

ESSAY



Finding a New Idiom: Language, Moral Decay, and the Ongoing Nakba

Elias Khoury

ABSTRACT

This essay is a translated and edited version of the Anis Makdisi Program in Literature lecture delivered by the author in May 2021. The talk, on the uprising sweeping every Palestinian geography from the river to the sea, was constructed as a series of illustrative stories. Their distillation, as Khoury points out, is that there will be no end to the Palestinian question so long as there exists a people continually prepared to resist the ongoing Nakba. "It is enough," Khoury concludes, "that with this uprising Palestine has recovered the alphabet, leaving us to create a new idiom."

KEYWORDS

Palestine; culture;
moral decay; ongoing
Nakba; Palestinian people;
resistance; storytelling

I GAVE THIS ESSAY A LOT OF THOUGHT; I began writing, but then deleted everything.* The task struck me as outlandish: what, amid the torrents of blood, suffering, and pain ravaging our lands, could I possibly say?

So rather than fumbling around with my own broken words, I decided instead to listen to those who have been involved in creating what I shall call this moment of Palestinian reclamation—when Palestine has reclaimed not only itself but also its name and its symbolism. I thought that the stories I heard, and will now retell, might help me extricate myself from the vortex of fractured words in which we are caught and move us closer to the new idiom that we seek.

Home

We're in the garden of a house in Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem. The neighborhood is named after Prince Husam al-Din bin Sharaf al-Din 'Isa al-Jarrahi, the personal physician of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (known as Saladin in English). Israeli settlers' attempts to expel Palestinian families and take over their homes was the spark that ignited the wave of rage, which culminated in the Jerusalem uprising of May 2021, the ten-day war on Gaza (21–31 May), and the nationwide general strike that swept Palestine in its entirety on the eighteenth of May. That is how this small Jerusalem neighborhood reopened the wounds of the Nakba, ongoing now for seventy-three years.

In a video clip that spread throughout the world, we see a beefy, fair-haired, and bearded Israeli settler dressed in loose blue pants and a white shirt. Before him, a seemingly diffident Palestinian woman, wearing a hijab on her head, is fiercely defending her home. She is Muna al-Kurd and he is simply "Yakov"—no last name given. Yakov is unarmed and has come alone to occupy the family's home and kick them out.

*This essay was translated by Dima El-Mouallem and abridged and edited by Maia Tabet.
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The scene is surreal, but one that is a prelude to what Sheikh Jarrah will later witness. Yakov came armed with “the law,” anticipating the Israeli Supreme Court’s decision to forcibly expel the Palestinian residents, and he wanted to be the first settler to lay claim to the al-Kurds’ home. He reasoned that he could quite simply seize the house, since they live in a state that is “democratic and subject to the rule of law,” and the law is that of the victor.

Caught on camera and shared by Palestinian activist Tamer Makalda, the clip went viral. Yakov’s conversation with Muna brims with significance.

MUNA. Yakov, you know this is not your house.

YAKOV. Yes, but if I go, you don’t go back ... so what’s the problem? ... I didn’t do this. It’s easy to yell at me but I didn’t do this.

MUNA. You are stealing my house.

YAKOV. If I don’t steal it, someone else is gonna steal it.

MUNA. No. No one ... no one is allowed to steal it.

YAKOV. This is not mine to give back.

In the garden where Yakov stands, we see an olive sapling and a cat sauntering in the grass. There are several other Palestinian men around, one of them wearing a Covid-19 protective mask, but only Muna and Yakov speak. It is the Palestinian woman who goes up against the Israeli settler.

Yakov expresses succinctly what Walid Khalidi toiled to prove decades earlier to counter pervasive Zionist propaganda. Khalidi was able to demonstrate that the expulsions [of Palestine’s Indigenous population] were outlined in Plan Dalet, elaborated in Tel Aviv’s Red House¹ under the supervision of the then prime minister David Ben-Gurion. In this time of Zionist fascism, Yakov succinctly summed up the work of Khalidi and of the Israeli New Historians who followed in his footsteps: “If I don’t steal it, someone else is gonna steal it.”

The scene is almost archetypal: a white Ashkenazi Jewish man dressed like the Zionist colonists of old—missing only the pith helmet—confronting an Indigenous woman. Had the scene not been recorded on video, it would have beggared belief. And in his naivete and patriotic pride, Yakov—whether consciously or not—is the embodiment of the Orientalist, producing a vignette that Palestinian film directors only dream of making but dare not, lest they be accused of peddling hackneyed stereotypes.

