

Essay

Coming out as Palestinian

After years of not speaking publicly about my heritage, I now feel a duty to proclaim it. By *Zahira Jaser*



'The Silk Line of Identity', 2020 by Hazem Harb

Many times in my life, I have omitted that I am Palestinian. When people asked, "Where is your name from?" I'd quickly respond, "It's Arabic." It was complicated enough being a young woman with a foreign accent on the trading floor of a US investment bank in London. No need to confuse people further.

But during the bombing of Gaza in 2021, something changed. The suffering I felt seeing my people killed, amid the silence of public opinion, was too much. I started to speak up about my identity. One day, I met some friends for coffee. One of them asked me why I looked so sad. "Because I am Palestinian," I said. Another told me recently she remembered thinking, "that's when you *came out* as Palestinian."

I am Palestinian and Italian, with fair skin, blue eyes and a slight Italian accent. I am not "obviously" Palestinian - many people think I am European when they meet me - so it did feel like a coming out. Do not misunderstand me, being Palestinian is one of the greatest honours of my life. But it can feel like a highly stigmatised identity, reinforced by racist assumptions. This is a reality lived by many Palestinians.

The academics Yasmeen Abu-Laban, who is Palestinian, and Abigail Bakan, who is Jewish, both of whom are based in Canada, argue that discrimination directed at Palestinians takes three forms. First, the denial of Palestinian

history, or even the existence of a Palestinian people. Second, the denial of the inequality they experience under Israel's regime. And, finally, the blanket assumption that Palestinians and their allies support terrorism and anti-Semitism. I have experienced all three.

In the past, I simply glossed over these episodes. But the current violence against Palestinians in Gaza, tantamount to genocide, is taking such a toll on me that I cannot function properly any more. (Editor's note: Israel denies a genocide is taking place.) In the past five months I have not been able to think clearly. I start tasks and forget to finish them. I am always tired, always sad. Naturally a strong and cheerful workaholic, I have lost interest in work and in talking to other people.

Since I began writing this essay several months ago, the insufficient level of humanitarian aid that is reaching Gaza has led to the starvation of hundreds of thousands of civilians. A report from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Johns Hopkins University forecasts more than 85,000 deaths by August, if nothing changes. I now understand better than ever a fear that many of my Jewish friends have talked about: the fear of being erased. This is now the fear of Palestinians too. And it is a fear that thrives in silence.

I was born in Italy in the 1970s. My mother, an Italian feminist, taught me to be confident and assertive. My Palestinian dad instilled in me a sense of the importance of human dignity, of respecting everyone, whatever their religious beliefs or walk of life. A true Jerusalemite, he knew that people of all faiths could live peacefully together. He had experienced it growing up in the Old City. "Always keep your head high," he would tell me. When I was a child, I thought this was just part of having a nice moral upbringing. Later, I realised my parents were preparing me for the discrimination a young Palestinian woman was likely to face.

I first remember feeling the stigma of being Palestinian when I was a teenager, hanging out with a group of friends. It was the early-1990s, and I must have said that my dad was Palestinian. One of the cool kids was quick to display his knowledge of international affairs by calling me a terrorist. Everyone laughed. No, I said, my dad came to Italy to study medicine. He was not a terrorist. But in the weeks and months that followed, the joke became normalised among other students, recited by anyone who wanted to undermine my confidence.

In my first year at university in Italy, I was confronted by a student involved in politics, who was already a local government councillor. "Palestinians do not exist," he told me. "They are an invention to prevent Jews from getting their land." This was the first time my mere existence had been defined as a threat to other people. It took me by surprise. My first thought was of my *sitti's* (grandmother's) dress decorated with Palestinian *tatreez*, our traditional embroidery, which I had loved since I was a child. I thought of her

way of wearing her veil, as Christian women did. I thought of the Palestinian songs I knew, the food, the smell of Palestinian *zaatar*. How could all this have been invented to stop Jews from having their land? The idea that someone might think so gave me shivers. It still does.

As I grew up, I began to see what my parents had been trying to warn me about. For my undergraduate degree, my dissertation in development economics focused on the shoe-making industrial district of Hebron in the West Bank. In the summer of 1996, I travelled there to interview entrepreneurs and study supply chains and business ecosystems. At the airport where I would catch my flight back to Europe, I was held and interrogated by Israeli security forces for four hours. Eventually, I was driven in a separate van to board the flight where I met the humiliating gaze of suspicious passengers who had been delayed for more than an hour. My luggage was confiscated and only returned to me several days later. What triggered this treatment, as well as subsequent episodes, if not my Palestinian identity?

