

# Mainstreaming Anti-colonial Discourse on Palestine: Mohammed El-Kurd's Discursive Interventions

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*Palestinian activists have long maintained that the hegemonic discourse used to describe their predicament is unhelpful for understanding the nature of the so-called "conflict" in their country. They maintain that a discursive hegemony suppresses their voices and denies their lived experience. A high-profile case of a settler organization's attempt to evict Palestinian families from their homes in Jerusalem brought visibility to a counter-hegemonic Palestinian discourse that challenges the dominant framing of the situation in Palestine/Israel. Through steadfast on-the-ground resistance that was powerfully documented online, attention was brought to an otherwise routine act of home dispos-*

*session. This study examines the counter-hegemonic discourse advanced by one of the victims of the case as an example of a growing Palestinian tendency to frame Israeli actions through the prism of settler-colonialism. The article outlines the fundamentals of this discourse and traces synergies between Palestinian narratives of injustice and those of system-critical social movements concerned with issues of racism, militarism, and capitalism to examine how power-resistance discourses challenge extant modes of knowledge production.*

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The Oslo peace process that sought to create a Palestinian state alongside Israel did not halt the ongoing dispossession of the Palestinians. As of 2021, Israel has built 280 settlements for 600,000 Jewish Israeli citizens on occupied Palestinian lands in the West Bank and in Jerusalem (B'Tselem, 2021), while Gaza has entered its fifteenth year under a land, air and sea blockade. For Palestine advocates, the failure of the Oslo process to achieve a two-state solution flowed *inter alia* from the treatment of the conflict as one between two national

movements rather than as one between an indigenous people and a settler-colonial state intent on subjugating it (Abdel Razek, 2021). It has been argued that by sidestepping the power asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians the Oslo framework was doomed to fail (Turner, 2011, 2015; Farsakh, 2017; Burgis-Kasthala, 2020). Three decades on from the 1991 Madrid conference that brought Israeli and Palestinian leaders to the negotiating table, a majority of Palestinians in the occupied territories believe a two-state solution is no longer viable (Shikaki and Scheindlin, 2018). Opposing the paradigm of “conflict” to describe the impasse with Israel, they counter that the situation should instead be described as a struggle for liberation from colonization. While power-brokers such as the United States and the European Union continue to speak of a two-state solution, Palestinian activists, long disenchanted by the Palestinian Authority and its role as auxiliary to the Israeli occupation (Nassar, 2021a), are involved in a struggle to have the world recognize that what they are up against is settler-colonization.

Anti-colonial discourse by Palestinians echoes that of early efforts by Palestinian intellectuals to explain the nature of the dispossession suffered at Israel’s inception (Zurayk, 1956; Sayegh, 2012). It also echoes pre-Oslo anti-colonial/revolutionary discourse within the Palestinian liberation movement’s long history (Sayigh, 1997). Moreover, the reemergence of the settler-colonialism paradigm has been accompanied by renewed scholarship that theorizes Israel as a settler-colonial state engaged in an ongoing process of colonization and its attendant consequences (Abdo and Yuval-Davis, 1995; Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2006; Zureik, 2016; Lentin, 2018, 2020; Mamdani, 2020). Underlying such scholarly initiatives is the idea that unless the expansionist drive inherent to settler-colonialism is acknowledged and addressed, peace will remain elusive. Instead, peace should be sought through a framework of decolonization by “acknowledging the power structures and asymmetry between colonized and colonizer as the point of departure, with the explicit goal of transforming them into structures of equality and reciprocity in a new democratic political order” (Rouhana, 2017: 15).