Israeli settler colonialism is the epitome of such a stereotype: mobs of settler killers and thugs walking in the shadow of police rifles, usurping Palestine, and chanting “Death to Arabs,” their slogans exposing not only their true colors but also those of a neocolonial West covering up for them—whether out of lingering nostalgia for its imperial past or to cleanse the Jewish blood on its own hands with the blood of Palestinians.

The Smile

I don’t know Maryam al-Afifi, a cello player and member of the Palestine Youth Orchestra at the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music. She flashed a smile in the very instant the Israeli soldier was handcuffing her, and her smile transported me to a place where words cannot adequately fathom meaning. Maryam was arrested in Sheikh Jarrah after having joined in solidarity with Muna and the other families of the Jerusalemite neighborhood facing the threat of expulsion. I said I didn’t know her. But that’s only partially true.

I know her from the Palestinian women in Lebanon's refugee camps, the ones who brushed away their tears with the palms of their hands as they recounted the killings, the massacres, and the expulsions in the Galilee in 1948; women crying from the memory of pain engraved in their eyes, but who, after drying their tears, suddenly smiled enigmatically and fell silent.

While I may not know al-Afifi, there are Maryams in every Palestinian city and village: the Maryams of the Galilee and the Maryams of Jaffa, of Haifa, and 'Akka (Acre), the Maryams of Nazareth and of Jenin, and the Maryams of Tulkarm and of al-Khalil (Hebron); and the Maryams of Jerusalem and Nablus who know that while human beings are capable of betrayal, the land never betrays.

When they handcuffed her, Maryam eyed the Israeli soldiers with scorn, then looked over her shoulder and smiled. She wanted us to remember her smile, not the handcuffs. The Israeli soldiers were at a loss to explain it: a young woman on whose neck one of them knelt and who, instead of crying out that she couldn't breathe, just smiled. Harkening to "those who face freedom with a smile" (pace Darwish),² the smiles of all the detained young men and women, spread like wildfire, in a prelude to the rage that ignited Palestine with demonstrations and rockets and calling out the Israeli monster of steel whose only language is the language of death.

How shall we interpret Maryam's smile rising from the depth of despair gripping us? The word despair may seem excessive, but it captures both Arab reality and the morass that is now occupied Palestine. Despair born of the defeat of the Arab Spring uprisings, demanding bread and freedom, but ending up drenched in their own children's blood, strangled between the military on one side and fundamentalist movements on the other. Arab societies have been besieged and trapped in bloody military coups or brutal wars paving the way for foreign intervention, with outside forces participating in the killing fields, whether those of the regimes themselves or of their Islamist partner-enemies.

What shall I say of the crushing despair born of the masquerade represented by the so-called Abraham Accords? A masquerade celebrating the crowns of shame that adorn the heads of rulers whose only skill lies in bowing. A masquerade that lauds Israel and allows the importation of goods to the United Arab Emirates from West Bank settlements (in other words, stolen Palestinian land) as well as military coordination with Israel (to say nothing of the adoption of the Israeli narrative almost in its entirety). The legacy of Trumpism and right-wing populism, mixed in with Zionist racism and the insecurities of oil shaykhs, these accords embody a shamelessness that exceeds all previous acts of shame and are tantamount to subjugation, not simply normalization—and with that, the persistent normalization of tyranny. Despair brought on by the feeling that everyone had abandoned Palestine and left it to disappear and be forgotten. Despair arising from the rot in the Palestinian body politic afflicted by internal rifts, authoritarian governance, and moral decay.

So how did the Maryams of Palestine find a smile in the face of their oppressors and in the very heart of a neighborhood that is open ground for looting and ethnic cleansing? How were the youth of Jerusalem able to stand up to Israeli troops and drive them out of Bab al-Amud (Damascus Gate square), and to maintain their protests at al-Aqsa Mosque with tear gas and rubber bullets raining down on them?

Today, we are in a situation that I will term post-despair. Maryam taught us that this means one thing only: that what lies beyond our despair—our insistence on defending life until the very last second—remains undefeated. And at that very last second, our post-despair erupted into a revolt that reunified Palestine and tore down the barriers across that partitioned land.

