

On May 15th, the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) held a rally and vigil to observe Nakba Day. This year marks 78 years since the start of Al-Nakba or “the catastrophe” (or disaster) in Arabic. Throughout 1948, more than 750,000 Palestinian people were violently expelled from their homes by Israeli forces to make way for Israeli settlements on the land.

This report of the Nakba Day gathering is primarily an amplification of the words and experience of two people who spoke: Alex Awad, a retired minister from Bethlehem who was expelled along with his family against their will from occupied Palestine in 1948, and a UO sociology student who chose to be identified only by first name, Aseel.

Around two dozen students and broader community members gathered outside Johnson Hall on the UO campus. Large banners were strewn across the steps leading up to the main doors of the building. As people greeted one another and speeches commenced, the late afternoon sun beat down and the peripheral noise and motion of campus activity continued undeterred. The emcee reminded the crowd of the necessity of continuing to gather, and then welcomed Alex Awad to the top of the stairs.

What follows is all shared with permission from his speech, some parts being direct quotations and others paraphrased.

Awad was born and raised in Jerusalem to Palestinian parents and lived in Bethlehem for more than 25 years doing ministry with the United Methodist church before moving to Eugene, Oregon. He began by informing the crowd that he would speak to these six questions: What happened to Palestinians, including [his] family, in 1948? Why did the Nakba take place? Why were Palestinians ethnically cleansed in 1948 and afterward? Why do Palestinians continue to resist? What led to October 7th, 2023? How can we stand with Palestinians today?

Alex then read an excerpt of his book *Palestinian Memories*, in

which he describes the death of his father at the hands of Israeli snipers, leading his family no choice but to “join the long line of Palestinian refugees.

“The Nakba has never truly ended, and some of its darkest chapters have unfolded in Gaza over the past two years. Since I was two years old, I have witnessed one Nakba after another.” He described the inception of the Zionist project, which made central to its goal the creation of the nation-state of Israel. “But there was a problem... more than 90% of Palestine’s population was not Jewish. So Palestinian expulsion became central to that goal.”

Awad went on to explain that as Zionist power and violence continues, so does Palestinian resistance. He outlines the reasons for this simply: “Because Palestinians love their land. Because many see themselves as custodians of holy places, especially Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, and the Church of the Resurrection. Because Palestinians believe in the justice of their cause and remain convinced, despite suffering and defeat, that history is on their side. And because people around the world continue to support Palestinian freedom.”

Leading up to October 7th, Israel imposed a sixteen year total siege on the Gaza strip – everything, down to food, fuel, water, and electricity, entered the Gaza strip only in the portions and rates determined by Israel, leading to massive and frequent supply shortages. There was, and is, an apartheid: different systems of law are applied to people depending on if they hold an Israeli or Palestinian passport. Palestinians were not even allowed to use some of the same roads. Over the years, attacks continued by the Israel army on Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, and settlements were violently imposed in the West Bank. In addition to all of this, the Abrahamic Accords began, mediated by the US under the Trump administration. The Abrahamic accords are agreements made between Israel and several surrounding Arab states. They

signaled massive abandonment of the Palestinian people's cause by several surrounding nations— leaving little hope that the siege would end. These were the conditions leading up to October 7th.

When Palestinians under occupation, apartheid, and siege, managed to break out of their walls and attack Israel, this was a shock and humiliation to Israel— a “slap in the face.” For years Israel had made a deliberate practice of subjugating and dehumanizing the Palestinian people, describing them with terms such as “animals”, “snakes”, “vipers”, and “Amalek.”* The state of Israel had also already gained confidence that the UN had no ability to stop them, and believed surrounding Arab states were too weak to do so.

Despite the majority of those in the U.S. supporting Palestine, that support hasn't translated into a change of conditions on the ground. In closing, Alex spoke to the importance of continuing to educate others, and to gather: **“Gatherings like this, and others across the country, remind Palestinians that they are not forgotten.”**

The final speaker of the event was Aseel, who transferred to UO from Lewis and Clark College largely due to an environment of hostility towards students of color, particularly SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) students, Muslim students, and anyone expressing pro-Palestinian viewpoints. Aseel is interested in pursuing law and ethnic studies, enjoys art and music, and dedicates time to social justice out of an obligation that she believes every person has.

“Every year since 1948, Nakba Day comes around, and every year since 1948, Palestinians walk with heaviness in their gait because it has never truly ended... And I've noticed that people are very comfortable with Palestinian grief. They understand the image of the grieving mother and the orphan child. They understand tears and pain... People have become attached to the image of the suffering Palestinian because it

allows them to imagine themselves as rescuers. They need someone to save.

But Palestinians are not symbols.

They are people, and people laugh and dance the same way they cry and yell. And while there has been an irreversible effect on Palestinian life at the hands of the U.S. and Israel's congenital inhumanity, I think one of the cruelest things genocide does is make a people feel guilty for being alive while they are under attack. That they don't deserve joy and their bodies and minds should belong solely to sorrow.

But no people survive for generations through grief alone. The only way to be alive is to continue living. Indigenous people, here and all over the world, celebrate and smile and fall in love and somebody still teaches the children songs and stories and silly jokes. ... I feel this all deeply as a North African, an Arab, a Muslimah, a person of color, because I am tired of seeing our communities flattened into complete and utter tragedy for other people's pity...

I think there is something powerful about refusing to let violence by Israel, by the U.S., by the pigs and the billionaires dictate how we live each day now.

Because if oppression only leaves us room to mourn, then even our emotions have been occupied... Joy is not separate from our fight. It is proof of our endurance and the legacy of the people."

The UO chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine is dedicated to Palestinian resistance, liberation, and remain steadfast in upholding the right of return for all Palestinians. Funds raised at this and other events are sent

to a family currently surviving in Gaza.

**in the Hebrew Bible, Amalek is the grandson of Esau. In a literal sense, it represents a lineage of enemies of Israelites, and it has a symbolic connotation of doubt, cynicism and inherent opposition to God/morality*