This article showcases the contours of this contemporary discourse through a case study of a young Palestinian man who has managed to challenge the dominant discourse surrounding the issue. A Jerusalemite, Mohammed El-Kurd is a writer and poet whose home has been threatened with seizure by a Jewish settler organization, Nahalat Shimon, which has targeted a number of homes in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem (Alsaafin, 2021). Since under Israel’s discriminatory system Jewish citizens can claim lands they owned prior to the establishment of Israel, whereas Palestinians cannot, claimants have been successful in winning cases against homeowners through the courts. This is the case in Sheikh Jarrah where a number of housing units built in 1956 and given to Palestinian refugees through an agreement between Jordan and the United Nations Refugee and Works Agency (Roya News, 2021) have been threatened with seizure through the Israeli court system.

Mohammed, along with his twin sister, Muna, have been active in the local community’s campaign to resist settler encroachment. Now in their early twenties, the twins first experienced settlers occupying part of their property when they

were 11 years old (Alfred, 2016). In that particular wave of home takeovers in Sheikh Jarrah in 2010, over 60 Palestinians lost their homes and hundreds more remained at risk of “forced eviction, dispossession and displacement” (OCHA, 2010). Ever since, the El-Kurd twins have been raising awareness about the issue, amassing hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter and millions of followers, between them, on Instagram.<sup>1</sup> When a video posted by Muna El-Kurd in early May 2021 went viral it turned the El-Kurds into two of the most prominent Palestinian voices on social media. The video showed Muna exclaiming to a settler that he was stealing her house, to which the settler replied:

If I don't steal it, someone else is gonna steal it (Al-Jazeera, 2021).

Many on social media saw this as a synopsis of Israeli policies, with one meme sarcastically describing the settler's phrase as “an Israeli proverb”.<sup>2</sup>

Sheikh Jarrah rose to further prominence during the 11-day military aggression between Israel and Gaza in May 2021 that killed over 270 people, almost all Palestinian. The El-Kurd twins had been engaged in publicizing their plight in the weeks prior and had attracted considerable attention on social media with the viral video of the settler. When Hamas framed its armed confrontation with Israel as “retaliation to its crimes and aggression on the holy city and brutality against our people in Sheikh Jarrah” (Hamas, 2021) the El-Kurds were further catapulted into the media spotlight. While the fighting was ongoing Mohammed appeared on US television channels such as CNN, MSNBC and CBSN, where he was successful in puncturing through the hegemonic discourse used by the media to talk about the war and about the situation in Sheikh Jarrah. Muna also succeeded in media outreach in Arabic, on channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. The El-Kurd twins thus became the *de jour* faces of Palestine activism, and have since been named among the 100 most influential people of 2021 by *Time* magazine (Mansoor, 2021). Given their large social media following among Palestinians, and the large scale protests supporting them in Jerusalem, it was evident that their message and the way in which they spoke about the issue had found much resonance within Palestinian society. While Muna El-Kurd mainly posted in Arabic, Mohammed's English language social media posts were directed at a western audience. For this reason, his interventions were chosen for the case study over his sister's.

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1 Mohammed El-Kurd (@m7mdkurd) has 222,000 followers on Twitter and 630,000 on Instagram. Muna El-Kurd (@kurd\_muna) has 81,000 followers on Twitter and 1.6 million on Instagram.

2 Tweet by @ AbuAmaanah on 22 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/AbuAmaanah/status/1396079008887054341>>

## DATA AND METHOD

The data for the study consisted of all tweets generated by Mohammed El-Kurd during the 11-21 May war of 2021. The chosen time frame represents an “articulatory moment” when a competing discourse to the dominant media discourse rapidly rose through the social media platforms and found its way onto traditional media platforms.

The tweets of Mohammed were chosen over his Instagram posts due to the fact that many of his posts on Instagram have since been removed in what appears to have been an act of censorship (Dwoskin and Vynck, 2021; Mnejja and Fatafta, 2021). Twitter, thanks to its succinct textual format allowed for a crisp population of textual data and a straightforward data-gathering process. Since El-Kurd’s tweets were of a manageable number, they were collected manually. A total of 395 tweets were gathered of which 280 were tweets by El-Kurd himself, and 115 were tweets by other activists that he had retweeted. Attention was given especially to those tweets that garnered many thousands of likes and retweets since this indicated their resonance among audiences. Additional data were gathered from media interviews given by Mohammed during the same period, which provided longer textual segments for analysis. To demonstrate the ubiquity of the counter-hegemonic discourse among the Palestine activist community, the study draws on interventions made on platforms such as *The Electronic Intifada*, Al-Shabaka and De-Colonize Palestine.

