بلادنا فلسطين

Palestine, Our Homeland

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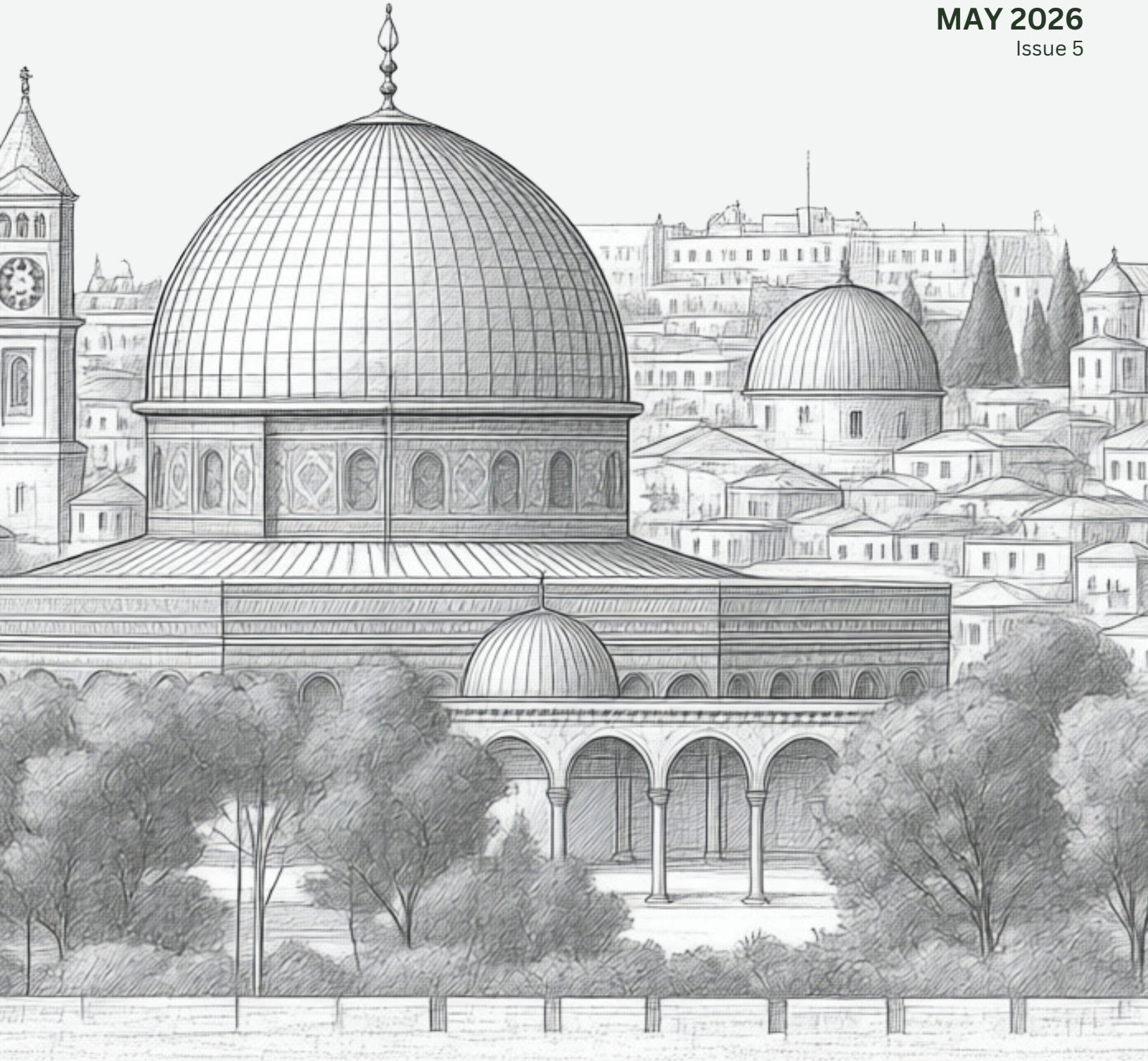

OLIVE BRANCH

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CHECKPOINT WITH OMAR & FADI

We begin by giving thanks to God for the blessing of this moment, to tell the story of Palestine as we know it, and to share our perspective of the world as we live it. We speak for our people whose story has so often been silenced, distorted and stolen. From the roots of the olive groves of our ancestral homeland to the exile of the diaspora, Palestinians carry with them the essence of humanity, beauty, and grace. Palestinians rise with an unwavering spirit, patient in sorrow, defiant in hope. It is our deep sense of duty, born of love, memory, and truth, that kindles a light within us, guiding us to stand against injustice and to speak with clarity and courage in the face of silence.



Why do we write? Is it for the amusement of sharing thoughts and experiences? Recounting stories? Crying about the past and healing our trauma?

For us, history is a process of understanding who we are, and determining how to act in the future. Writing is not a passive exercise nor is it a blame game or a healing circle. The reason we write is to help draw a path towards return, liberation, and freedom. We write to do our part. To use our skills to reach a day where we can see a free Palestine.

This vision may be blurred today, by smoke and dust from Israeli bombs and shots fired in our Holy Land, but we, as Palestinians know all too well that the almond blossom always blooms in winter. It is a representation of our collective spirit; what pushes us to wake up every day and be just as stubborn about our freedom as we were the day before.

At the heart of that spirit is the land blessed by God, Palestine, and the source of that blessing, Jerusalem. This issue of Palestine: Our Homeland dives into the significance of Jerusalem for Palestinians and the community at large.

As we watch the events unfolding in Palestine on our phone screens, we recognize the importance of actively thinking about our duty toward our people and holy sites. This Duty of Guardianship (Amanah) belongs to every Muslim, regardless of their heritage or ethnicity. Our duty is not tied to ownership, but rather to a responsibility of care.

Historical Context

Some may argue that Jerusalem occupies a unique position at the intersection of religion, politics,



Credit: Sliman Mansour

and international law. Revered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike, the city has long been recognized as possessing a significance that extends beyond national boundaries. For this reason, its status has consistently been treated by the international community as a matter requiring special consideration.

Some try to present a distorted view of Jerusalem as one of the remaining most contentious and unresolved issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The city's final status has been repeatedly deferred due to negotiations, yet realities on the ground continue to further complicate the possibility of a negotiated settlement. A reality Palestinians have been facing for the past century: complete erasure by an extremist ideology – Zionism.

Truthfully, the only reason Jerusalem is presented as if it is a complex case by international law is because the international community has normalized Zionism under the guise of inclusivity. Jerusalem did not require special consideration as a Holy site before Zionist ideology was imposed on it. The indigenous Palestinian population always accepted Jerusalem as a home to many religions and not exclusive to one.

Under the Balfour Declaration (the 1917 British mandate for Palestine), Jerusalem became a focal point of Zionist colonial aspirations, marketed instead as nationalist tensions between Arabs and Jews. The concept of Arabs and Jews is as ridiculous as ridiculous can get. What is an Arab? What is a Jew? It's like saying that White is a race and Muslim is a race. Under that premise, you can never have someone that is white and Muslim and if you are Muslim you can never be white. At the core of it, each concept put forward by zionism is extremely racist and backwards, but that is a conversation for another day.

