

# *Diaries of the Uprising*

Edward Said Forum

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May, 2021

The map of protest expanded, and the street reclaimed its rightful place, marking a turning point in the uprising that united us to create, with our own hands, a popular movement and a revolutionary scene that illuminated the path of our people toward liberation and our just cause with all its symbolism. Our throats roared, carrying accumulated anger in support of Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa Mosque, bleeding Gaza, and ourselves.

In the pages of this booklet, you will find different scenes from the May 2021 uprising. We recall the memory of days when the voice of the street was louder than any other voice. The organizational form that shaped the uprising consisted mostly of popular initiatives and local youth movements, which came to light and formed a comprehensive and interconnected national fabric. From here, we shape the memory and document the phase through our lines, our words, and our vision, recalling the memory of unity and collective solidarity.

At the Edward Said Forum, we believe in the importance of students and youth activism. Indeed, we see the students and youth sector as the beating pulse of the spirit of the revolution. We invite you to write your own personal memoirs in the final pages, so that we might extract from memory a revolutionary spirit and immortalize our collective moments.

May, 2021

One of the most vivid scenes that comes to my mind when I recall the Dignity Uprising is the morning of the first day of Eid al-Fitr. The traces of destruction were everywhere; the streets were still breathing fire, remnants of rubber bullets, damaged traffic lights, and the Eid takbīrs echoed from the mosques. I was overcome by a feeling that we were closer to victory and closer to freedom. Then the scene at the Magistrate's Court in Nazareth comes back to my mind. On one night, more than fifty detainees from Nazareth and its surrounding areas were brought in – a scene that sent shivers down the spine. You could see a group of lawyers who took upon themselves the task of getting the youth out and defending them. They chose to give up their Eid days and rest, dedicating themselves to serving the sons of their people. The scene of national leaders from all currents waiting eagerly in the courtyards of the courthouse, along with the honorable media who came to solidify and document the scene.

Oh how we appeared as a cohesive and united people in the face of the Zionist colonial system.

A university student – Nazareth.

May, 2021

I am sitting there, penniless, in the Social Sciences building, and I decide to write down the memories of that uprising right away. I have nothing but a pen, so I wander around the building until I find some paper to write on. I go down from the fourth floor until I reach the entrance of the building. I find a notebook for writing messages to the students of our university who were killed in the Dizengoff attack. I tear out a page from the notebook and go back to the fourth floor. I sit on a chair and begin to remember...

And what do I want to remember? And how could I ever forget?

We, the students, set off on a bus from the Sheikh Munis neighborhood to Sheikh Jarrah. The buses were prevented from entering, so young people from Jerusalem came to transport us in their cars. Their Jerusalemite accent was beautiful and distinctive! We had breakfast with the families of Sheikh Jarrah. It was the first time I tasted authentic Jerusalem falafel – there was nothing more delicious than it. After breakfast came scenes of rubber bullets, stun grenades, soldiers, tear gas, sewage water, and a state of panic. That moment was very important to me. It was the first moment I felt oppression, the first moment I understood what confrontation meant, what it meant to go down and confront on the land – our land.

We passed by a local man's house and took shelter inside. Christmas decorations were still hanging throughout the house. Amid feelings of fear and anxiety, I noticed that the house was one of the most beautiful I had ever seen in design. The ceiling arches made of old Palestinian stone spoke with beauty. There were eight of us girls sitting with mixed emotions: fear, panic, anger, and mutual support. We heard the man compare the current situation to the Second Intifada, and we wondered how we would leave the house and when.

After we returned to the bus, we all sat on the sidewalk in silence. Our friend offered us Arabic coffee, and we waited until the rest of the scattered groups gathered with us.

I went to my room in the student dorm, in "Rosheem." I sat on my bed going through an identity crisis. I thought about the different place and situation I was living in, and the word "different" meant nothing more than geographical differences and lines on maps – nothing else. Thoughts followed one another; one feeling disappeared only to be replaced by another. After that, I prepared slogans for the student demonstration we were going to organize the next day.

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It was one of the longest demonstrations I had ever attended.  
My God, it was one of the strongest student scenes I had ever witnessed.  
My feeling was paradoxical – between love for unity and belonging, and the very cause  
of this gathering.