The article proceeds as follows: first I present the theoretical framework used to analyze the data; second I provide a brief overview of hegemonic media practices in reporting on Palestine/Israel; third I provide an analysis of El-Kurd’s discursive interventions; and finally I discuss the context in which an anti-colonial discourse on the issue has been emerging in recent years.

## HEGEMONY AND DISCOURSE

Hegemony is established through the domination of certain narratives in the media, in think tanks, in universities<sup>3</sup> and through other fora of knowledge production. It is evidenced in the terminology and framing choices used to perpetuate a certain understanding of a given issue. These choices become the “default” way for epistemologically understanding, describing, and analyzing a given situation. When hegemonic narratives become “common sense”, the power structures that worked to advance them fade from view and are forgotten (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). While for Gramsci the dominant classes in society use language within the institutions of the superstructure to manufacture consent for narratives that suit their interests, for post-modernists

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of how academia blocks Palestinian narratives see (McCarthy, Landy, and Lentin, 2020).

such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) hegemonies are unstable and may be challenged. Dominant ideas can and do change, sometimes rapidly, depending on shifting alliances and changing agendas.

The study draws on critical approaches to discourse analysis such as Discourse Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These approaches see discourse as imbued with ideology, either reflecting or creating it. Language can be socially shaped *and* it can be socially constitutive, reshaping identities, social relations and systems of knowledge (Fairclough, 1993). Since discourse is a particular way of representing social, physical and psychological realities it becomes a strategic resource for representing an issue in order either to reproduce or challenge existing conceptualizations around it. Hegemonies “at a societal level are produced, reproduced, contested and transformed in discourse” (Fairclough, 1992: 10). Although the production of meaning around social phenomena is mainly in the hands of hegemonic powers, it is always negotiable and meanings are never permanently fixed. “Articulation” of new ideas can establish “a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105). The structured totality of such ideas becomes a “discourse”. A given articulated discourse is just one of many possible in the larger “field of discursivity” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112). Competing discourses may exist simultaneously, each borrowing from different genres, mixing, matching and producing reality in a range of different ways.

CDA as a technique can reveal how power relationships are established, reinforced or challenged through language. By looking for choices in vocabulary, grammar and style, by examining the values and attitudes conveyed by a text, including through the genres it draws on, and by identifying the links between a text and the social structure in which it is produced it is possible to examine the power dynamics within a text while situating it in a specific socio-cultural moment (Fairclough, 1992; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2005).

## HEGEMONIC MEDIA DISCOURSE ON PALESTINE/ISRAEL

Mainstream media’s representation of the situation in Palestine tends to be problematic in two main ways. First, the issue typically makes the international news when Israelis are affected, while routine violence against Palestinians goes under-reported.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the media tends to draw on Israel’s framing of events by repeating Israeli talking points about “self-defense” and “security”. Palestinian perspectives are often left out, or only minimally included. This has been empirically shown by a number of studies.

A *416 Labs* study that used Natural Language Processing techniques to assess content across five major US newspapers between 1967 and 2017 found that

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Israel’s killing of 13 Palestinian teenagers in the West Bank since the start of 2021 (Palestine Chronicle, 2021) has not been picked up by the international media.