This mandate escalated tensions between Zionist terrorist groups (who claimed indigenous rights to the land using their newfound racial identity) and Palestinians (who were actually indigenous to the land) as both communities advanced claims for self-determination, setting the stage for international intervention. This resulted in a gross injustice. As in the case of Jerusalem, the Zionist colonial party was given control of the land by granting them religious rights over it when in 1929, the British gave the Zionists administration over the Buraq Wall, leading to the Buraq Revolt of 1929.

What is going on today is a continuation of international order put in place disguised as bringing religious diversity while in reality setting the plate for a colonial entity to steal Jerusalem from its indigenous population on the false premise that the land constitutes a complex historical and religious matter. Simply put, the action was criminal, and sold to the international community as a fair act of historical rectification.

This false premise is used to explain away the ethnic eleansing of Palestinians in 1948, the illegal occupation and apartheid of the remaining Palestinian territories in 1967, and every other crime committed by the Zionist terrorist entity (modern-day Israel), including but not limited to genocide.



Credit: Khawla Tawil

The narrative that Jews have a claim to Palestinian land starts with Jerusalem. It is the garrison that created false historical context, backed by international governing bodies , which allows the Zionist project to continue its erasure of Palestine, its people, and culture. This also provided a narrative, for Western nations like Canada, to freely claim support of Israel's right to exist.
You will often find nations and organizations pleading with international governing bodies to protect Palestinian rights when in reality, these same institutions were built to foster the erasure of Palestine.

Some may argue that the United Nations has consistently maintained that East Jerusalem constitutes occupied territory and that any unilateral measures altering its status are null and void under international law. The International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion saying that Israel is illegally occupying the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

So what?

Have these statements and haughty declarations changed anything for Palestinians facing mass starvation, imprisonment, brutality – genocide?

Let's take Canada, for instance. Have any of the crimes committed by Israel led Canada to take concrete measures to stop them? Or at the very least, withdraw its support of them?

If anything, Canada has doubled down on their support, showing off its role in spilling the blood of our children, rather than standing up for justice.

Canada audits and lists Muslim charities as if they are criminals[1]- charities that work to offer real benefit to its communities in Canada and abroad, while allowing the Jewish National Fund (JNF), well known for building parks on the graves of Palestinians, to maintain their status as a registered charity for 80 years despite their blatant criminal activities.

[1] See report by professor Michelle Gallant of the University of Manitoba published on April 1, 2026: An Independent Academic Review of The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) Audit of The Muslim Association of Canada (MAC).

Why is it that all Palestinian resistance movements in Canada are listed on the terrorist watch lists while the Canadian government continues to maintain free trade agreements with Israel?

Why is it that with all the efforts, advocacy, and pleading that people and communities have done over the years, the Canadian government repeatedly shows us that our work means nothing to them.

We don't seek pity. We don't even seek acknowledgement. We seek honesty.

People often tell me it takes years of advocacy before our rights can be recognized.

I disagree.

We don't need systems to recognize my humanity. We don't need empty statements by soulless governments to tell us we belong to the human race.

No human has the authority to deny the humanity of another.

Palestine is our land. Jerusalem is our heart. No one should be allowed to do what the Zionist project has done.

In an ideal world, we wouldn't need to advocate for our basic right to exist. In accordance with their self-proclaimed values, governments (like Canada), should be acting on behalf of their own values; by breaking existing free trade agreements, imposing economic sanctions, boycotting, corporate, education, and military contracts with the Israeli government. Canada has these measures in place for many other nations (for example, sanctions against Iran), but refuses to do so with Israel – a genocidal state committing crimes so blatantly against international law.

The false historical context of Jerusalem provides a narrative used to soothe the world into bolstering and protecting the colonization and ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Backed by international institutions and nation states that pretend to take a neutral and rational approach to politics but in reality, are only selling a story rooted in hate and injustice to further the erasure of Palestine.

In the face of such blatant hypocrisy, Palestinians need to root themselves in the soil that made them, and not fall into the trap of negotiating for their own humanity. We must tell our story, and the story of our people, proudly and unapologetically.

Zionism sold a lie. A convenient one for everyone to use to justify their crimes. Palestinians paid for this lie with our blood, our land, Jerusalem.



Credit: Sliman Mansour

IBN AL-QUDS (SON OF JERUSALEM)

Fadi

I am blessed to be called by titles many people strive for in life. Whether professionally, or personally (father, son, husband, brother, friend). To this day, nothing brings more joy to my heart than being called the Son of Jerusalem (Ibn Al-Quds). It is such a great honor to be one of Abnaa' Bayt al Maqdis (Sons of Jerusalem). This honor brings me a sense of duty to guard this blessed land and reminds me to use my life, time, and skills to rebuild a free Palestine.

When people ask me about Jerusalem, I often feel a surge of anger. It feels as though the world turned its back on the city when it needed it most.

And yet, who am I to speak with such anger/betrayal? Jerusalem remains occupied, restrained, burdened, while I move freely, voicing frustration as though the world owes me its liberation. I live. I travel. I speak. I claim that Al-Aqsa is my closest companion, despite having left it behind during the most sacred nights of Ramadan, with no one praying at the doors of heaven on earth.

Jerusalem can be described in many ways: poetic, philosophical, historical, sacred. But for me, it is something simpler and far more difficult to articulate. It is home.

And what a home it is.

I've often feared that telling my story would look as if I am trying to write a memoir. Memoirs belong to endings, to moments that can be gathered, reflected upon, and preserved. What we are living through has no such closure. It is still unfolding, still shifting, left unresolved. What is there to commemorate when the story itself is yet to be settled? So, I leave remembrance to those who will one day look back on Jerusalem's story. For now, I am searching for my part in the freedom of my homeland.

So perhaps, it is better for me to speak not from authority, but from weight. From the tension that comes from loving something so close to my heart, but so out of reach: the city that remains under occupation by the Zionist regime.



Smell of Home

What people often see of Palestine is a history rooted in resistance against outside aggressors and the special connection Palestinians have with their land, particularly their olive groves, its oil, and fruit. This connection is real. But there are many other small, intimate things that quietly shape who we are as Palestinians. Things so ordinary, they rarely make history books, yet so essential they define Palestine and Palestinians.

To me, Palestine is the act of sitting beside your sitto (grandmother), picking pebbles out of *freekeh*[1] because she brought it from the souk (market) and her eyes are no longer what they used to be. It is resting under a grapevine after 'Asr prayer, sharing a watermelon with your family as the afternoon sun softens its light. It is picking an orange from the hills of Nablus when you feel like having a snack, its richness making it a meal in itself.

Palestine is the scent of Jerusalem's bakeries at dawn, warm bread rising into the cool morning air. It is sipping *Sahlab*[2] at Bab al-Amoud (Damascus Gate) on a cold December night while you watch the walls of the Old City and let your mind travel beyond it. It is sitting by the walls of Akka, listening to the waves as though they carry meaning, as though they are speaking directly to you.