University student – Galilee

May, 2021

Yesterday, my sister, my cousin, and I walked toward the gas station in Jaffa, on the border with Bat Yam. There, the evening prayer was held in the street, facing the settlers who were on their way to Jaffa, continuing the brutal events that had taken place in Bat Yam. As we were walking, special patrols began running toward the Al-Jabaliya Mosque in the same area. They entered the mosque courtyard and started throwing hand grenades at the worshippers who were standing their ground. As we continued walking, we kept changing direction every few minutes because we were surrounded on all sides by horses and soldiers. We found a path to take, and it was dark. Our group moved forward, and I noticed a group of people in the distance whom I couldn't make out. Suddenly, I heard a voice saying, "Stop. Stay where you are. Do not move forward!" He raised a weapon that emitted a red light, and the full command was: "Do not advance. Do not move forward." Of course, we began to retreat and moved away slowly, afraid they might shoot at us. At the same time, they were detaining and arresting a young man. I couldn't see who he was or hear his name.

Anyone who had any information, allowed us to share it, cooperate, and build an information network among ourselves. We had no choice but to protect ourselves and defend one another.

University student - Jaffa

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The Second Intifada seemed very distant. It was ancient history. I never felt a time gap between it and the liberation of Jerusalem by Saladin or the expulsion of Napoleon from the shores of Akka. When thirteen young men were martyred in the occupied territories, I was celebrating my fifth birthday. Everything that those older than me experienced seemed the same. History – a history that stretched from our expulsion from paradise to the bombing of Tel Aviv. When one of us said today “the bombing of Tel Aviv,” they had to mention the name of the battle, or at least the year. Our situation was not like this until 2014. Since then, we became accustomed to the bombing of Tel Aviv, to the point that Palestine became closer to us, and we became closer to each other.

When I went to Sheikh Jarrah for the first time, I was worried about the effects of sound grenades, tear gas, and rubber bullets. My fear of the soldiers was less than my fear of their tools. They had the F-16. This ended all discussion about the power imbalance. As for us, our mere presence alone – without even talking about refusing to leave our neighborhood – was reason enough to receive grenades and beatings. Then what? It turned out that the noise of a sound grenade was mild compared to the sound of fireworks on Eid. As for the tear gas, a quarter of an onion placed inside the gas mask was enough, from the start of the demonstration, to neutralize its effect.

After several days, in one of the towns of Galilee, at a location chosen by youth to confront the police, it was a different experience. I ran, fleeing with others, after hearing the sounds of many sound grenades, followed by the firing of rubber bullets. I could hear the sound of them hitting the wall and the adjacent asbestos sheeting. We learned from previous days that this meant they would storm the neighborhood and attempt to arrest the protesters. I had not run ten meters when I passed by one of the field youth leaders, who shouted at me to stop. He was without a face covering, an onion, or even a mask, standing in the middle of the street with empty hands. He turned to me specifically, directing his words: “Where are you going? Why are you running? Were you hit by rubber bullets?” Then he pointed with his left hand to two wounds in his left leg, continuing: “I got two rubber bullets. When you get hit by rubber bullets, you will run. Go back.” When we were scared in our childhood, there was always someone to reassure us, give us courage, with a kiss, a hug, or words that lessened the burden of fear. I did not hesitate.

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I counted the meters I had run earlier, and I trusted people about whom, to this day, I knew nothing – except that they were from this town. Yet the single enemy, by necessity and by its own evil, built one nation.

The most important information remained that which was observed with the naked eye. We were promised the bombing of Tel Aviv, and the promise was fulfilled. I was in Jerusalem and did not hear the threat of it being bombed, only to be surprised by shouts of “Allahu Akbar” and the spreading of the news. That was enough for the soldiers to understand what had happened. What happened was that we dared, and then we became – through blood and race – one people, one nation. The next day, the Arab and Islamic world awoke to Eid al-Fitr, and our people rose to achieve their unity – in action, not just in words. We reclaimed our streets and our land, each in their own town. Due to circumstances beyond my control, I was forced to go to another town to demonstrate throughout the following two weeks. Why not? We bombed Tel Aviv, just as we had promised our enemy. It became our role to support those among us who were bombed and to defend our homes and lands. Had we not become a nation? Should not the blood, race, and the dust of bullets and cannons be shared by all of us? Palestine was ours, for all that we dedicated to it and to its people.