The Israelis called their savage bombardment of Gaza “Operation Guardian of the Walls.” But the guardians of the Iron Wall—a term coined by Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the godfather of the Herut and Likud parties—failed to imagine that the walls could crumble before the smile of undefeated post-despair.

Mousa

Mousa Hassounah: thirty-something truck driver and father of two. Mousa was born in Lydda, one of the Palestinian cities that Israelis refer to as mixed cities. In addition to Lydda, these include Ramla, Haifa, Jaffa, and Acre. All of them have been subjected to ethnic cleansing, and their remaining Palestinian inhabitants have been herded into neighborhoods surrounded by barbed wire and heavy metal gates, which the Israeli conquerors call the ghetto. Wadi Nisnas in Haifa. Ajami in Jaffa. The Old City in Acre. Al-Jamal in Ramla. The neighborhood between Saint George Cathedral (al-Khadir) and the Grand Mosque in Lydda.

Every city in Palestine occupied in 1948 was ethnically cleansed, but the worst massacre took place in Lydda. There, the walls of the Dahmash Mosque were splattered with the remains of about 150 Palestinians who were shot execution-style with anti-tank weapons. The streets of Lydda were not only the sites of murder; they paved the way to the great death march, the exodus of thousands of Palestinians forced to walk through Palestine’s rugged terrain at the height of the torrid heat in July 1948. Many died of hunger, thirst, and exhaustion in the wilderness, their dead bodies left to rot in open country.

But what does Mousa have to do with this history?

Well, nothing, really. Or so the young man thought as he came home from visiting a relative on 10 May 2021. He was cornered by a gang of armed Israeli thugs who killed him simply because he was an Arab Palestinian from Lydda. But what secret lay behind the killing? There must have been one, I thought. I had spent a lot of time with such secrets while researching my novel *Children of the Ghetto*, which takes place in Lydda.

Malek Hassounah had named his son after his own father, Mousa. The secret of the young Mousa who was murdered lay in this very name. Mousa the elder (the young man’s grandfather) had witnessed the Lydda massacre in 1948 and was one of the survivors that ended up living in the city’s ghetto. The Palestinians of the ghetto lived in subhuman conditions after the creation of the State of Israel: for a year and a half, they had no running water and rolled barrels of water from a well almost a kilometer from their neighborhood, which was like a cage, entirely enclosed by barbed wire. In 1948, some of Lydda’s youth were forced to loot Palestinian homes, their own homes, at the bidding of Israeli troops. The booty was then loaded onto trucks bound for Tel Aviv. Others had to collect the corpses of Palestinians littering the streets and throw them into mass graves. I don’t know exactly in which unit the elder Mousa was forced to work. What I do know is that the experience left the man’s soul scarred—and he continued to feel the barbed wire scratching at his eyes until the day he died. The younger Mousa belonged to that generation of Palestinian grandchildren who resolved to forget this history, but as the deadly bullets entered his body, he realized that the past was not past and that the ghetto was also sinking its barbs into his soul.

This gory anecdote may explain why and how the Palestinian ghetto that was suffocated by what is known as Judaization exploded when the Jerusalem uprising broke out. But we should not misinterpret what happened here: Sheikh Jarrah isn’t and wasn’t a reminder but a

marker or an indicator. The Nakba is not a past that we remember but a present in which we live. The Nakba has been an uninterrupted trajectory since 1948. The eruption of anger in Jerusalem only came after the Israeli authorities went too far in their scorn of Palestinian pain and Arab sorrow. And the shameful “Abrahamic” regimes went too far in their stupidity, letting Benjamin Netanyahu believe that gobbling up Jerusalem was a possibility, and that doing so would pave the way for his continued tenure as prime minister.

But the ghetto rose up to say that Palestinians refuse to play the part of the silenced victim and that Palestine is not dead because its people simply refuse to disappear.

Family Death Tree

I do not know the stories of the al-Kulak and Abu al-Ouf families in Gaza. What I do know is something that has already been mentioned in Arab and Israeli media: these two families were basically annihilated during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in May 2021. The “Guardian[s] of the Walls” who claim the right to self-defense in the face of Palestinian “terrorism” committed a massacre against civilians in Gaza.