It is a child's imagination shaped by faith and place, seeing a hoopoe or an ant and wondering, just for a moment, if you might understand them as Prophet Sulayman once did. It is wondering if you too could heal just like Prophet Jesus could.

It is climbing a fig tree and spending hours questioning why its branches have milk. It is picking a fresh lemon off a lemon tree to compliment the Mlukhiye

[1] Roasted grain made from green durum wheat. See Leila el-Haddad's book The Gaza Kitchen where she speaks about how Israel tried to appropriate this Palestinian heritage as their own.

[2] Sahlab (or Salep) is a thick, creamy, and sweet Middle Eastern hot milk pudding beverage popular in winter

your mom carefully prepared for dinner.

It is the simple, unmatched joy of climbing an almond tree, eating green almonds until your stomach aches, only to return the next day and do it all over again.

It is walking down the streets of the Old City and seeing the same faces, day after day, with their prayer mats on their shoulders, going to pray together, their steps in sync with the Athan calling them home.

It is knowing the smell of Jerusalem, the smell of Al-Aqsa, on a rainy day so well, you can still smell it wherever you are in the world.

These are not just memories. They are a language of belonging. And losing them is another kind of exile.

I still remember the day my parents told me we were leaving Palestine. I cried uncontrollably. The thought of being away from Al-Aqsa, of being severed from that world, felt unbearable. To this day, I feel that a part of me still lives in the streets of the Old City.



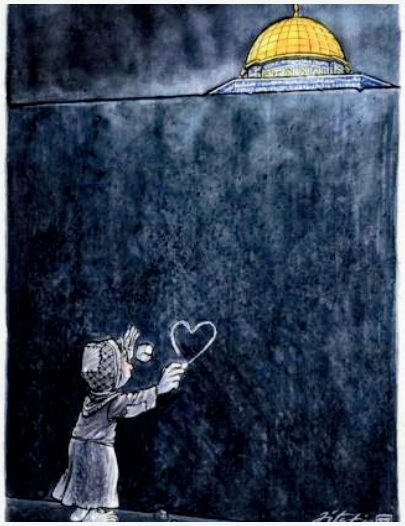
When I got married, I jokingly said to my wife that I would love her deeply but never quite as much as I loved Palestine. She understood that like most Palestinians, the love and passion I have for my land is rooted in faith, memory, and maybe a little bit of freekeh.

Growing up in Jerusalem

I grew up in Palestine under the weight of military occupation and the violent daily realities of apartheid. But that is not what defines my earliest memories. What remains most vivid is something else entirely: love. Love of Palestine, of Jerusalem, of Al-Aqsa, of a place imbued with meaning far beyond its geography.

My earliest memory is soft and intimate: lying in bed, waiting for my father to wake for Fajr prayer so I could join him. It is running through the courtyards of Al-Aqsa, greeting strangers as brothers after prayer. It is walking to school and wondering if the prophets themselves had once stepped where I stepped. That thought alone made the world feel open, full of possibility. As a child, I believed I might one day change it.

At the same time, I became aware of a deeper injustice very early on. I remember speaking with relatives in the West Bank who were denied access to Al-Aqsa, and wondering how such a thing could be normalized. Every time I visited relatives in Jordan I felt, instinctively, that their suffering of being away from our land was much greater than my struggle of living under occupation in Jerusalem. I listened to women from Gaza, permitted into Jerusalem only briefly to sell goods, speak about lives constrained by siege. Even as a child, I felt anger that other children, like me, were excluded from what I experienced daily, living by Al-Aqsa. You may think it strange for a child to feel such blessing while living under the siege of occupation and surveillance of apartheid, but the reality was, most of the time, just seeing Al-Aqsa was enough to make us forget the world entirely; when you laid eyes on Al-Aqsa, occupation seemed meaningless, at least momentarily.



Credit: Jitet Kustana

But the blessings of Al-Aqsa were always incomplete. They were incomplete when the gates of the mosque closed, when soldiers threw gas bombs and fired rubber bullets at worshippers. It was incomplete when those in other parts of Palestine, who love Al-Aqsa just as much as me, would never have the privilege of praying on its floors. Often, it felt as if I was a fish in an aquarium, watching the ocean. I could see its vastness and beauty , but I was not free to live in it.

Path to Freedom

Growing up, I was often told that Jerusalem may appear small, especially when constricted by checkpoints watched over by young soldiers from Eastern Europe and Ethiopia. In reality, Jerusalem is a mirror to humanity itself. A measure of its conscience.

When the world inclines towards righteousness and justice, Jerusalem prospers. When it turns towards extremism (such as by the Crusaders or Zionists), Jerusalem bleeds, and its people suffer.

When I was in first grade, one of my teachers told us a story about Salahuldin.[3] He said that Salahuldin never thought of anything other than the liberation of Palestine; he even refused to smile before Al-Aqsa was free. This taught me that to be Muslim is to care; to live free or be on your way to freedom.

This awareness of injustice expanded my view beyond Palestine. I followed, as best I could, the struggles in Bosnia, Kosovo, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Iraq. My understanding was simple: we were one people, bound by faith, and therefore bound by responsibility. I prayed for their freedom as I prayed for ours.

Even in moments of fear, I held on to a singular belief: that injustice, once seen clearly, would compel the world to act.



I thought that others would surely see Palestine as I did: not only as a site of suffering, but a place of extraordinary beauty and meaning. It is a land where history and faith converge, where generations have lived, struggled, and believed. It is a place of paradox: the lowest point on earth and, in our tradition, a gateway to the highest. A land of hardship and abundance, of ancient roots and unfinished futures.

More than that, it is the best part of who I am. My sense of purpose, my capacity for faith, my resilience, are all tied to that place. And so, I will keep trying to find my way back to the source of it all, my home.

[3] Salahuldin Yusuf Ibn Ayyub is best known as the general who liberated Jerusalem from the Crusaders in the 12th century.

Journey of Hope and Liberation

Fadi



When I think of Al-Aqsa Mosque, all I can be is hopeful. Hope is the essence of the blessings of Jerusalem.

It is the place God chose as the gate to Heaven from Earth when He took the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on the journey of Mi'raaj. The place where Maryam (PBUH) grew up in the constant worship of God, she would often be found praying in the Mihrab (sanctuary) where it is believed to be somewhere in Al-Aqsa Mosque. The place where Zakariya (PBUH) was told that he will be blessed with a son, Yahya (PBUH).

It is the place where Omar Ibn Al-Khattab established a city of inclusivity and harmony. The place where Imam Al-Ghazaali went to ponder about the revival of Muslim hearts.

This is the place that held the Minbar of Nur Al-Din Zengi[1], built long before the liberation of Jerusalem by Salahuldin and his people, driven by a faith in liberation they didn't live to see but still believed in.

Sykes-Picot and Mental Colonialism

It is difficult to understand how and why the Muslim and Arab world stopped adhering to their personal Duty of Guardianship towards Palestine, Jerusalem, and Al-Aqsa. A historical analysis of the modern history of settler colonialism in the region is needed to understand how the Muslim and Arab world evolved to become what it is today. There are two components to settler colonialism that are important for us to understand how people became disconnected to Al-Aqsa Mosque.