Today we knew that nations and peoples had not existed since eternity; rather, they were the product of actions and words of a group that saw itself as part of a larger collective of people who cared about their affairs. Together, they saw and imagined themselves as a single entity – a nation. We also learned this at university. Reading the works of Benedict Anderson was useful for understanding the formation of a nation. You could also participate in a protest with young men and women under twenty, chanting, “Abu Obeida, our beloved, strike, strike Tel Aviv.” We lived, learned, and worked inside the large settlement called Tel Aviv – and that was where our relationship with it ended. In moments of truth, that is, during bombing, we did not say that it was bombed; rather, we chanted that we bombed it. In 2014, when we bombed it, I did not hear the sirens, because I was not living in Tel Aviv. Then the same thing happened during every aggression against Gaza; the settlement was bombed from Gaza, and I did not hear the sirens.

Indeed, the latest battle ended without me hearing the sirens except through Zoom, during an event held by Zionists living in Tel Aviv. I choose to be Palestinian every day – especially when we bomb Tel Aviv.

The Dignity Uprising was not only a collective act that was conscious of itself, its goals, and its unity; it was also a religious ritual and an individual purification. We removed the filth and dirt of Zionization, overturned a purposeless and irrational hatred toward those among our own people who differed from us, and drew closer to one another through blood and wounds. Ordinary life – tainted and filled with sins – came to a halt. In our daily lives in the occupied territory, we became oppressors and infidels simply by living a “normal” life. Our dull, ordinary day – going to work and to classes – caused harm to millions of refugees and people living under siege. Our mere existence on our land was no longer a goal except for those who dreamed of improving their conditions within the settlement. What we did during our existence was what determined our position in the war – not our language or our parents’ origins. Whoever sought Palestine within had to shake off Zionization and cleanse themselves daily from Israeli materialism. Every wound, arrest, or trial of one of us became part of a process of purification.

We might die in a car accident, break a hand in the bathroom, or choke on a grape. We might be arrested over a dispute about two meters with a neighbor, or because we fought with another family in the town. Being afflicted in ourselves, our wealth, and our children was inevitable. Did we not consciously choose the causes of our calamities? Suffering was imposed upon us, but I liked to believe that I chose my own suffering. During the uprising, we entered a period of worship and retreat, during which we memorized the alleys of Gaza, the streets of the West Bank, and the occupied villages inside. We came to know the meaning of Palestine in our throats and in our eyes. And for the first time, history no longer seemed vast to me. It became short, sequential, and comprehensible. We wrote the history of one battle among the many battles of our people.

University student – Galilee

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From one demonstration to another, from Sheikh Muanis to Jaffa, the enthusiasm of young people carried my friends and me forward that day. We chanted passionately, trying to make our voices – and our anger – heard. The Jaffa demonstration ended, as many do, with brutal arrests by the occupation police. My father called and said, “The Islamic Jihad will strike Tel Aviv at nine this evening.” I dismissed his words and told myself, *Nonsense*. But on our way from Jaffa back to the student housing, the sirens began to scream, and rockets cut across the sky. As in every war we endure in the occupied interior, we enter the familiar dilemma: do we fear for our lives, or do we celebrate our resistance? In truth, we were terrified. We stopped the car and ran for shelter, entering the stairwell of a residential building whose residents were Jewish. I expected them to ask us to leave because we were Arab. Instead, they welcomed us and allowed us to hide with them. Their kindness unsettled me. I asked myself: are they truly humanitarian? And if they are, how can their humanity be divided? Why do they protect my life but remain silent about the children of Gaza and Jerusalem? Is this hypocrisy – or ignorance shaped by a media that hides the crimes committed by their state?

