

MELODY OF CATASTROPHE

Unlearning Silence to Understand the Landless

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"Gaza" by Sobhi Qouta

Upon my return from Palestine and Israel, some of you might be wondering about my thoughts on the recent resistant operation by the Izz el Din al-Qassam Brigades, known as the Al-Aqsa Flood.

To offer some perspective, I arrived at LAX from Palestine on October 5th at 7:00 PM, which corresponds to 5:00 AM on October 6th in Palestinian time. Roughly 24 hours later, on the 50th anniversary of the 1973 war where Israel relinquished Sinai to Egypt, the military wing of Hamas, al-Qassam, initiated a comprehensive offensive against Israeli forces occupying parts of the Palestinian Territories. It's not an exaggeration to suggest that this offensive took Israel by surprise, which is highly unusual given Israel's advanced infiltration tactics, surveillance technology, and their control over land, air, sea, communications, and crucial infrastructure.

According to some Palestinian sources:

The resistance operation comes in response to the ongoing stream of crimes against the Palestinian people, the daily murder of Palestinians on the streets of the West Bank of occupied Palestine, the siege on Gaza, the theft of land for settlements, the denial of refugees' right to return, imposing exile for over 75 years, the torture and attacks on the Palestinian prisoners, the ongoing invasions of Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the 75 years of Zionist occupation and over 100 years of imperialist domination and colonialism throughout occupied Palestine.¹

Husni Abdel Wahed, the Palestinian representative in Spain, raised a pertinent question in a recent interview with RTVE Noticias: "If the Ukrainians have the right and international support to defend themselves from Russian invasion, don't the Palestinians also have the right to defend themselves against Israel's settler colonial violence and occupation?" He acknowledged that, even though Hamas is their political adversary, the right of Palestinians to fight for their land,

¹ Samidoun, "Palestine."

dignity, and survival is a matter of life and death and is thus legitimate.²

According to Israeli sources:

Likud MK Yuli Edelstein told the Post "Israel woke up this morning to a coordinated and murderous terrorist attack. The fighting still continues and the State of Israel is doing everything to protect its citizens against this brutal attack. Hamas carried out the terrorist attack, but Iran is the one behind this shocking murder of dozens of innocent Israeli women, children and men."³

The US Congressman from Florida, Cory Mills, publicly expressed:

I support Israel's right to defend itself, its citizens, and eliminate the terrorists threatening the stability of the region. It's clear to me that this is the work of Iranian-backed Hamas, aimed at disrupting talks with Saudi Arabia and the expansion of the Trump-era Abraham Accords.⁴

"Resistance and revolution...murderous terrorist attacks..." I cannot claim to be impartial on this matter, even after earning an advanced degree in theology and conducting extensive research on global colonial history. I grew up in a church with a dispensationalist Christian Zionist background. As a Baptistcostal, my deep roots in Christian Zionism were not easy to unearth. I read the Bible with the assumption that the modern state of Israel is the rightful heir to biblical Israel, both theologically and geopolitically. Consequently, for me, the year 1948 and the events surrounding the establishment of Israeli occupation in Palestine (I was not even aware of the

² *ISRAEL-GAZA.*

³ "Israel's Counterterrorism Expert Who Predicted the Hamas Invasion."

⁴ Ibid.

significance of Nakba until recently) represented God's movement toward redemptive times, something to celebrate rather than lament. Any threat to Israel's safety and control of the land seemed to me an act of terrorism not only against an ordinary nation-state but also against God's redemptive plan and the Christian Church.