First, settler colonialism typically unfolds as a process aimed at permanent settlement and control of land rather than temporary rule or resource extraction. It begins with the arrival of settlers who claim territory by denying or minimizing Indigenous sovereignty, often framing the land as empty or underused. This is followed by dispossession, through treaties made under unequal conditions, legal redefinitions of land ownership, or outright violence. Central to this process is what scholars call a "logic of elimination."[2] Indigenous peoples are removed as obstacles to settler society through forced displacement, physical violence, assimilation policies, and cultural erasure. This process has been central in the Zionist project as a Palestinian genocide scholar points out:

> *"The Zionist colonial movement has employed the logic of elimination since the inception of its activities in Palestine, and in 1948, it moved on to annihilatory violence in an attempt to complete its settler-colonial project. Yet, Zionist efforts remain incomplete, necessitating the continuation of the logic of elimination that manifested in various Israeli policies and techniques, aiming primarily to dispossess the natives and complete Zionist settler-colonialism in historic Palestine."* [3]

An important factor in determining the success of a settler colonial project is its size: the targeted land should not be too big to handle, initially, and the population not too large to manage.

This is why the Sykes-Picot agreement is important. In 1916, the Sykes-Picot Agreement was created as a secretive World War I pact between Britain and France, with Russian assent, to divide the Ottoman-controlled Middle East

[1] Sultan Nur Al-Din Mahmud Zengi, an 11th century ruler who fought the Crusaders and was in charge of most of Syria and Egypt before Salahuldin.

[2] Term coined by Patrick Wolfe.

[3] Nijm,M, *Indigenous Epistemologies and Decolonising Genocide Research on Palestine*, Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies, 2026, Volume 25, Issue 1.

into spheres of influence. It aimed to partition Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, defining modern borders. The success of this plan relied on the people of the region inheriting a false divisiveness with one another prior to the partition. By looking at each other through the limits of their borders and protecting the interests that lay within those borders over the interests of the whole region, each country found itself vulnerable to the Western colonial project.

For Palestine, this means that before the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Palestinians were part of a large and diverse community that had the backing of the whole Muslim and Arab world. Suddenly, that world was divided into tens of new nation states waving new flags and working within the colonial confines. For the Zionist project, this meant being able to target a non-militarized population; easy to displace to other geographical limits of a newly created map. This map, carved out and put on a platter for the Zionist project by the British mandate of Palestine (1917-1948), established a pipeline of Jewish immigration to Palestine.

Therefore, one can assert that without the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the permanent settlement and control of Palestinian land by the Zionist project would have been impossible. More importantly, without Sykes-Picot, the average Arab and Muslim might still see Palestine and Al-Aqsa Mosque as part of their own land, identity and national security today, regardless of how far that land is geographically. This outcome is only possible because people were convinced it is possible, as such, division happened in the mind first, leading to what we refer to as mental colonization.
For example, if Israel was to establish a settler colonial project in New York, this would cause outrage among Americans from coast to coast. This is due to their shared identity, which holds strong, even if the distance between New York City and Seattle is 4,600 km.



If America were to become 52 countries, instead of 52 states, it would expose itself to a rapid and uncontrollable degradation of its national security. As such, a strong collective understanding of shared identity is of great importance to maintaining the safety of a region from outside forces.

Second, as settlement deepens, settler institutions and sovereignty are normalized. Indigenous legal, political, and economic systems are replaced by settler laws, property regimes, and governance structures, and the settler population comes to see itself as native to the land. Over time, national histories and cultural narratives legitimize this reality, portraying settlement as inevitable or benevolent while positioning Indigenous peoples as marginal or belonging to the past. Crucially, scholars emphasize that settler colonialism does not end with these steps; it persists as an ongoing structure that manages Indigenous survival and resistance without relinquishing settler control over land and sovereignty.

In the case of the Zionist settler colonial project, it is not enough that sovereignty is normalized within the settlements. It is important to close up what Sykes-Picot started. The Zionist project is only successful so long as everyone around it acknowledges its legitimacy as a native, sovereign state, just like themselves. This means, the normalization of the state of Israel needs to be acknowledged by all the people and places that are, or once were, part of the indigenous Palestinian identity. Moreover, it is important for Muslims and Arabs to stop identifying with Palestine and with Al-Aqsa.

Considering the above, Israel has to wrestle with two things at once. It needs to ensure that Historical Palestine is ethnically cleansed so that they maintain an ethnic majority in the land. Further, it needs to ensure the surrounding communities adopt Israel as a natural part of the region and stop identifying with Palestinians.

This leaves Israel with the substantial task of both maintaining complete domination of the region

(militarily, economically, and intellectually) and becoming normal to the region. The problem for Israel is that these two interests are contradictory to one another . Every time Israel acts violently, it weakens its legitimacy to the people in its surrounding, effectively making them question their duty towards Palestine. On the contrary, every time it tries to normalize itself to the region, it faces Palestinians demanding their right to freedom, justice, and self-determination, which weakens its settler colonial image.

Despite Israel's attempts of this impossible mission over the past 78 years, Muslims are starting to remember what Al-Aqsa Mosque means to them. This is mainly due to the fact that Israel is constantly redefining itself, trying to fit in like a puzzle piece that doesn't belong. Israel has now outed itself as an extremist, radical Jewish state determined to re-establish the so called "third temple" on the grounds of Al-Aqsa Mosque which is first Qibla (direction of prayer for Muslims), second mosque to be built (after Mecca) and one of three holy mosques for Muslims. Muslims around the world are now starting to educate themselves about the significance of Jerusalem and understanding that they haven't been adhering to a key part of their faith, their Duty of Guardianship to Al-Aqsa.

This religious extremist approach will not allow Israel to execute its settler colonial dreams and is in fact ruining its chances of normalization in the region. Today, more than ever, to the Arab and Muslim world, there is no doubt that Israel's establishment as a nation state is seen as foreign and unnatural to the region, meaning that the nation state of Israel remains a temporary project that has a high probability of collapse at any moment.



Credit: Sliman Mansour

From Colonial Divide to Duty of Guardianship

Jerusalem is believed to have been built by the Jebusites (a Canaanite tribe), who viewed the city as a holy place and gave it the name Ur-Salem. Some argue that the name of the city was referring to the Canaanite god, Salem, or to the word Salam, meaning peace. Others argue that the Jebusites built the city as a guard around Al-Aqsa, the mosque having been there even before the city was built. This version of events makes it seem as though the native population of the time felt that they had a Duty of Guardianship toward Jerusalem.

As their ancestors have done before them, Palestinians do not see Jerusalem as belonging to them, they see themselves as belonging to it– maintaining their Duty of Guardianship over it, generation after generation. Come Through thick and thin, Palestinians have revered their duty to guard as a sacred covenant withstanding the test of time.

If you don't believe us, ask the dust of civilizations that tried to make Jerusalem theirs.

Although Israel thinks it shows a great deal of might and power to the world when it engages in military campaigns against civilians, particularly against children, in reality, it is exposing itself as a problem for peace and stability in the region.