Israeli sources were quoted 250% more often than Palestinian sources, and that the term “occupation” in reference to the occupied Palestinian territory declined by 85% over that time period (Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018: 3). The majority of reporting took place during times of armed conflict, while long-term grievances and ongoing crises such as the blockade on Gaza rarely made the news. References to a “peace process” were frequently stated in relation to Israel, giving the impression that the Oslo process to achieve Palestinian statehood was ongoing despite widespread perceptions that the two-state solution has become moribund (Khalil, 2010; Abdul Qadir, 2021). The term “terror” appeared three times more often than the term “occupation” and Israel’s Jewish-only colonies were rarely described as “illegal” (Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018: 13-14). When Jerusalem was mentioned, East Jerusalem’s status as Palestine’s occupied capital was omitted, while the term “blockade” was ten times less likely to appear in reference to Gaza than the term “Hamás” (Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018: 14). Overall, the Palestinian narrative was “highly underrepresented” and key topics needed to understand the conflict remained “understated” (Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018: 3). The lack of reporting on these issues contributed to “the normalization of the Israeli occupation” (Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018: 13).

These findings support those from a previous study into US media, which found that the *New York Times* ignored documentation received about violations of Palestinians’ human rights and rarely mentioned discriminatory Israeli state policies. By concealing such information from readers, public views in favor of Israel became more likely (Falk and Friel, 2007).

Such partiality in reporting reflects the power imbalance between Israel and its occupied subjects, an imbalance that derives from (though is not limited to) the sourcing of information. No matter how journalists may try to compensate for the weaker side, “sourcing imbalances nevertheless persist when one party to the conflict has a functioning government, a strong military, and well-established civil society institutions but the other side does not” (Dunsky, 2008: 13). Moreover, although the United States gives diplomatic cover to Israel at the United Nations and supplies it with weaponry this is rarely mentioned in media representations of the parties’ links with external actors. Rather, the mainstream media acts as a policy mirror that absorbs the “Washington consensus” in much of its framing of the issue (Dunsky, 2008: 36).

The UK mainstream media suffers from similar problems. For example, a study into BBC reporting on the issue found that news bulletins tended to report on the latest atrocity or the latest “cycle of violence” without going into the contextual reasons for why it was occurring (Philo and Berry, 2011). This is significant because when viewers were asked to comment on the news, they relayed narratives that had been put forward in news bulletins, both in content and in structure (Philo and Berry, 2011). Another study into BBC reporting found that permitted terms and phrases on the issue were monitored through a hierarchy of gatekeepers within the corporation that ensured terms such as “Zionism”, “colonialism” and “equality” were avoided (Richardson and Barkho, 2009). Based on interviews with BBC editors and journalists, the study concluded:

no other conflict [...] receives the same degree of scrutiny, attention and editorial supervision (Richardson and Barkho, 2009: 619).

## MOHAMMED EL-KURD'S DISCURSIVE INTERVENTIONS

Hi, as a person living in Palestine I can confirm that we are being ethnically cleansed.<sup>5</sup> Actually have been for the past 73 years. But don't take my word for it. What do I know? Believe the white woman in a Manhattan high rise saying "Palestinians do face some challenges but..."<sup>6</sup>

The above tweet by Mohammed El-Kurd received over 20,000 retweets and 50,000 likes. Its resonance speaks to the cry by Palestinians for their claims to be heard given they are the injured party at the receiving end of Israeli policies. El-Kurd is essentially asking whether an American pundit, far removed from life under Israeli subjugation, can be a more credible source than a Palestinian. His reference to "white" woman juxtaposes the western observer against the indigenous (non-white) Palestinian, drawing attention to the media's choices of who may speak for Palestinians. The intervention recalls Edward Said's view that hegemonic opinions on Israel emerged with the willing consent of western liberalism's identification with European-born Zionism and that "Zionism always undertakes to speak for Palestine and the Palestinians [...] the Palestinian cannot be heard from (or represent himself) directly on the world stage" (Said, 1980: 39).

For example, although Palestinians have long claimed that Israel practices apartheid<sup>7</sup> (Bishārah, 2002; Zreik, 2004; Barghouti, 2011) this term only began to enter mainstream liberal discourse when uttered by Israeli and American organizations. First, Israeli human rights NGO, B'Tselem, released a report in January 2021 that found Israel to be "advancing and perpetuating the supremacy of one group —Jews— over another —Palestinians" (B'Tselem, 2021). Three months later, the mainstream NGO, Human Rights Watch, came to the same conclusion (HRW, 2021). It has not been lost on Palestinians that the frame of apartheid only became acceptable once non-Palestinians used it.