On Sunday, 16 May 2021, during the heavy bombardment of three buildings on al-Wahda Street in Gaza, the Abu al-Oufs and the al-Kulaks disappeared almost entirely off the face of the earth. The dead among the Abu al-Oufs included Ayman, the father and a doctor at al-Shifa Hospital, his two children: Tawfik, 17; and Tala, 13, as well as two other members of the family: Reem, 41; and Rawan, 19. Their bodies were found immediately after the bombing. Later that night, more bodies were recovered: those of Sobhiyya, 73; Amin, 90; and Tawfik, 80, as well as Raja and her three children: Mira, 13; Yazan, 12; and Amir, 9.

In the building next door, the al-Kulak family was wiped out: Fawwaz Amin Mohammad al-Kulak, 63; and four of his children: Abd al-Hamid, 32; Riham, 33; Baha, 49; and Sameh, 28; Sameh’s wife, Ala, 19; and their 6-month-old infant, Qusay; as well as Amal Jamil Salama al-Kulak, 42; and three of her children: Tahir, 24; Ahmad, 16; and Hana, 15. Others who were also killed from the extended family include Muhammad Mu’in Muhammad al-Kulak, 42; his brother ‘Izzat; and his brother’s two children: Zaid, 8; and Adam, 3. The bodies of Ala Omar Abdalla al-Kulak, 39; and Sadiyya Yusef Dahir al-Kulak, 84, were also recovered.³

Instead of drawing a family tree, as many notable families do in our part of the world, it has become possible to draw family death trees spanning three generations. Our gratitude goes to the Israeli guardians of the walls who invented trees drawn in blood, enabling Palestinians to transform their memories of the Nakba into a lived present.

How can we interpret this act of genocide? Can we accept the claim that it was nothing more than collateral damage in the war against what Israel calls Metro Hamas [that is, the network of underground tunnels in Gaza]? In a report on Israel’s 2014 attack on Gaza, the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem implicitly concludes that the elimination of about seventy Palestinian families in the fifty-day carnage was premeditated murder.⁴ In her 19 May *Haaretz* article, Amira Hass highlights that the Oslo Accords require the Palestinian interior ministry to send detailed information of Palestinian births to the Israelis who maintain a registry of the entire Palestinian population, with the data therein having to receive approval by the Israeli side in order for Palestinians to be able to get their own, Palestinian-issued ID cards! “It is clear, then,” the journalist writes, “that the army knows the number and names of children, women and elderly who live in every residential building it bombs for any reason.”⁵

Israeli air force pilots thus perpetrated war crimes against civilians on the orders of their superiors who knew everything there was to know about the victims, including even their phone numbers.

How so? The answer to this question lies in a eulogy delivered by Moshe Dayan in the kibbutz of Nahal Oz in 1956, when he was Israel's army chief of staff.

Roi Rutenberg

In 1951, the kibbutz of Nahal Oz was founded on the ruins of the village of Khirbet al-Wahidi, one of forty-five localities razed to the ground in the Gaza district whose Palestinian inhabitants fled or were expelled. Anyone who wants more information on these events, which took place after the 1948 war and before the signature of the 1949 armistice agreements can look up *Khirbet Khizeh*, a largely autobiographical Israeli novella set in a fictional village of the Gaza district.⁶

Nahal Oz was a military settlement founded by the Nahal units of the Israeli army to harass Palestinian farmers who had been driven out of their villages and had become refugees in Gaza. In March 1956, Roi Rutenberg, a young officer in charge of security at the kibbutz, was killed by Palestinian fedayeen who had snuck in from Gaza. In August 2014, *al-Quds al-Arabi* published an article citing the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, in which Roi's son, Boaz, now sixty, recounted that his paternal grandfather had died of grief after the death of Roi, and that his mother never remarried and died ill. Boaz himself had fled to Thailand in search of peace because he had never overcome the shock of his father's death. He added that he had "harbored hatred toward Gazans since childhood" and that there was "no end" to the war with the Palestinians.⁷

This is undoubtedly a personal tragedy, but how are we to understand it? Should we consider the farmers of Khirbet al-Wahidi who were driven out of their village terrorists and saboteurs, per Israel's discourse, or is there another way of viewing the question? Dayan's eloquent eulogy, which he delivered at Roi's funeral, provides one answer:

Early yesterday morning Roi was murdered. The quiet of the spring morning dazzled him and he did not see those waiting in ambush for him, at the edge of the furrow.