Further, Jerusalem, and Al-Aqsa in particular, is becoming more of a unifying factor that may lead to transforming the entire region.

Muslims believe that Palestine and the area of Sham is a blessed and sacred land. Some Muslim scholars such as Dr. Abdullah Maroof, suggests that Jerusalem is the spiritual representation of the relationship among all humans. According to Dr. Maroof:

> *"Jerusalem has always been represented by the prophets of Allah, who are the true leaders and representatives of humanity according to the Islamic understanding of human relationships, as clarified in the Qur'anic verse:*
>
> *"We have surely sent you with the truth as a deliverer of good news and a warner. There is no community that has not had a warner." (Qur'an 35:24)*
> *When mentioning nations, the Qur'an often associates them with their prophets, linking their stories*

and history to them, such as the people of Noah, who are known by no other name, or the people of Lot, whom the Qur'an only mentions by this description. Even the prophets whose names the Qur'an mentions are often referred to by their relation to their people, such as Hud (for 'Ād) or Ṣāliḥ (for Thamūd). This indicates that the Qur'an considers the prophets to be the true representatives of nations in history, a modern perspective on history that can only be understood through divine text rather than mere archaeological study.

*This is likely why the prayer led by the prophets and the leadership of the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) over them on the Night of Ascension (*Isrā' and Mi'rāj*) took place in Jerusalem specifically, because this land represents the prophets, the leaders of nations and their true representatives according to Islamic understanding. Thus, the *Isrā'* (night journey) and the handing over of leadership to the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) of all humanity occurred at the Blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque, which represents all of humanity, and not in Makkah, which represents the majesty and private sanctity of Allah Almighty."*[4]

This means that for Muslims, connecting to Jerusalem connects them to their leadership role in the world and reminds them of what they can be as global citizens. It is what unifies Muslims to be the best version of themselves as mentioned in the Qur'an:

"Let there be a group among you who call 'others' to goodness, encourage what is good, and forbid what is evil —it is they who will be successful." (Qur'an 3:104).

Islam sees Jerusalem as a connection between the message of Islam and humanity itself by spreading goodness and peace.

Today, Jerusalem is becoming the cause that is reminding Muslims of their ability to create greatness in their own world and contribute positively anywhere they turn. It is reminding Muslims all over the world of the value of being free, of life, of love and dreams. In the midst of genocide, the Palestinian cause is uniting all human beings of conscience towards the idea that justice is a human value we all share, and that we should be honest in pursuing, relentlessly, regardless of our faith, color, or race.

As for me, Jerusalem is my home, it is my family, my friend, and it is part of my fabric of being. I am the son of Jerusalem and regardless of how far I am from Jerusalem, I will always try my very best to uphold my duty to guard it.



[4] Dr. Abdullah Maroof, *What have Muslims Lost with the Fall of Jerusalem?* A study in the Philosophy of Jerusalem.

AL-QUDS: THE HEART THAT REFUSES TO BE ERASED

Zeina

Al-Quds is more than a city. It is the beating heart of Palestine, carrying the memory, faith, and resistance of generations. Long before checkpoints carved through its streets and soldiers controlled its gates, Jerusalem lived as a Palestinian city whose neighbourhoods breathed life into its ancient stone walls. Families filled its markets. Children ran through its narrow alleys. Communities formed around mosques, schools, and homes built by generations who believed the city would always belong to those who lived, prayed, and struggled within it.

At the centre of that life stands Masjid Al-Aqsa.

For centuries, Al-Aqsa has been more than a place of prayer. It is the spiritual pulse of the city. Its courtyards carry the footsteps of worshippers, workers, and students whose lives were shaped by the presence of the mosque. Every gate holds memory. Every stone holds history.

But Al-Aqsa never stood alone. It was surrounded by Palestinian neighbourhoods whose homes, markets, and schools formed the living fabric of Jerusalem. The sacred and the everyday were never separate. Life flowed outward from the mosque into the city around it.

To isolate Al-Aqsa meant dismantling the communities that sustained it.

Across Jerusalem, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, Palestinian life has faced demolition, eviction, and relentless pressure. Some communities have already been erased. Others live under constant threat.

Yet through every attempt to break it, Jerusalem continues to resist.



Credit: Sliman Mansour

1967: A City Reshaped

In 1967, Israeli occupation forces captured East Jerusalem and the surrounding areas of the West Bank. Soon afterward, Israeli occupation authorities expanded the boundaries of the city and imposed Israeli law on its eastern half.

For Palestinians, life in Jerusalem changed overnight.

Residents who had lived in the city for generations were classified as permanent residents rather than citizens. Their right to remain in their own city became tied to bureaucratic rules and administrative control. Land laws and planning policies soon followed, shaping where Palestinians could build homes, expand neighbourhoods, or even remain in Jerusalem.

The consequences of those decisions are still visible today.

Within days of the occupation of East Jerusalem, a centuries-old Palestinian neighbourhood beside Al-Aqsa disappeared.

The Mughrabi Quarter

For centuries, the Mughrabi Quarter stood beside the walls of Masjid Al-Aqsa.

The quarter's narrow alleys and stone homes formed part of the living city that surrounded Al-Aqsa.

Much of the land surrounding Al-Aqsa existed as waqf—religious endowments dedicated to sustaining the mosque and the communities connected to it.

Founded in the twelfth century by Muslims from North Africa, who settled in Jerusalem, the neighbourhood grew into a community deeply tied to the life of the mosque. Families lived there for generations, caring for religious endowments and working in the markets of the Old City.

After the occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967, residents were ordered out with almost no warning. Some families were given only hours to gather their belongings. Others were forced into the streets while their homes still held their possessions, documents, and memories.

Then the bulldozers came.

By morning, more than 130 homes had been reduced to rubble. Hundreds of Palestinians were displaced. A neighbourhood that had stood for centuries vanished in a single night.

In its place emerged the Western Wall Plaza.

What disappeared was not just housing. A living community tied to Al-Aqsa had been removed from the city.

But the memory of the Mughrabi Quarter never left Jerusalem.

Silwan: An Ancient Presence Under Threat

Just south of the Old City walls lies Silwan, one of the oldest Palestinian communities in Jerusalem. Families have lived there for generations, building homes and raising children on land that predates modern political borders.

Its location beside Al-Aqsa has made it a constant target.

Building permits for Palestinian residents are almost impossible to obtain. Homes built to accommodate growing families are declared illegal. Demolition orders follow.

Entire sections of the neighbourhood live knowing their homes could disappear overnight.

In areas such as Al-Bustan, redevelopment plans threaten to remove dozens of Palestinian families whose roots in the neighbourhood stretch back decades.

Yet Silwan remains.

Children still play in its streets. Families still gather in their homes. Life continues beneath the shadow of demolition orders.

Silwan endures because its people refuse to abandon the land that holds their history.



Sheikh Jarrah: The Unfinished Nakba

Sheikh Jarrah carries another chapter of the Palestinian story.

Many of its residents are descendants of refugees displaced during the Nakba of 1948. After losing homes in cities such as Haifa, Jaffa, Lydda, and Ramla, they rebuilt their lives in Jerusalem.