El-Kurd explicitly points to racism as a factor in the obstruction of the Palestinian narrative. In a tweet referring to Israeli army attacks on residents in Silwan (Jerusalem) he tweeted:

5 "Ethnic-cleansing" refers to population transfers and other criminal acts committed in the course of the Bosnian war of the 1990s, and has been used to describe Israel's expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948. See Pappe, 2006.

6 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 20 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1395406058315829257?s=20>>

7 "Apartheid" is defined as a crime against humanity by the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid and by the 1998 Rome Statute.

These fascists can get away with this because the world has an anti-Palestinian racism problem. History will remember.<sup>8</sup>

Commenting on the media's habit of sourcing confirmation about attacks against Palestinians from the very army that carries out those attacks, El-Kurd uses language more commonly heard among Black American activists ("white people"), thus recalling the intersectional links between the Palestinian struggle and the struggle for racial equality elsewhere:

If it's challenging for "white ppl/non-Palestinians/etc." to believe the voice that's facing the gun barrel without the confirmation of the very gunman, then that's a bias they must unlearn. Allowing them that confirmation perpetuates anti-Palestinian racism.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the moral imperative of allowing Palestinians to speak for themselves, El-Kurd posits that there exists an appetite for the Palestinian voice to be heard and accuses the mainstream media of standing in the way:

The fact that so many outspoken Palestinians have shot up in follower count over the past few weeks, including myself, tells me there is a global thirst for the Palestinian perspective and an intentional erasure of that perspective from mainstream media.<sup>10</sup>

## COLONIZATION, NOT "CONFLICT"

Speaking to *MSNBC* from his threatened home in Jerusalem, El-Kurd explained why the colonial paradigm is appropriate to understand the Israeli polity:

Looking at how this country came about, it came about by stealing people's lands and destroying people's villages. Today the difference we have is that they no longer use their artillery to steal our homes —*except when they do come and steal our homes*— now they use a supremacist judicial system, a colonial judicial system, that colludes with these settler organizations that are actually registered in the United States to take over our homes [...] Just because something is legalized does not mean it's correct, does not mean it's historically just. What is happening to us in Sheikh Jarrah is ethnic cleansing. (*MSNBC*, 2021: 2.11-3.09)

8 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 16 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1393842568472014850>>

9 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 20 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1395443130485379074>>

10 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 14 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1393186939394826246>>



In the few seconds afforded to him on *MSNBC* El-Kurd managed to summarize the genesis of Israel as a settler-colonial enterprise; explain that colonization takes place through Israel's court systems as well as through brute force; and reference the US's involvement —and thereby its complicity— in illegal settlement practices.

Palestinians say that Israeli actions are part of an ongoing plan to remove them from their lands, in effect, constituting an ongoing *nakba*<sup>11</sup> (Nassar, 2021b; IMEMC, 2021). They point to the fact that settler-colonial states develop moral justifications for the elimination of the native populations they seek to replace, which can include ethnic cleansing and other criminal acts (Decolonize Palestine, 2021). In El-Kurd's neighborhood, the Israeli army works in tandem with settlers to demoralize residents into leaving:

Sheikh Jarrah is blockaded since 2 weeks. Even us, whose IDs say we live in the fucking neighborhood, are not let in & have to sneak in. Every day they invade our homes, assault us, & use US-made weapons on us. I am sick of living under their fascist rule.<sup>12</sup>

A tweet by US-based Palestinian activist and lawyer, Noura Erakat, (retweeted by El-Kurd) underscored the absurdity of the Israeli "self-defense" paradigm that is often uncritically repeated by the media, and criticized discourse that paints the Palestinians as the violent group:

My feed is filled w images of scorched bodies, limp bodies, bloody bodies in Gaza & a sickening barrage of Zionists celebrating those images & asking for more. Palestinians aren't the ones to whom you should be preaching about non-violence<sup>13</sup>

El-Kurd further highlighted this point by drawing attention to the international community's treatment of the situation as though it were a conflict between two seemingly equivalent sides:

Currently on a Zoom call with a "both sides" diplomat. A woman from Gaza prefaced her testimony with apologizing in advance should she leave the meeting soon, her area is getting heavily bombed by Israeli forces..... Both what? <sup>14</sup>

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11 *Nakba* ['catastrophe'] is the term Palestinians use to describe the ethnic cleansing event of 1948 (Pappe, 2006).

12 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 15 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1393599135346053122?s=20>>

13 Noura Erakat tweet on 14 May 2021. Retweeted by Mohammed El-Kurd. <<https://twitter.com/4noura/status/1393029136894119936>>

14 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 17 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1394079405035692037>>

El-Kurd's perspective echoes sentiments frequently found in *The Electronic Intifada*, a US-based online news outlet set up in 2001 to give voice to the Palestinian narrative. During the May 2021 war, its founder noted:

We are often told that Hamas is guilty of targeting civilians because it 'indiscriminately' fired thousands of rockets towards Israeli cities and strategic assets.

However it is never explained that rockets are used as a deterrent against further ethnic cleansing (Abunimah, 2021).

## CALLING OUT THE MEDIA

Passive media terms such as "clashes" to describe the violence that frequently results in a high Palestinian body count conflates perpetrator and victim. Palestinians urge that the media use the active verb, "killed", and that they name the perpetrators of the killings (Rethinking Palestine, 2021: 10.00-11.00). In a tweet to a *New York Times* journalist who had highlighted the differences in linguistic norms used for Palestinian versus Israeli deaths, El-Kurd urged her to take the next step and publicly resign over this form of journalistic bias (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Tweet by Mohammed El-Kurd on 18 May 2021 calling on a *New York Times* journalist to take a principled stand against double standards used in reporting Palestinian versus Israeli deaths**



Social media has helped Palestinians bypass the gatekeepers of traditional mass media. “Thank God for social media”, El-Kurd said in one television interview, “because it appears to me that the world is finally waking up to the fact that Israel is an apartheid state and it treats Palestinians with such dehumanization—it treats Palestinians the way colonizers treat the colonized” (Democracy Now!, 2021: 3.29-3.42). However, he also showed that social media is not without its own gatekeepers:

Our #SaveSheikhJarrah FB group, which had 10k+ members, was disabled. Zuck supports ethnic cleansing.<sup>15</sup>

Such censorship contributes to “deepening the already substantial power imbalance between Israelis and Palestinians” (Agostinelli, 2021) and exacerbates Israel’s censorship of the Palestinians:

Israeli intelligence has been calling Palestinians and threatening them with arrest and prosecution should they not remove their documentation and social media posts regarding police violence... we aren’t scared<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the horizontally distributed nature of access to social media permits a large volume of content-sharing by Palestinians. In El-Kurd’s experience this has compensated for the exclusion of the Palestinian narrative from the mainstream media:

Social media has been generous in providing us with a myriad of exhibits of Israeli violence—police shooting journalists, soldiers bombing ambulances, settlers lynching Palestinians, smashing their stores, screenshots of genocidal messages—yet none of it will air on American TV.<sup>17</sup>

Through his interventions, El-Kurd has essentially set an example for how to interact with the media on terms that concord with the Palestinian reality. In a series of tweets that garnered over 10,000 likes/retweets, he offered a set of guidelines to those engaging with journalists:

Be unabashed in your support & articulation of Palestinians’ right to liberation and self-defense against Israeli terror

15 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 13 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1392729608039112707>>

16 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 14 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1393291797162508293>>

17 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet on 13 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1392954990013059076>>