The day ended, but the events continued: Gaza was bombarded. A house burned in Jaffa. The news brought only pain: images of martyrs, settlers’ terrorism, demonstrations in Arab towns, arrests of young men and women, and Hebrew media portraying us as terrorists. I followed both Arab and Hebrew outlets and saw how radically the same story could be told. Eventually, I could no longer continue. I turned off my phone and waited only for news of a ceasefire. I felt guilty and powerless, yet I held firmly to one position: I did not want new victims in Gaza. I could no longer endure these scenes. I asked my parents why they seemed indifferent to what was happening, even though they had struggled in their youth. Did it no longer matter to them? They answered that they had lived through this in 2000, and in every war since. Then I asked myself: will I also become trapped in this same despair and indifference when I reach fifty?

When the events ended, nothing between me and any Jewish person remained as it had been before. The looks on trains and buses were no longer neutral; they were tense, guarded.

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I concluded that they were subjected to brainwashing by their revered state, and that they have become complicit in the crimes of the occupation.

University Student – Akka District

## **Before and After the Uprising**

Before the uprising, there was much for us to write, much to hate and curse, and much from which to overflow – hope, or even disappointment.

We were forced to witness realities that burned away the hopefulness we carried inside. Calamities shattered what imagination had carefully woven, and agreements demolished collective dreams spun from the memory of pain. We engaged in countless discussions about the Palestinian cause, only to find ourselves turned into projects for condemnation, denunciation, or justification.

Justifying Palestinian existence:

- Loss of identity
- Failed leadership
- Consecutive catastrophes
- Weak national speeches
- Poor political elites
- The essence of the struggle
- Usurped history
- A colonized land
- The diaspora of our people
- Or even the conspiracies against the justice of our cause

Then, the fierce winds of the uprising swept over us. In its brief, overwhelming moments – when everything else seems still – it forced us to confront our own humanity and revealed the absurdity of these endless justifications.

Before this great invasion of reality, I did not know how long the Palestinian would be compelled to waste himself producing statements and rationales, or how long attempts to strip the Palestinian cause of its human context through filthy politics would persist. How long would some confine it to literary productions, honored in poems translated annually into many languages, treated as art from which new literary theories are extracted.

There are many things I never truly did, and still haven't – but even that no longer matters.

The uprising struck with a torrent of hope and determination. It shattered questions and affirmed the certainty of many: the Palestinian cause is an ethical liberation project, stripped of all that is unethical. And that this ethical project will inevitably shine. Its justice, the struggle for freedom, the rebellion against colonialism, the revolution against oppression, and the outrage against practices of racial superiority require no justification – they are settled through liberation.

The path of this liberation, whether short or long, is fueled by resistance. Resistance needs no justification; it is an idea put into practice. The Palestinian liberation project will redefine the very concept of existence and humanity. And we, without a doubt, with all hope, will one day seek refuge in the poetry of liberation after decades of intoxication – the poetry of resistance, and even of defeat.

University student – Taybeh

It is one o'clock at night: a warm bed, a roof that shelters, and rockets blocking the sky over Gaza. I hold my phone, which never leaves my side for a moment, refreshing Instagram feed in sync with the ticking of the wall clock hanging above me, hoping to catch the latest news. I remain like this until five in the morning – who fired a shell, where, when, the extent of the damage, news of the Iron Dome. I get up from my warm bed and have the pre-dawn meal: coffee, a few dates, and a piece of apple-and-cinnamon cake my mother made yesterday.

There are those who will not have their pre-dawn meal; they are searching for their beloved beneath the rubble that covered the apple orchards.

“For the sake of Al-Aqsa” ...

My friend Mahmoud from Gaza did not have to be a hero, nor to film his daily life under bombardment, nor to share it in interviews with newspapers and global TV channels explaining the trauma of the fourth war in his life, nor to have his diaries called “war diaries.” How do the oppressed cling to their faith – and how does this faith grow even stronger under such circumstances? Perhaps if a person were to lose their faith, they would find nothing left to keep them alive. I clearly remember a “story” he documented, like any other night, his daily life under bombardment, ending the clip with the phrase, “For the sake of Al-Aqsa.” Despite the possibility of his martyrdom at any moment, the homeland demands answering the call – even if that means giving one’s life. We give it with open hearts, for the sake of Al-Aqsa, the homeland, and freedom.