Decades later, many of those same families face eviction once again.

Legal disputes over property ownership have placed several households at risk of losing homes they have lived in for generations. For residents, these cases are not simply legal battles.

They are the possibility that displacement will repeat itself.
For families who already carry the memory of exile, the threat of losing their homes again is a continuation of the same story. Sheikh Jarrah has therefore become more than a neighbourhood.

It has become a frontline of resistance.

Bab al-'Amud

Bab al-'Amud—Damascus Gate—is where the life of Palestinian Jerusalem remains visible.

For generations, its steps have been a gathering place where people meet, talk, and move through the city. Merchants open their stalls. Families pass through on their way to work, school, or prayer.

Even under surveillance and heavy police presence, the space remains alive.

Young people sit on the stone steps. Vendors call out to passing crowds. Conversations fill the plaza.

Every ordinary moment becomes

a quiet act of resistance.

Simply gathering there is a way of saying, “we are still here.”

Yet the pressures shaping Jerusalem do not stop at its walls.

From Jerusalem to Gaza

The devastation unfolding in Gaza today echoes the same struggle that has shaped Jerusalem for decades.

Entire neighbourhoods have been reduced to rubble. Families search through the remains of homes they once built with their own hands. Refugee camps that already carried the memory of earlier displacement have been bombed again.

The families resisting eviction in Sheikh Jarrah, the residents of Silwan living under demolition orders, and the children pulled from the rubble in Gaza belong to the same people.

Their lives are tied together by the same history of displacement —and the same determination to remain.

What happens slowly in Jerusalem unfolds with devastating speed in Gaza.

But the struggle is the same.

Across Palestine, people continue to endure, rebuild, and resist.



Credit: Mona Termos

The Heart That Still Beats

Jerusalem has been scarred, but it has not been defeated.

Masjid Al-Aqsa still stands.

Palestinian families still walk the streets of the Old City.

The call to prayer still rises over Jerusalem.

The city lives because its people remain.

Jerusalem is not a memory.

It is a city that still breathes.

And as long as its people remain, the heart of Al-Quds will never stop beating.

SABT AL-NUR: CHRISTIANS AND CENTURIES OF WITNESS IN JERUSALEM

Danielle

هلمّوا خذوا نورًا من النور الذي لا يغرب
ومجّدوا المسيح القائم من بين الأموات

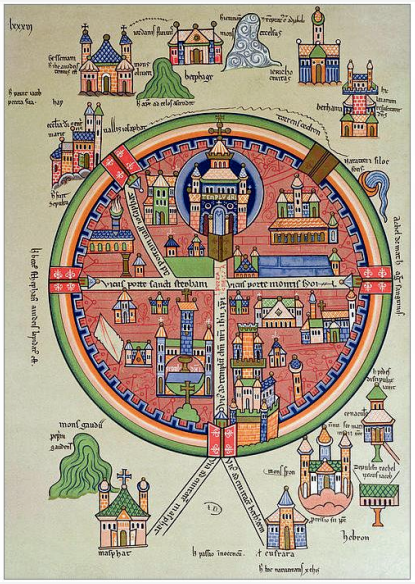
Come ye take light, from the light, that is never overtaken by night.

Come glorify Christ, who is risen from the dead.

Jerusalem is often narrated through the rise and fall of empires, the contest of religions, and the geopolitics of the present. Far less visible in these accounts are the continuous lives of the city's Indigenous Christian communities, Palestinian Christians are not a remnant of a distant past, nor a marginal minority within the Holy City. They are a living community whose claims to Jerusalem are enacted not only through history, but through ritual, space, and collective memory.

Among the most powerful expressions of this continuity is Sabt al-Nur, the Holy Fire ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Each year, this ritual gathers thousands into a choreography of light, sound, and movement that has persisted for centuries. More than a liturgical event, it is an embodied assertion of presence: a practice through which Palestinian Christians reproduce belonging, assert inheritance, and maintain continuity under shifting regimes of control.

This article situates Sabt al-Nur within the longer history of Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem, particularly during the Ottoman and British Mandate periods, and into the present. It argues that the ritual functions not only as religious devotion, but as a form of Indigenous continuity and resistance, and what can be understood as a recurring enactment of presence in a city where sovereignty, movement, and access have long been contested.



Credit: The Palestine Poster Project Archives

For context and understanding, allow me to explain what Holy Saturday means to Orthodox Christians and what happens in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on this day. This will lay the groundwork for showcasing the symbolism of this event in the broader context of Palestinian Christian resistance and resilience.

Every year on the Orthodox Holy Saturday, the Saturday before the Resurrection, thousands gather inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to bear witness to the miracle of the Holy Fire. In Orthodox Christianity, Holy Saturday commemorates Christ's descent into Hades (Hell) and the cosmic stillness before Resurrection. In Orthodox theology, it is a day of quiet victory, Christ breaks down the very gates of Hades and defies death. Jerusalem's celebration is uniquely authoritative as it is anchored to a place, the Tomb itself. At the heart of Holy Saturday is al-Qabr al-Muqaddas (the Sacred Tomb), the shrine enclosing the Tomb of Christ inside the Church. Al-Qabr al-Muqaddas is divided into two chambers, the Chapel of the Angel and the Inner Tomb chamber. Access to the Tomb is governed by the Status Quo agreement, an Ottoman-era arrangement regulating Christian access and authority.

Only the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem is permitted to enter the Tomb to perform the central rite, however that morning there are preparations and inspections carried out. The shrine is inspected by representatives of other Christian communities in the Status Quo agreement, the Church's Muslim custodians (key holders) of the Nusseibeh and Joudeh families participate in the procedures. These preparatory customs display the marrying of a civic-religious choreography unique to Jerusalem. As the afternoon approaches, thousands gather, the atmosphere is tense

and electric as the faithful await al-Nar al-Muqaddas: the Holy Fire Ceremony. And so, the miracle takes place, a divine, uncreated light ignites the fire spontaneously and the Patriarch emerges holding bundles of 33 candles (symbolizing Christ's age). The moment the Fire appears, the church erupts; bells, chanting of the opening verse above, and the flame then travels among the crowd. Within minutes, hand-to-hand, the flame is passed amongst the people. From there the Holy Fire is carried in formal processions to the Christian quarters of Jerusalem and to Orthodox Churches in Occupied Palestine and its historical lands. In recent decades, the flame is transported immediately and received by Orthodox Patriarchs worldwide. The Fire is then used that night in the Pascha liturgies celebrating the Resurrection. This circulation reinforces Jerusalem's role as the liturgical heart of the Orthodox Christian world.

Centuries of Witness in Jerusalem

The ceremony of the Holy Fire is one of the oldest continuously practiced Christian rituals in the world. Likely emerging during the Byzantine period, after the construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the 4th century under Constantine the Great. The ceremony continued during the early Islamic period of the 7th-11th centuries, widely described in travel writings of Muslim and Christian writers. In his 11th-century work, The Chronology of Ancient Nations, Persian scholar Al-Biruni provides a detailed and objective account of the ceremony. He notes the procedure where the tomb is sealed by the Sultan or local Muslim authorities and the faithful wait until a white fire appears from the tomb. He mentions that after the fire appears, a formal report is delivered to the local Sultan or governor confirming the event.