Let us not cast the blame on the murderers today. Why should we declare their burning hatred for us? For eight years they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate.

It is not among the Arabs in Gaza but in our own midst that we must seek Roi's blood. How did we shut our eyes and refuse to look squarely at our fate, and see, in all its brutality, the destiny of our generation? Have we forgotten that this group of young people dwelling at Nahal Oz is bearing the heavy gates of Gaza on its shoulders?

Beyond the furrow of the border, a sea of hatred and desire for revenge is swelling. . . .

We are a generation that settles the land and without the steel helmet and the cannon's maw, we will not be able to plant a tree and build a home. Let us not be deterred from seeing the loathing that is inflaming and filling the lives of the hundreds of thousands of Arabs who live around us. . . .

This is the fate of our generation. This is our life's choice. . . .

The young Roi who left Tel Aviv to build his home at the gates of Gaza to be a wall for us was blinded by the light in his heart and he did not see the flash of the sword. The yearning for peace

deafened his ears and he did not hear the voice of murder waiting in ambush. The gates of Gaza weighed too heavily on his shoulders and overcame him.⁸

I can tell stories endlessly, for stories beget stories.

But here I am not telling stories that are over and done with: the Palestinian story is taking place right here, right now, at the gates of Gaza, on the streets of Jerusalem, and in the cities and villages destroyed or blockaded by settlements. Stories, like meanings, are strewn about the streets, al-Jahiz told us long ago. We have to pick them up, collect them, and narrate them if we are to build mirrors to our souls.

The issue is not whether or not we forget. The ability to forget enables us to withstand life's tragedies and walk in their shadows. Like all human beings, we too want to forget.

A person can forget the past, but try as she might, she cannot forget the present. At the hands of the Israelis, our past has become an ever-living present that does not pass, so how are we to forget? And for that matter, how are we to remember?

This time of post-despair is reshaping Palestine as an idea, as a people, and as a liberatory project for freedom. The reverberations from the Jerusalem uprising will surprise us all. I imagine a tsunami of possibilities, which we will have to fathom and shape, and with which we will have to experiment.

The time of undefeated post-despair does not warrant trite or reactive optimism. To bear fruit, in political terms, resistance to settler colonialism and moral decay requires the elaboration of new social structures. It also requires a new kind of thought, one that reimagines national liberation as a project for freedom and as a struggle to rid ourselves of both colonial thinking and the remnants of moribund Arab nationalist thought. We need to reimagine the story of Palestine and the Arab world in a way that encompasses freedom for all of their populations.

It is enough that with this uprising Palestine has recovered the alphabet, leaving us to create a new idiom.

About the Author

Elias Khoury is the editor of *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, the Arabic-language sister publication of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*. A renowned public intellectual and novelist, he is the author of numerous books, including novels, plays, and literary criticism, among them the award-winning *Gate of the Sun* and *My Name Is Adam: Children of the Ghetto*.

Endnotes

1. The headquarters of Haganah, Israel's prestate army.
2. Translator's note: The original line from Mahmoud Darwish's "On This Earth" is "the people's applause for those who face death with a smile." See Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché, with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 6.
3. These figures were gathered directly by the author from personal sources in Gaza. They also appear in Amira Hass, "Gaza Lives Erased: Israel Is Wiping Out Entire Palestinian Families on

- Purpose,” *Haaretz*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/gaza-israel-wiping-entire-palestinian-families-amas-1.9820005>.
4. B’Tselem, “50 Days: More than 500 Children; Facts and Figures on Fatalities in Gaza, Summer 2014,” 20 July 2016, https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20160720_fatalities_in_gaza_conflict_2014.
 5. Hass, “Gaza Lives Erased.”
 6. S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, trans. Nicholas de Lange and Yaacob Dweck (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).
 7. Wadi’h ‘Awawda, “T’iraf tarikhi li Moshe Dayan bil-haqiqa ‘an Ghazza,” *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 28 August 2014, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/%EF%BB%BF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%87-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%80%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9/>.
 8. Moshe Dayan, “Moshe Dayan’s Eulogy for Roi Rutenberg—April 19, 1956,” Jewish Virtual Library, 19 April 1956, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/moshe-dayan-s-eulogy-for-roi-rutenberg-april-19-1956>.