I am hanging on the gallows of the morning, My forehead – facing death – bowed.  
Because I did not bow it... alive.

Al-Aqsa cries out, Sheikh Jarrah calls, and Jenin groans – so mighty Gaza answers the call as if she were the mother of us all. For Gaza is the martyr and the mother of the martyr, the free and the captive, the rebellious and the oppressed.

How can one support someone going through such circumstances? What can a person do or say to console someone who may lose their home, or their family, or both at any moment? And is consolation even possible at all?

How helpless I feel when I speak about Gaza and the suffering of its people, and how naïve I feel when I repeat slogans that it's true meanings I do not fully understand... chants for the prisoners, for the intifada, for the detainees, for the martyrs, for the victims of war, for the mothers of martyrs, for the children of stones... How can I understand or truly comprehend these things when I have never tasted their reality?

So what do I do? Do I go out to protest and demonstrate? Do I share posts on social media? Do I tell my American and European friends about the suffering and oppression of my people – who, in turn, will not truly understand what it means, and will go on with their day as usual, for Palestine is merely a spot in that backward, full of wars, the Middle East.

So then, what can be done – what is within my power? I am not the first to be angry, or oppressed, or to feel helpless. Yet I realize that despite all of this, a person must fulfill their national and moral duty, even if it feels extremely naive, even if it is in the simplest of matters – a confrontation or an engagement – perhaps it will be a butterfly effect that does not fade away.

What shocked me is the reality that many Palestinians of the Galilee, or at least of my Galilean town, have discussed the uprising and its issue in a non-central way, or as if it were not important at all. At times they talk about Sheikh Jarrah or Al-Aqsa, or perhaps Gaza, and then they move on to talking about the type of meal they want to prepare next.

Is the explanation for this phenomenon a lack of awareness? Or perhaps becoming accustomed to such injustice? Neither explanation makes sense, for we are all Palestinians; our reality is one, our land is one, our soil is one, our Jerusalem is one, and our Al-Aqsa is one. So why, then, must some of us pay with their lives for this sacred soil, while others choose to watch all of this from behind a curtain, with indifferent eyes and unengaged souls?

University student - Galilee

A few days before the uprising, a solidarity demonstration for the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood was organized in Nazareth, a city of nearly one hundred thousand residents. Historically, Nazareth has produced martyrs, writers, and poets; yet on that day, it failed to bring together even thirty demonstrators. I was deeply upset. I kept asking myself why this had happened to us, how we had reached such a state, and what it would take for people to awaken.

When the uprising began, everything changed. It felt as though someone had finally shaken the people from their slumber.

I participated in the uprising in my town on one day, and in Sheikh Jarrah on the others. I remember how joyful I felt as the news reached me, and how I carried that participation as if I were acting on behalf of my town itself.

University student, Nazareth.

## The Twenty-Seventh of Ramadan, Old City, Jerusalem

He arrived at Damascus Gate with a friend two hours before the call to sunset prayer. A great fire burned in a trash container across the street. Young boys played a game of cat and mouse with men in their thirties wearing plastic armor, their foreheads coated with dust. The men overacted in a game that demanded lightness and agility. He said to his friend, "They will never catch them. Their heavy clothes in this heat have turned their sweat into glue—layering dust on their faces and blinding them." His friend nodded, as though he had found a scientific explanation for animal behavior.

He helped the radish vendors escape, carrying what they could from the left side of Damascus Gate while fleeing a water-cannon truck—water, God save you from it, water with no dignity at all.

Then he continued toward Hitta Gate. He knew an old man there who hung a majestic stuffed eagle above the shelves of his shop and prepared kebab with tahini salad—simply irresistible. On the way, he stopped an elegant man and asked about the difference between the gate's name in Arabic and in English: Bab al-Amud and Damascus Gate. The man was kind, but his answer was unconvincing. The stones of the alleyways were preparing for iftar. There was little time left before the cannon announced the breaking of the fast. The crowds, however, were preparing for something else—for confrontation. People had come to Jerusalem to pray, yes, and to admire the beauty of the ancient porticoes, yes—but also to clash in the morning with special guards who had arrived by ships and airplanes, determined to enter in their boots through the Moroccan Gate—by force.