After working in banking for several years I retrained as an academic. In 2018, while I was doing my PhD, I attended a leadership conference. After presenting my research, I was approached by a kind Jewish-American colleague who told me that there were some Israeli scholars there who felt threatened by my presence. They were refusing to attend any session in which I was involved. This came as a surprise. Maybe I was naive, but my research - about managers' leadership in large companies - could not have been called threatening, or even political.

At dinner that evening, I sat next to an Israeli military commander who was doing a PhD in leadership. He was well-meaning, but assumed a kind of symmetry in the relationship that I did not feel. He did not understand my sense of fragility and intimidation. I tentatively spoke up, heart racing, about the vulnerability of being Palestinian. All I can remember now is the outline of the conversation, but what has stayed with me is my confusion. He was telling me about the training soldiers receive in how to decide when to pull the trigger. To me, it all sounded like softening the blow of an armed occupation, which was more and more stifling on my West Bank family's ability to work, travel freely and carry out a normal life.

Over time, I started to better understand the intergenerational pain of being Palestinian. About why my dad, who moved from Jerusalem to Italy to study medicine in 1964, never graduated. This had always been a mystery to me, as he passed all the modules and even wrote his dissertation. Now, I saw that he could not function properly. Even at a geographic distance from Gaza, knowing what is taking place there places a huge toll on the emotional and cognitive resources of Palestinians in the diaspora. I can imagine how my dad might have felt in 1967, when Israel forbade the return of those living abroad. He was locked out. He would have been a great doctor. Instead, he became a not-so-good businessman.

I also understood why, in his despair, my father did not teach me Arabic. I think he wanted to protect me. Better just to be Italian, to speak Italian, to live in Europe. He was trying to protect me from the sinking feeling that is the ever-present knowledge of Palestinian suffering. This, in part, is how a people gets erased: when staying true to one's identity becomes so difficult that teaching one's own language to children is seen as passing down suffering.

My experience of discrimination comes in spite of the privilege of my white skin, my European accent, my Christian rather than Muslim heritage, and my Italian and British citizenship. I write this knowing I have a job, stable finances and supportive colleagues. And yet, speaking up as a Palestinian - any Palestinian - is risky. We've seen people lose their jobs, be cancelled from events and silenced because they joined the voices calling for peace, for ceasefire, for the rights of human beings, and criticising Israeli military violence. Palestinian symbols such as the keffiyeh have been banned in some places, with many pundits conflating marches in support of Palestinians with marches in support of terrorism, or even against Jews. All of it reinforces anti-Palestinian racism.

What does it mean to be Palestinian? There are many answers. There is the reality for those who live in the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza and East Jerusalem; for those who live within the state of Israel as citizens; and those of us who make up the diaspora. I cannot speak for everyone, so, watching from the safety of the UK, I ask myself what being Palestinian means to me.

Attempting to answer, I find refuge in the writing of Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said, giants who explored this question from a position of diaspora. We have a common experience of exile, nostalgia and longing. In their voices I hear my father's. They were all born in Palestine before 1948, men who felt ostracised and who died far from their native land.

It was not just the physical displacement - or external exile, as Darwish defined it - that tainted their experience. It was also internal. "Exile," Darwish wrote, "exists in the self that is deprived of free thought and speech forced on it by an oppressive regime and an equally oppressive society. One finds oneself exiled in one's own society."

In all societies there are extremists who should be condemned, but the tendency to conflate all Palestinians with extremism deprives us all of free speech. Such silencing is a form of psychological exile. It is not just a dehumanising experience, it sparks existential fear. Because after the dispossession, the killings and the forced removals, many Palestinians' existence as Palestinians depends on freedom to think and to speak.

The ongoing annihilation of Gaza is making the Palestinian experience more uniform. No matter where Palestinians live, the violence we are witnessing unites us all. Palestinian advocacy is more important than ever right now, to counter the pervasiveness of an old but rising form of discrimination: anti-Palestinian racism. Whether one is publicly Palestinian, or otherwise. **FT**

LAYERED COLLAGE OF ARCHIVAL FINE-ART C-P PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST