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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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03.10.2023

Zionists will always call us antisemitic

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Ask any Palestinian or accomplice to the movement, and it is almost a guarantee that they were called antisemitic for expressing their anti-Zionist politics. The Zionist accusation has become so commonplace that it is to be expected in response to any vocal support for Palestine. Nevertheless, as much as it can be anticipated, it can still be reputationally devastating and traumatizing for the people going through it.



Banner welcoming participants to Palestine Writes Festival on UPenn campus, Philadelphia, Sept. 22-24, 2023. WW Photo: Joe Piette

It happened during the 2018 National Students for Justice in Palestine Conference at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) when Zionists came out in the hundreds to protest the student gathering: chasing us with cameras, calling us “terrorists,” “racists,”

“antisemites,” trying to sneak into the conference and holding posters of our faces outside of the venue chanting phrases such as “gay rights for Gaza.”

It happened to Fatima Mohammed, the commencement speaker for the City University of New York (CUNY) Law School, who spoke out against well-documented, egregious human rights abuses Israel continues to commit against Palestinians. Right-wing news outlets, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and CUNY officials condemned her words, denouncing them as hate speech. New York City Councilwoman Inna Vernikov went as far as sending a letter to the New York Bar urging them to deny Mohammed from obtaining a license to practice.

It happened to Steven Salaita, a professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, who was forced to resign from his tenured job after he tweeted his outrage about the 2014 assault on Gaza — an Israeli-orchestrated attack that murdered 2,252 Palestinians, 500 of whom were children, over 50 days.

There are thousands of stories that I could share that follow a similar trajectory.

Back in college when I began organizing, we responded to Zionist backlash with a letter that would methodically lay out why our event, or teach-in, or statement, or vigil, was not antisemitic. We would outline the distinction between Zionism and Judaism and the ways that the former mobilizes the accusation of antisemitism to deflect from Palestinian suffering.

We would lay out the unequal power dynamic between a nuclear superpower, Israel, and an occupied people, Palestinians, concluding that calling it a “conflict” was a misnomer and deeply uninformed. We would highlight the fact that the U.S. provides Israel annually with \$4 billion of military aid, while not recognizing Palestinian statehood. We would denounce antisemitism in all its iterations and we would reaffirm our principles for a free Palestine.

We would spend hours writing sentences that have been written before, get signatures from partner organizations and allies we had partnered with previously, and disseminate the statement online, in student newspapers and in any outlet we had published the last statement. Unsurprisingly, the antisemitism accusation would not be rescinded.

While the statement would do nothing to quell accusations of bigotry leveled against us, they did successfully eliminate the Palestinian struggle for freedom from the conversation. It was surreal and anxiety-inducing to see these accusations of antisemitism both challenge our credibility as young activists and obscure our message underneath a separate discourse.

No matter how vocal we were in our condemnation of antisemitism, the same accusation persisted. The defamatory nature of these accusations is never about antisemitism in the first place but is rather a deflection from talking about Palestine.

As Nation correspondent Mohammed el-Kurd wrote on X (formerly Twitter), “I grew up under the rule of a self-proclaimed Jewish State. Still, I’m expected to distinguish with surgical precision between Zionists and Jews, I’m asked [to] learn and apologize for century-old tropes created by Europeans, and I’m somehow guilty of bigotry until I declare otherwise. No way.”

If we recognize that these Zionist accusations cannot be appeased, why do we continue to respond to baseless, racist accusations?

The year 2023 is on track to be the deadliest in Palestine, with over 200 Palestinians having been murdered by Israel since the end of August. The United Nations has declared that the Gaza Strip has been uninhabitable since 2020. Last year Israel committed a war crime by assassinating journalist Shireen Abu Akleh when she was covering a raid at the Jenin refugee camp. A year later they raided that same refugee camp killing over 12 people, including three minors.

Israel has been forcing Palestinians to destroy their own homes and then charging them demolition fees. Recently, a story dropped that 16 Israeli soldiers beat up and branded a Star of David on a Palestinian man’s face. Ceaseless violence, a ruthless military occupation and ongoing genocide are the daily reality for Palestinians.

No matter how many times I highlight these atrocities or how often I have written and rewritten these above sentences, the dominating discourse remains being about responding to accusations of antisemitism, so I am disengaging, and I urge you to disengage as well.

I’ve seen far too many videos of Palestinians being shot and killed in broad daylight on social media, too many heartbreaking, tearful pleas as parents and siblings hold lifeless bodies, too many pictures of demolished homes and rubble, too many Palestinians being denied entry to their homeland, too many Israelis spewing the most vitriolic, hateful, racist language at Palestinians, too many soldiers brutalizing worshippers and too much Western indifference.

We are witnessing a human rights catastrophe play out in real time as Israel continues to annex our land, erase our history and incarcerate, brutalize and murder us. Zionists will continue to weaponize accusations of antisemitism, but we must be steadfast in our principles and confident in politics. We cannot let Zionists distract us from the ultimate goal of freeing Palestine from the river to the sea.

Workers World 29.09.2023