He took a piece of kebab from the old man and a hot cake from the neighboring bakery. He wondered about the pain of those standing behind the iron barrier at Bab Hitta while he passed through it into the courtyard of Al-Haram.

What misery must a man in his thirties feel, carrying on his body a third of his own weight, forced to watch elderly women sway beneath the porticoes as they passed beside him?

Work is not shameful, my grandmother used to say.

Perhaps he thought too much. He wondered why people cooked enormous pots of maqluba in their towns, carried them to Jerusalem, walked them from the outer walls into the Haram courtyard, climbed the hill of the Dome of the Rock—only to turn the pot upside down there.

The people prayed Maghrib. Our friend did not. He returned instead to the market,

where one could not help but drink coffee, then carrot juice, then buy zalabiya from Ibn al-Rumi – until one ended up lying on one's back, gazing at the stars while the crowds devoted themselves to Tarawih prayers.

He tried to sleep in the Marwani Prayer Hall, the only place left. The snoring of the man beside him made it impossible. He got up for another pastry for suhoor (pre-dawn meal), but the falafel line pulled him in, it was stronger than his ability to resist. He stood in the falafel queue. He ate with his friend. The suhoor cannon fired. The call to prayer rose. No sooner had the call to prayer ended than masked youths emerged from between the ancient stones. They carried large containers filled with rocks from the old prayer hall and formed scattered piles in the Qibli Prayer Hall. This happened while men in their forties arrived to perform the sunnah prayer. A child asked his father, "Why are these people gathering stones?" The father fell silent. Perhaps he did not know how to explain that the sweat of young men is not sold in the gold markets – without teaching his son fear. He answered hesitantly. The child asked, "Then why do they cover their faces?" The father replied, "Because the homeland is more precious than life." The child asked again, "Then why don't they take off their shoes when they enter carrying these rocks?" The father found no answer. Our companion intervened: "Their shoes are purer than our foreheads." The child did not understand. The answers were not convincing – but one day he surely would.

The prayer was called. The masked men continued building barricades in front of the Moroccan Gate. Perhaps necessity makes the forbidden permissible. Our friend joined the prayer. Even if it was only movement without essence, praying here carried a special meaning. When the imam finished, a loud voice cried, "Do not leave. Tie your bodies to the olive trees and the pillars of the prayer halls." The barricades were completed as the prayer ended. The crowds sat in rare calm – circles of remembrance in the corners of the Qibli Mosque. Our friend sat with fellow university sufferers. They told him calculus would not become easier, but he would grow accustomed to it – and that would be enough. They discussed everything. No topic survived. No person was spared their gossip.

8:30 a.m. The crowds were positioned between the Qibli Prayer Hall to the south, the fountain near the arcade to the north, and the Marwani Prayer Hall to the east. To the west, the barriers stood. The west meant Al-Maghariba Gate – the official entrance for entering the mosque's courtyards disrespectfully. And glory be to God – here, too, they prayed from west to east. This city lived on contradictions: people sleeping, waiting for a clash only minutes away. A dark helmet appeared atop the wall between Al-Maghariba Gate and Al-Silsila Gate. Then the army began firing tear-gas canisters at the crowds. I do not know who named it "tear gas," but I am certain he wore a tie and sat behind a luxurious desk. It was not a gas for tears – it was a gas for suffocation, a gas that severed the connection between the brain and the lungs. The helmet did not last long. It fell under the intensity of stones and firecrackers in a spectacular scene. Then the incursion began from Al-Maghariba Gate. Canisters roared. Stones erased the sky. Gas erased the distance. "When souls reach the throats," the ancients said – and perhaps they described this moment better than our friend ever could. He lay beneath an olive tree, hearing rubber bullets whistle through branches and thud between his feet. Voices rose: "Injured! Injured!" Rescue teams rushed forward. People gave him so much onion that he could have built a house from it if he tried to trade it.

The imbalance in tools told the whole story: rubber-coated bullets capable of crushing bones from a hundred meters met stones from ancient prayer halls; cursed gas met onion heads; expensive shields met a simple wooden divider between men and women. Helmets met keffiyehs. Armor met bare chests. The clash lasted an hour.