During my first trip to Israel in 2014, I started to perceive Palestine as an "oppressed land." An evangelical Hebrew Bible professor, who had lived in Bethlehem, took the time to explain the challenging conditions affecting the people of Palestine and showed me the Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. These settlers would eventually claim the land, establish schools, economies, and exert political influence in various Palestinian areas, a process known as Israelization. I learned that Palestinians not only faced territorial borders and restricted access to airports but were also subject to the influence and control of Israeli settler colonies from within. The heavily guarded checkpoints we crossed between Israeli and Palestinian territories left a lasting impression. I later discovered that there are more than 705 roadblocks controlling Palestinian movement in the West Bank.⁵

At that time, I did not realize that I was witnessing a contemporary version of Israeli settler colonialism and Palestinian apartheid. However, I felt a deep unease. I began to question the reality I had inherited: the idea that the oppressed and landless people of biblical Israel equated to the modern state of Israel. Experiencing the land and people of Palestine and Israel in person taught me more than the doctrinal books and sermons I had encountered in the abstract world of theology.

⁵ "United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Occupied Palestinian Territory | Over 700 Road Obstacles Control Palestinian Movement within the West Bank."

I returned to West Asia in 2019 but did not visit much of Palestine, focusing instead on historical biblical sites in Jerusalem. In a way, my discomfort with Palestinian apartheid became somewhat normalized. However, my recent and third visit to West Asia to participate in the 26th International Conference "Land, People, and Culture" at Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem was a transformative experience that requires further reflection. I am not yet prepared to articulate my perception of the place, people, and culture from the perspective of the Palestinian people and the diaspora that gathered at the conference from around the world.

The discomfort and confusion I initially felt during my first trip had evolved into a deep sense of sadness and unrest during this third visit. I had never truly seen the land, people, and culture of Palestine; I had only seen Israel through the distorted lens of Christian Zionism. It was shocking to witness US and Latin American Christian Zionists walking through the streets of West Jerusalem, proudly displaying Israeli flags and demonstrating a strong sense of belonging to that land and its history. I even saw a group of white Americans from the US walking and singing hymns on the streets of Jerusalem, with Israel's flag held high and wearing t-shirts that read "Donald Trump for President." This vividly illustrates the sentiment of many Christian Zionists, whose political faith and financial support demand unconditional backing for the modern state of Israel. Congressman Mills is just one example who elevates the discourse of "the expansion of the Trump-era Abraham Accords" to the level of "real peace in the Middle East," yet conspicuously omits any mention of Palestine in the Accord. In this rhetoric, Palestine is stripped of its status as an independent people and nation, a clear case of political ethnocide that ignores the right to existence of an ancient land, people, and culture, reducing it to the status of occupied territory. I wonder if the American public is aware of the consequences of such political rhetoric and the fact that, regardless of our diverse beliefs, we are also being normalized into a Zionist nation-state.

As I grapple with my Zionist upbringing and the emergence of a decolonial awareness, I do not claim to have a fully coherent perspective on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that will satisfy those who firmly align themselves as pro-Israel/anti-Palestine or pro-Palestine/anti-Israel. I am an outsider who was drawn to the narrative of Christian dispensationalism and Zionism but has recently begun to gain a more grounded understanding of the land, people, and culture of West Asia.

The irreparable moral failure of the West's silence during the Jewish Holocaust in Europe laid the foundation for granting the modern Israelites exceptional geopolitical privileges to acquire an ancient land claimed as a biblical inheritance. However, this land was already home to indigenous Palestinian people, including various Jewish communities. Seventy-five years have now passed, and the West must be held accountable for its silence during the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The catastrophe is that Israelites continually feel under attack, while Palestinians constantly experience oppression.

The essence of this catastrophe is vividly depicted in the painting "Gaza" by the Palestinian artist Sobhi Qouta. The artist portrays "the high-reaching barrier in the sky...there lies a somber, heavy greyness etched on the chest...and the walls between the bleeding West Bank and the besieged Gaza." Wrapped in nostalgia, the Palestinian character of Homeros sitting on the boats and playing ceaselessly brings to life his "immortal melody, the epic of his poetry, sends wounds of consecutive calamities...with passion, tears, and spirit. The moment dries up, and eternity shines on, leaving behind the melody of immortality, and life continues."⁶

⁶ Qouta, "Homeros Beyond the Barrier," 18.

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