they’ here to refer to the western-zionist colonial system, which is made up of politicians, the police, the media, and yes universities. I refer to them as ‘they’ deliberately, because they do not deserve more recognition. Those of us who continue to speak out – and even more so those who try to materially put a stop to genocide and the system that enables it – will be discredited, vilified, or violently disposed of.

This repression will not cause much of a stir among the broader public (as it hasn’t throughout history when exercised on oppressed peoples standing up for justice and their rights). If people have normalized seeing Palestinians being murdered in the most gruesome ways. Why would people who get dismissed from a job, kidnapped and locked up, or beaten up by the police make people flinch? The majority are bored and tired of hearing about genocide. The oppression of the few who continue to try to remind us all of a genocide will not matter to most.

The mixture of the extreme genocidal violence, the continued complicity and inaction, the violent repression and apathy has had profound psychological effects on many of us. As Gabor Mate described, our hearts have been broken everyday for 18 months by the horrors we have seen and our incapacity to stop them. I want to here directly address and acknowledge the feelings of disillusionment and alienation many of my friends are feeling right now, especially Palestinians, Arabs, and people of colour who have had to witness the western institutions they work for or study at not only remain staunchly complicit in a genocide but also repress those who speak out and act. This has produced among many an incapacity to act. I know several friends who are simply unable to continue working for these institutions because of the violence they have inflicted, and many others who will not now come to work for or study at them. This unacknowledged violence and racialized exclusion will have profound effects on these institutions for years to come, and we must talk about it.

What then should the few who feel compelled and able to keep acting do in this situation? Do we hide away and wait for the fascist storm to pass? Do we take a step back and be 'strategic' in the hope that at least we will still be able to criticize Israel or speak about international law or the rights of Palestinians?

For those of us who have the capacity to keep speaking and acting, I would hope the answer to the question is a resounding no.

Palestinians need us more than ever now, as the world moves on, and genocidal Zionism attempts to reach its final stage of erasure. They need us to be bold, in both our words, and in our actions. We must continue to push the boundaries around what is acceptable to say and to do. We must now more than ever be bullish that Zionism is indefensible and that it *must* end. We must practice that imperative with our actions to bring it to an end by disrupting its military, economic, and diplomatic arteries of support. We must also be bullish that Palestinians can and should resist by any means possible, including armed resistance.

If we take a step back now, they will come for more. As Palestinian poet and author Mohammed Al-Kurd, whose unapologetic refusal to bend has inspired me for the last 20 months, reminds us, 'fascism thrives on fear, they want you to be silent, to self-censor, to do less, you will not recover whatever ground you concede. If the objective is fear, be unafraid, dissent.'

I am not here to prescribe what exactly each of us should do – that is up to us to decide, both as individuals and in our collectives. A small plea though for those not willing to do radical, disruptive action. Please speak out bullishly in support of those who do. What we are capable of and responsible for doing depends on our positionalities (a gentle reminder again that white people are much harder for them to delegitimize and punish).

But I want to encourage you to not be afraid, to not be guided by fear for what we might lose.

How can we not be afraid when the stakes are so high, and the violence so intense? Here we must first keep our eyes locked on Palestine.

Whatever pain we go through, whether it be the loss of a job, whether it be abuse and vilification, whether it be time in a jail cell, or the judgement of our friends and colleagues, it remains *nothing* compared to what Gazans have sacrificed and had to endure for 1.5 years, and for the last 77 years, and what they will have to endure in the years to come.

Again, as the infallible Mohammed Al-Kurd also said when discussing his journalist friends who told him they were afraid to speak out, at a certain point you have to acknowledge that your life is not worth more than the lives of people in Gaza, and you must act accordingly'. This sentence, which I first heard in January 2024, has stuck with me ever since.

I am not saying that we all have to be ready to spend time in jail, or be ready to lose our livelihoods. But I am saying we should not be afraid. We should not be afraid of losing stuff that we are attached to, whether that is our liberty, our jobs, our lifestyle, or the validation of our friends, colleagues, and families.

Those who think that creating fear will work do not understand that greater and greater repression can actually remove fear. When you have witnessed people who have had everything stripped away from them, you begin to develop a detachment from what you were once attached to.

Palestinian journalist, Wael Dahdouh, described this fearlessness when he talked about why he kept on reporting in Gaza as his family members were murdered by the IOF, one by one. He described how he 'had seen so much loss, seen so much death, and come so close to dying himself that he no longer had any fear. Life and death, to him, had become the same. All that he cared about was that when death came, it would find him "on his feet"'.

Similarly, we should find courage when we see the fearlessness of the resistance fighters who still somehow after 18 months of constant bombardment keep going and manage inflict damage on the Zionist war machine, journalists who put themselves in danger to document the endless war crimes, doctors who stay put to treat the injured despite illegal evacuation orders, or Gazans who face the daily hardship of survival and repeatedly declare, despite the destruction, that they will not leave this land. We should also acknowledge and draw strength from the deep faith in securing God's rewards that drives this ability to keep on acting and a detachment from present suffering.

We can and should also look to people in the West who have sacrificed their reputation, their livelihoods or liberty for advancing the cause of Palestinian liberation, whether this be Palestinian authors Susan Abulhawa or Mohammed Al-Kurd, German civil servant Melanie Schweizer, American author Ta-Nehisi Coates, students Mahmoud Khalil or Momodou Taal, or the Palestine Action Filton 18 in the UK. To see people who have not taken a step back and faced severe consequences, I think, has a hugely inspiring effect on others to step up their own commitment.

I want to focus a little on the words of some of those who explain the action they have taken. For example, Ibtehal Abu Saad who was recently fired from Microsoft for disrupting an anniversary event. This is how she explained taking action:

"They might come after me for what I said, but my fear of retaliation doesn't even compare to my fear of contributing to technologies used to bomb innocent people. To me, my greatest fear is waking up on an ordinary workday only to find out that the code I wrote might have played a part in killing children. That's the haunting thought that consumed me."

Ibtehal sets out a similar rationale for acting here to Omar Akkad, in his book 'One day, everyone will have always been against this', when he describes that people in the West should not act out of fear that the same genocidal violence is coming for them (this, he

points out, is reserved for racialized groups). He says: 'no, there is no terrible thing coming for you in some distant future, but know that a terrible thing is happening to you now. You are being asked to kill off a part of you that would otherwise scream in opposition to injustice. You are being asked to dismantle the machinery of a functioning conscience. Who cares if diplomatic expediency prefers you shrug away the sight of dismembered children? Who cares if great distance from the bloodstained middle allows obliviousness. Forget pity, forget even the dead if you must, but at least fight against the theft of your soul.'

So far I have touched on the sense of fearlessness that comes with detachment from our material lives, and with living in a state of immorality. This should also coincide with a deep sense of moral clarity about what we are fighting for, moral clarity that we are on the side of life.

We must maintain this, because they will do everything they can to break this moral clarity. They will say you did not respect the rules or the law, you were uncivilized, you were threatening and made people feel unsafe, you were reckless, you were impatient, you are going too far – again, these accusations have always always been thrown at liberation struggles. As Mohammed Al-Kurd so unapologetically sets out in his book the politics of appeal, we must not be distracted by these voices. Remember what we are fighting against. We are fighting against incivility, barbarism, death. We are fighting against 20 months of genocide, and 77 years of theft, erasure, and occupation.

Just a small note on calls to be more nuanced with our language. Sorry, but why exactly should we be nuanced as Palestinians are getting slaughtered and starved to death daily? If by being nuanced you mean not calling for the dismantlement of Zionism, then what you mean is a continuation of ethnic cleansing and genocide. It means you do not value Palestinian life, it means you do not understand the causes of their suffering, it means you do not want an actual solution, which is an end to a Zionist colonial project that exercises ethnic supremacy, and practices that project on another people's land, while steadily exterminating its previous inhabitants.

We who are acting to end Zionism therefore are on the side of life. As Palestinian political prisoner Walid Daqqa said while he was in prison, which I have to thank the wonderful Layal Ftouni for guiding me to, 'I stand above them, ethically speaking, as someone possessed of a right, the right of even the simplest of creatures, which is the right to life. They make death, and I am the labour of life.'

This is difficult. The tiny differences we seem able to make in the context of the immense violence and the sacrifice we might bare is difficult to justify to ourselves.

But, I know that I cannot carry on as normal. I cannot live in the indignity that comes with forgetting and moving on. Merely existing within a system which curtails the life of others is not a life worth living. Palestinians are the ones who for decades have shown the way in fighting and choosing death over indignity. We should do the same (For those who will accuse me of calling for suicide bombings, please fix your Islamophobia).

Those who continue acting without fear, and sacrificing, will attract and inspire others to do the same. That we can be sure of. Just look at the growing movement in western countries over the last 20 months.

And with this, we must finally hold on to the conviction that what we are fighting against will one day end. Amidst all the carnage, Zionism is on its last legs.

We must not listen to voices who say we have failed. Again, that is designed to paralyse us. Even the fact that, as Gabor Mate argued, 'in the face of all the propaganda, all the withholding of truth you are broken hearted, that's a sign, that's a tribute to humanity... Even if you feel broken hearted, and in despair, don't let that get to you, because you have a larger goal here, which is to contribute to the life and the truth in the world as best you see it. And that is a long-term struggle, it's a long term calling, and all of us can contribute to it.'

That is indeed already a significant win, that despite the repressive violence and the propaganda, so many are horrified by what has been enabled. But we want and need more. We need justice. We need an end to a Zionist project that is bent on genocidal erasure. There is hope that we are closer than ever to that.

As journalist Abby Martin, who can put it much more eloquently than I could, said recently in an interview: 'The Zionist state will not survive, to stay in the same place they have to kill and kill and kill, that's the only thing they know how to do, that's not a surviving strategy, and the more people who wake up, and certainly tens and tens of millions of people have woken up to the truth, to the barbaric nature of what Zionism is and what Israel really represents, there is no going back for them. For decades pro-Palestine activists have been on the defensive, to explain why defense of Palestine, why advocacy for Palestinian liberation is not anti-semitic, why criticism of Israel is not anti-semitic, that is no longer the case. Zionists are on the defensive now, explaining why they support apartheid and genocide, they're no longer going to be allowed in the same spaces as progressives. It is a racist, colonial, genocidal ideology, and it has been exposed.'

The repression we are facing, and will continue to face for speaking out and acting to end genocide and end Zionism, is also a sign that it is near its end. It is a sign of weakness.

As Momodou Taal reminds us, 'you do not repress to this level when you're in a position of strength. When you have to quell speech, it means that you are realizing that the outside world or public opinion is swaying in one direction. So I think now would not be the time to be afraid. I know it's a very frightening moment, but for me, this is the time to double down'. I wholeheartedly agree.

Thank you.