Then the crowds retreated toward Al-Rahma Gate along the eastern wall. The Qibli Prayer Hall doors were closed to protect the mosque. The bombs were loud, but louder were the sounds of people choking from tear gas bombs. They were pushed toward Al-Asbat Gate to exit, where another group awaited them, firing rubber bullets at point-blank range. They beat those who carried the wounded. They prevented ambulances from entering.

Our friend made his way into the Old City alleys. Someone hid him in his home. Then he went back out to walk again. He avoided colliding with children while chasing a friend to throw a cucumber at him. They ran beside ambulances carrying the injured, indifferent to the fleeing crowds.

The same contradiction. It's a characteristic of this city.

University student – Umm al-Fahm

During our conversations at Nito Café on campus, during the break between lectures, and after we had returned to the Sheikh Munis neighborhood due to a brief interruption caused by the shelling we watched from the students' dormitory windows, my friends believed that returning to one's hometown was a step toward integrating into the uprising there. When I returned to my town, I felt more isolated than the streets themselves. The extension of the uprising stopped at our borders. The spread of the uprising halted at our limits – no one carried that extension forward – and the family that had lived through the intifada held reservations about activism itself.

University student - villages of Marj Ibn 'Amer

# The Kafr Kanna Youth Movement: Context and Vision

## Introduction

On the fourteenth of May last year, Israeli occupation forces arrested Sheikh Kamal Khatib from his home in Kafr Kanna. It took only a few minutes for the “Upper Quarter” to fill with hundreds of young men. The arrest method was provocative to all: the forces arrived accompanied by the “Yamam” unit—a counter-terrorism unit equipped for assassinations and “targeted killings.” Beyond the symbolic and leadership significance Sheikh Kamal held in the town, the minaret of the Omar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque played a fundamental role in mobilizing people for what came to be known as the “Town’s Day.”

This day held remarkable significance. Events accelerated in it exactly as they had in most moments of the Intifada, as if it were a condensed version of it, preceded by clashes that had swept all parts of Palestine. It was also a driving force for what followed in Kafr Kanna, and for the morale of the town’s youth. That day revealed hidden potentials in Kafr Kanna that had long been overlooked. On the same day, a medical committee, a legal committee, and a field committee were formed, without much of the “bureaucracy” with which we are familiar.

In Kafr Kanna, as in other Palestinian towns, residents realized the necessity of their role as active participants during those days, because without their action nothing would happen, and indifference to what was happening around them was deadly. Thus, they took to the streets, despite their certainty that the street was devoid of any organized political force and that Israel held complete control over it. In fact, this very certainty was what pushed young people to storm the street. In Umm al-Fahm, activist Saeed Janazin spoke about the role of the people as the main driving force behind bringing youth into the streets: “Despair is what drove the youth to take to the streets with such anger, and it is this street and the anger that prevailed there that led to the birth of the Umm al-Fahm movement, and not the other way around” (1).

In this sense, defending the city, repelling the aggressor, and helping people overcome their crises constituted a real and tangible meaning for Palestinian youth during the moment of the Intifada.

On the other hand, when we broaden our perspective to include the “occupied Palestinian interior,” the recent Palestinian events marked a pivotal turning point in collective consciousness. We were not a minority. Children did not feel that we were fewer in number, less capable, or lacking in will (2). As long as the Palestinian people

moved as a single bloc. The events themselves were not outside the bounds of familiar Palestinian behavior; rather, they represented a continuation of previous demonstrations and collective movements of varying intensity. These included the series of protests titled “The entrances to our towns are the exits from our crisis,” the anti-violence demonstrations in Umm al-Fahm, Tamra, and Majd al-Krum, and the protests in support of prisoner Maher al-Akhras organized by the Sheikh Mounis Movement at Tel Aviv University. Before the events unfolded, several local movements and initiatives had already been established, such as the Umm al-Fahm United Movement, the Baqa Academics Association, and the Bleabel Movement in Nazareth. These demonstrations and movements contributed to shaping the character of the recent uprising.