Reject fabricated nuance: there is nothing complex or controversial about this well-documented historic injustice

Call out propaganda (myth of Israel “self-defense” etc.) & anti-Palestinian racism (victim blaming etc)

Assert the illegitimacy & inherent bias of Israeli systems: the I”D”F isn’t a credible source of info, Israeli colonial occupation courts can’t deliver justice

Don’t normalize the language of the oppressor: it’s not the “Magistrate Court,” it’s an Occupation Court. It’s not the IDF, it’s IOF or ITF. [Israel Occupation Forces, Israel Terrorist Forces]

You already know this: center the power imbalance, reaffirm that mainstream narratives are written by the powerful not the truthful<sup>18</sup>

Through his interviews on US television, El-Kurd demonstrated how to put these guidelines into practice. When asked on CNN whether he supported the “violent protests” that had erupted in solidarity with his family in Sheikh Jarrah, he quipped back:

Do you support the violent dispossession of me and my family? (CNN, 2021: 4.27-4.40).

Elsewhere, when asked to comment on Israel’s right to self-defense, El-Kurd disrupted the very framing of that question by quipping back:

The United States has waged more wars than there are Hamas members, I don’t wait for the United States to tell me what constitutes self-defense (MSNBC, 2021: 3.30-3.48).

By reworking hegemonically-structured questions to correct their fundamental assumptions and by using sarcasm to command attention El-Kurd seized back control of the interview.

El-Kurd’s uncompromising critique serves a number of purposes and borrows from a variety of genres. It is journalistic in its reporting of on-the-ground events, conversational in its aim to connect with audiences, deontic in demanding that the media frame the issue accurately, and defiant in its unapologetic use of expletives and sarcasm. By fearlessly calling out the mainstream media he went beyond the simple chronicling of Israeli violence to also identify the processes complicit in it. And instead of merely being the subject of the media story, he became its narrator.

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18 Mohammed El-Kurd tweet thread on 16 May 2021 <<https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1393728578089521153>>

## WHY IS AN ANTI-COLONIAL DISCOURSE BREAKING THROUGH NOW?

Two-thirds of West Bank Palestinians support revoking the Oslo Accords as of August 2021 (Melhem, 2021). The Palestinian Authority's repeated postponement of elections and its crackdowns on its own people have left many feeling unrepresented by their official leadership (Melhem, 2021). Leaders today may instead be found among those who resist their own dispossession on the ground, bringing their struggle online and speaking in unison with other Palestinians in the diaspora. Their voices may be found on social media under hashtags such as *#FreePalestine*. Participants in this movement comprise a generation whose digital proficiency exceeds that of activists even a decade ago; among the younger generation many are digital natives (Solombrino, 2016). Activists who previously engaged in documentation of the atrocities they endured are now learning how to leverage this documentation to not only expose Israel's aggressions but to call out complicit actors. It should be noted that Palestinian Internet resistance has to contend with the challenge of Israeli "cyber-colonialism" (Aouragh and Tawil-Souri, 2014) and invasive surveillance (Dwoskin, 2021). Therefore while Palestinians may be able to leverage social media for now, they may not always be able to rely on it.

What may be significant about this moment is the climate of heightened awareness about racism and a rejection of the social-political structures that maintain racialized systems of inequality (Lentin, 2020). A 2017 survey found that American millennials (who constitute the largest generation) cite racism among their top three concerns, regardless of their own racial background (Cohen *et al.*, 2017). This may signal growing receptivity among US audiences to a discourse that highlights the discriminatory underpinnings of the Israeli regime. Traditional media, in its competition with social media, is under pressure to respond to this change. This change, moreover, is set against a backdrop of increasing intersectional mobilization among movements concerned with issues of racism and militarism. These movements have amplified Palestinian voices transnationally.

For example, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has allied with the Palestinians:

We are a movement committed to ending settler colonialism in all forms and will continue to advocate for Palestinian liberation (Salam, 2021).