Credit: AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg

Under Crusader rule, the ceremony gained even greater prominence. Latin chroniclers described massive crowds filling the church while awaiting the emergence of the fire. The event became a major symbol of Christian Jerusalem. Given its status, disputes between Greek, Armenian and Latin clergy intensified during this period, as control over the ceremony meant prestige and authority inside the church. These conflicts foreshadow the later Status Quo system, which would regulate Christian access to the church for centuries.

When the Ottomans took Jerusalem in 1517, they inherited centuries of Christian competition over the Church of Holy Sepulcher. Rather than abolish existing rituals, Ottoman authorities formalized a complex arrangement known as the Status Quo, finalized in 1852. This system divided rights within the church among the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Roman Catholic. Under this arrangement, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch retained responsibility for the rites of the Holy Fire. In the British Mandate period (1917-1948), Sabt al-Nur became one of the largest annual religious gatherings in Palestine.

Following Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967, the Holy Fire ceremony entered a new political environment. Access to the Old City increasingly depended on security restrictions and permits, particularly for Palestinian Christians from the West Bank. Despite these challenges, the ritual continues to draw thousands of worshippers each year. For Palestinian Christian families, Sabt al-Nur became both a religious celebration and a reaffirmation of their connection to Jerusalem. Israel's occupation and apartheid policies in Jerusalem and the West Bank have continued to impact the free movement of Palestinian Christians to exercise their right to worship and attend religious sites in our own land. While Sabt al-Nur is for all believers, it is local Palestinians who suffer restrictions to access. This is far from unique to the Occupation as, historically, foreign religious entities have sought to limit Palestinian clergy from positions of authority within the Orthodox Church in Palestine.

As noted, the Status Quo arrangement was finalized under the Ottomans in 1852, however,

Israel has been systemically breaching this agreement since the Nakba in 1948 and increasingly since the Occupation of Jerusalem in 1967consequently leading to the erosion and erasure of Palestinian Christians. The Status Quo agreement is a binding legal framework, integral part of international law, and was reaffirmed by UN Resolution 181. Israel's illegal occupation over Jerusalem and its policy of apartheid and ethnic cleansing have altered the geography of Jerusalem, including residency evictions, movement restrictions and forced displacement of Palestinians. In addition to the restrictions on worship and access to holy sites, Israel increasingly exercises financial pressure on the Christians of Jerusalem with threats to impose taxes on church properties that are exempt, impacting their sustainability in the community. Breaching of the Status Quo is not just about physical access to buildings and sites, it is about the erasure of the identity of the indigenous Palestinian community by asserting an exclusive Jewish-Israeli narrative over Jerusalem and its holy sites.

Intercommunal Governance and Sharing of the Holy Land: Fada'il al-Quds

We have noted that intercommunal governance of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has been long established, leading back to the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem in 637 and the meeting between Umar ibn al-Khattab and Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem. Sophronius agreed to surrender the city only if the caliph himself received the surrender and so Ibn al-Khattab travelled to meet him from Medina to Jerusalem. The agreement guaranteed protection for Christian holy sites and the Christian population. The key promises attributed to Umar Ibn al-Khattab were protection of churches and crosses, protection of Christian worship, protection of Christian property and the freedom of movement for clergy and pilgrims. This agreement became the basis for Islamic governance of Christian institutions in Jerusalem for centuries. One of the most famous parts of the story involves prayer. Sophronius invited Umar to pray inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, but Umar refused. His reasoning: if he prays inside, Muslims may later claim it as a mosque. Instead, he prayed outside the church and that location later became the Mosque of Umar. As noted earlier, the role of Muslims in Sabt al-Nur is a feature of this governance system; the keys of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher are kept by two historic Muslim families, the Nusseibeh and Joudeh families. This arrangement developed to prevent conflict between Christian sects as a Muslim custodian was considered a neutral authority.

While Umar Ibn al-Khattab did not pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, there is a long historical tradition of Muslims performing pilgrimage to Christian holy sites in Jerusalem. These practices were not marginal but deeply embedded in Islamic pilgrimage culture, especially through the literary genre known as Fada'il al-Quds. The Fada'il al-Quds consists of Islamic texts written from the medieval period onward that describe the religious merits of Jerusalem. Their purpose was to encourage pilgrimage and devotion to Jerusalem. Specifically looking at Sabt al-Nur, there are multiple sources of Muslim attendance and pilgrimage, one of the earliest being in the 10th Century. Historian Al-Masudi (died in 956) describes the Holy Fire at the Church and explicitly notes Muslim attendance. This is important as it shows Muslim attendance centuries before the Crusades, that Muslims were not only aware of the ritual but physically present inside the sacred space, and that the ceremony functioned as a public spectacle shared across communities. Even the Islamic scholarly materials that criticize or debate the Fire Ceremony are significant as it demonstrates how prevalent and well known the ceremony was and its significance to Jerusalem. This frames how Jerusalem, as early as medieval times, was a city of shared sacred geography, where religious boundaries were far more fluid than modern narratives assume.

Fire as Inheritance, Resistance and Resilience

Today, Holy Saturday is both religious and communal survival. Access is actively restricted by military permits, apartheid regimes, and foreign control and influence over the Church–yet the ritual endures as a claim to

presence in Jerusalem for Palestinian Christians. For us, the Holy Fire is not a spectacle, it is inheritance. It is a practice of presence that repeatedly reasserts local Christian communities in a city where movement, crowding, and sovereignty are managed by outside authorities. It is an act of worship and active participation, not just remembrance, as Palestinian Christians attend, waiting fervently for the flame, passing it hand-to-hand. That embodied participation is how Palestinian Christian families assert their belonging to Jerusalem. Holy Saturday in Jerusalem functions as an annual regime of inheritance, resistance, and resilience; a practice through which Indigenous Palestinian Christians perform sovereignty over sacred space and time, and reproduce communal belonging through collective movement and sound.

We have explored the centuries old tradition of Sabt al-Nur and its unbreakable significance to the city of Jerusalem. Across more than sixteen centuries, the Holy Fire ceremony has persisted through political transformations. From Byzantine, Early Islamic, Crusader, Ottoman, and British Mandate rule, Christians in Jerusalem have continued to exercise their holy rites and rituals. Never has our struggle to continue these traditions been so tested as with the rise of the Zionist state. Yearly, less and less permits are issued to local Palestinian Christians looking to access our Holy Sites and participate in our religious holidays. While overall restrictions on pilgrims attending Christian sites throughout the Holy Land exist, it far more negatively impacts indigenous Palestinian Christians. While foreigners access our most holy churches, attend our holiest rites, Palestinian Christians are denied access, facing systemic measures of erasure and ethnic cleansing. At the time of writing this piece, we are mere weeks away from Sabt al-Nur. Ramadan has just ended with access to Masjid al ’Aqsa completely barred to Muslims. And now, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher stands closed indefinitely. Closed to the miracle of Christ, He who defied death and conquered Hades, stands against an immoral, illegitimate man-made state in the Holiest of Lands. While we know that this time of injustice is but an earthly test, how we stand up to these injustices is deeply rooted in our faith, and our responsibility to our people and our land.