The most important element here was the absence of what is known as the “internal specificity” discourse, and the lack of interest in reviving it – a discourse that confines Palestinian action within the limits of Israeli citizenship. Collective movements carried the group into a new phase of thinking and self-awareness, producing political and social ideas and movements to express themselves and to build upon what they achieved.

#### **Gentle Steel Organization:**

Three days after “Town Day,” an invitation titled “Open Meeting” appeared on social media, aiming to set an action plan for the “Dignity Strike” scheduled for the eighteenth of May. This invitation appeared alongside similar calls in various Palestinian towns. Within three hours, forty-two young people attended and gathered at Ain al-Balad to form working committees and approve the activities for the day of the strike.

The discussion circle imposed a participatory form of work. No one felt the presence of a “center of gravity” on any side of the circle; rather, it was distributed among all participants. At the moment of its formation, the movement had no higher authority or known reference that determined its mode of operation. Palestine – the homeland – was the first and last point of reference, and the management of the work existed solely for its sake. At that same moment, in order to ensure the success of the Day of Dignity, the work guided itself, spontaneously creating its own tools, while the proposals themselves suggested the mechanisms for managing it. This pattern of “horizontal work” neutralized the centralization of decision-making in the hands of a particular group or body within the movement and instead formulated a participatory mechanism for decision-making and implementation of ideas and proposals. In this way, it avoided hierarchy within the movement’s structure. This type of work could not be understood without recognizing the spontaneity of its formation, the nature of the young people involved, the relationships woven among them, and the speed with which they aligned

and reached agreement (3). Nor could it be understood in isolation from the accelerating pace of events, which imposed a need for speed and precision that surprised the young people themselves once the work was completed.

However, points of strength quickly became points of weakness. Flexibility meant that the movement could also be brought down easily. And despite the distinctive morale boost in Kafr Kanna, the continuity of the movement remained linked to a single matter: the members' decision to continue. Any circumstance could be overcome if such a decision existed.

No one knew when popular uprisings would erupt again across Palestine, spontaneous popular uprisings were not a goal in themselves.. At the same time, Israel's preparedness to restrain and reverse outcomes remained evident. The movement therefore had to remain conscious of Israel's capacity to undermine its achievements and drain its momentum.

For this reason, sustaining the movement required a phase distinct from its founding moment, which had arisen under specific and temporary circumstances. Organizational, political, and personal questions emerged, particularly concerning each individual's role in strengthening the movement. These questions confronted all youth movements that followed the Unity Uprising: how to regroup after events ended and people return to pre May 2021 pattern of life, how to shape political and social discourse, how to build internal relationships, and how to select activities appropriate to current conditions. Such questions demanded collective answers.

### **The vision:**

Within the Palestinian interior, Israel systematically restricted spaces that could serve as arenas for communication, severing lines of visibility and interaction among people. This persistent policy sought to bury solidarity and mutual support. In Kafr Kanna, the village's last territorial expansion occurred two decades ago. The population grew from 13,000 in 1995 to 22,000 today, while the town's only park deteriorated into ruins. Ain al-Balad amphitheater now remains the sole public gathering space.

Majd Kayyal notes,

"The root causes of violence are what happens from disintegration and a permanent reduction of all the spaces where this community meets, where the community's members interact with each other and create a kind of dialogue and acquaintance, a kind of safe social life and fabric that ensures equality and solidarity among the

members of a single society" (4).

Communication narrowed distances and strengthened relationships, whether through verbal interaction or even visual forms of communication. Youth movements sought to reclaim and create such spaces, and they embodied this effort through their activities. The movement itself became a youth framework dedicated to building national awareness and solidarity through programs that transformed noble aspirations into achievable goals.

#### FOOTNOTES:

(1) Ali Habib Allah and Saeed Jabareen: A seminar titled \*The Street is Entitled to What Others Are Not\* / Jafra Student Foundation.

(2) I asked the children about this on the eighteenth of Ayyar, the day of the Strike of Dignity.

(3) The strike action plan was agreed upon in less than two hours, among youth meeting for the first time in their lives.

(4) 30 minutes with Ramzi Hakeem (Complete 2.10.2019) | Majd Kayyal - Us, Israel, and The Violence: Where is the Leadership's Responsibility?

[Jamal Mustafa - Kafr Kanna]