The intersectional movement has committed to addressing state-sanctioned police violence globally, and not just in the US (Salam, 2021). Although Black American-Palestinian solidarity has existed for decades, particularly since the Israeli invasion of Arab lands in 1967 when the two movements found common cause in anti-imperialism and Third Worldism (Rickford, 2019), this alliance was strengthened during the concurrent bombing of Gaza in 2014 and the police-occupation of the Ferguson (Erakat and Hill, 2019; Naber, 2017). Recognizing that military-grade weapons used by police departments in Ferguson and missiles used by Israel in Gaza were all US-made, and that policing methods have been

exchanged by US and Israeli police departments, activists easily made the connection between their respective struggles against state-sanctioned violence. Local groups in Ferguson such as the Organization for Black Struggle and the St. Louis Palestine Solidarity Committee, together with other groups across the US, organized a “Palestine Contingent to Ferguson” whereby supporters of Palestinian liberation stood in solidarity with the victims of police violence in Ferguson (Naber, 2017: 15). Elements that underpinned their alliance were “US-led empire building, militarism, and war; neoliberal economics; and white supremacy” (Naber, 2017: 17). This alliance was visible during the May 2021 aggression on Gaza when BLM activists joined Palestinian marches across US cities (Salam, 2021).

The intersectional links between policies of militarism, racism and oppression also find resonance among other movements engaged in systemic critiques of the world order. It is thus that the climate group, Fridays for Future (FFF), has taken a stand on Palestine. In a tweet thread posted in the midst of the 11-day bombardment of Gaza, the organization issued a carefully produced, lengthy thread of tweets that opened with: “We stand with the Palestinian people against settler-colonization”.<sup>19</sup> The group proceeded to explain that Israel removes Palestinians from their homes in a process of militarism and colonialism “all of which we exist to dismantle”.<sup>20</sup>

FFF and BLM are movements that use radical discourse to address the root causes of the issues they stand for. BLM’s toppling of statues associated with slavery is itself a discursive intervention carried out through socio-cultural practice to expose the ongoing commemoration of white supremacy (Borysovysh, Chaiuk, and Karpova, 2020). Protests by FFF have similarly engaged in searing systemic critiques, as evidenced through founder Greta Thunberg’s insubordinate discursive style. Through his anti-colonial discourse, Mohammed El-Kurd has made similar inroads into mainstreaming a systemic critique that rejects the hegemonic agenda and confidently sets out a new one. The new agenda says “don’t play the media game”, “talk about root causes” and “take no prisoners”.

## CONCLUSION

Although the multiple structures of discrimination and dispossession that govern the lives of Palestinians have been well documented by a plethora of human rights groups and UN agencies, the language used to describe these structures in much of the mainstream media obscures the basic underpinnings of these structures, whether this is done intentionally or inadvertently. Although sympathy for the Palestinians is elicited through images of carnage during violent military

19 Fridays for Future tweet thread on 19 May 2021. <<https://twitter.com/Fridays4future/status/1395111918898016259>>

20 *Ibid.*

conflagrations this does little other than elicit calls for humanitarian relief. Yet humanitarian aid is incapable of ending the ongoing suffering; “we are treating the consequences of settler colonialism and apartheid, for which we have no medical cure”, remarked a Doctors Without Borders medic in the midst of the May 2021 violence (Bseiso and Whittall, 2021).

Given the US’s acquiescence to Israel’s *de facto* annexation of Palestinian lands and the EU’s business as usual approach vis-à-vis a state that is now widely known to be practicing a system of apartheid, a change in the status quo will not come from the top down. Israel has no incentive to end its decades-long policies of Palestinian repression unless there is a cost associated to the current state of affairs. It is therefore incumbent on scholars and practitioners in fields such as conflict resolution and journalism to pay attention to local actors and to re-examine the ways in which the century-old impasse in Palestine has been conceptualized. An epistemological reconceptualization of the so-called “conflict” may well contribute to political pressure that can lead to a more constructive resolution agenda.

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