Who are the Christians of Jerusalem: Christians in Late Ottoman and British Mandate Palestine

To understand why Sabt al-Nūr carries such weight for Palestinian Christians today, it must be situated within the broader historical structures that shaped Christian life in Jerusalem. The ritual did not emerge in isolation, but within a city governed by successive imperial systems that organized religious communities, regulated sacred space, and mediated access to holy sites.

By the 19th century, Christians constituted a significant minority in Jerusalem. The Greek Orthodox Church represented the largest denomination of Palestinian Arabs, making up nearly half of the Christian population. There is then the Armenian Orthodox Apostolic church, concentrated in the Armenian Quarter of the city, Greek and Roman Catholics, and smaller communities including the small but influential Protestant community. Under Ottoman rule, Christians were governed through the millet system, where religious communities had certain autonomy in internal affairs.



The 19th century saw intense European penetration into Jerusalem, often in the role as “protectorates” of the different churches: Greece and Russia for the Orthodox, France for the Catholics, and Britain for the Protestant missions. This imperial competition through religion meant that schools, hospitals and churches became tools of influence and local Christians were increasingly tied to transnational networks of patronage. The effects on

Palestinian Christians were the expansion of education and literacy, and the emergence of a Christian Arab middle class. European intervention and missionary expansion also brought along one of the most famous of colonial constructs in the region, sectarianism. "The idea that violent sectarianism has characterized Palestine since time immemorial is widespread, powerful – and fundamentally mistaken" (Robinson). In fact, sectarianism did not emerge as a primary aspect of Palestinian politics until the British Mandate period. It is through this colonial construct of sectarianism that we find the marginalization of Palestinian Christians and the Chrisitan communities' erasure from the country's political history. The transition from Ottoman to British rule marked a profound restructuring of this order. Under the Ottomans, Christians existed within a plural imperial framework that allowed for overlapping identities, religious, local, and imperial. The British Mandate, however, introduced a new political logic that categorized communities into fixed religious groups within a national framework. This period did not simply inherit sectarian divisions, but actively institutionalized them, reshaping how Christians understood their place within Palestinian society.

The Arab Orthodox Crisis

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate was also a major land owner in and around Jerusalem; even today, it is the largest nonstate landowner in Israel. The Patriarch and Brotherhood of monks of the Holy Sepulcher who headed the church were ethnically Greek, but the whole laity and clergy were Palestinian Arab, a situation that caused much tension and conflict, especially during the British Mandate period. The long-standing conflict between the Greek Orthodox Arab laity and the all-Greek hierarchy was transformed from an internal ecclesiastical dispute into a modern political movement deeply integrated into Palestinian nationalism. The Mandate's legal and political environment, especially the British reinforcement of sectarian communal structures, pushed Orthodox Arab activists to adopt nationalist rhetoric, organization, and constitutional demands, effectively fusing the "Orthodox cause" with the anti-colonial, anti-Zionist national struggle.

The catalyst for this struggle was in 1923 and the Patriarchate's land sale to Zionists, they sold substantial church lands to the Palestine Land Development Company, an arm of the World Zionist Organization. This land sale represented Greek-British-Zionist collusion in Arab eyes and triggered the first Arab Orthodox Congress (1923). The congress established a central Orthodox Executive Committee modeled on the nationalist movement. Their political platform demanded an Arabization of the patriarchate, admission of Arabs into the Brotherhood, and for Arabic to be used as the liturgical and administrative language, among other demands. The congress simultaneously condemned the land sale to Zionists and framed the Orthodox cause as part of Palestinian national resistance.

While ultimately the Orthodox movement failed to achieve Arabization of the Church, the movement and its players were central to the development of a Palestinian national identity. The Arab Orthodox struggle was not simply an internal church issue but a mirror of the Palestinian national struggle, embodying questions of sovereignty, representation, foreign domination, and communal identity.

The Arab Orthodox movement therefore cannot be understood as a purely ecclesiastical dispute. Rather, it functioned as one of the earliest sites where questions of representation, land, and authority were articulated in explicitly political terms. In this sense, the struggle within the Church mirrored the broader Palestinian condition under colonial rule, where foreign control, land dispossession, and demands for self-governance converged.



Credit: Ahmed El Khalidi

These historical dynamics did not disappear with the end of the British Mandate. Instead, they were transformed and intensified

under Israeli rule, where questions of access, sovereignty, and presence became even more tightly controlled. In this context, Palestinian Christian discourse increasingly turned toward theological language to articulate political reality.

Kairos Palestine Document and the Church's Response to Israeli Occupation

The Kairos Palestine Document is one of the most important modern statements by Palestinian Christians about life under Israeli occupation. It was published in 2009, issued by a collective from multiple heads of Palestinian Christian churches, speaking as Indigenous Christians of Palestine. The document frames the situation in Palestine as a moral and theological turning point demanding action from the Global Church. It frames the Occupation as both a moral and theological crisis, naming Israel's rule over Palestinian territories as `sin against God and humanity`. The document outlines the various methods of control, annexation, and ethnic cleansing exercised by the Israeli state on Palestinians in general, and Christians in particular.

> *1.15 Religious liberty is severely restricted; the freedom of access to the holy places is denied under the pretext of security. Jerusalem and its holy places are out of bounds for many Christians and Muslims from the West Bank and Gaza strip. Even Jerusalemites face restrictions during the religious feasts. Some of our Arab clergy are regularly barred from entering Jerusalem.*



Credit: Amir Cohen/Reuters

Israeli policy in Jerusalem is clear: to empty the city of its Palestinian citizens, both Christians and Muslims. `Their identity cards are confiscated, which means the loss of their right to reside in Jerusalem. Their homes are demolished or expropriated. Jerusalem, city of reconciliation, has become a city of discrimination and exclusion, a source of struggle rather than peace.` The document rejects the theological claims of Christian Zionism (though does not name them as such) as justification for the Jewish state. Declaring that anyone who uses the Bible to legitimize the Occupation `distorts the image of God in the Israeli who has become an occupier just as it distorts this image in the Palestinian living under occupation.`

The Kairos Document does seek to lay out the hardships of Palestinian life under occupation, its language is prophetic and speaks in moral absolutes. It focuses heavily on the call to action of the Global Church by rooting the plight of Palestinians in theological terms. In 2025, Kairos Palestine Document II was released, themed `Faith in a Time of Genocide`. This document has an important shift in tone, vocabulary, and strategy. It shifts into more explicit diagnostic language (i.e., genocide, settler colonialism, apartheid). Naming the Zionist project, `Zionists do not want us to remain on our land. Their plan for us is displacement, death or submission.` This document centers around human rights and international law, calling out Israeli actions not only as morally corrupt, but as an ongoing criminal project of genocide, colonization, and ethnic cleansing. In addition to being a call to action to the Global Church, it calls on the whole international community to rise up against the injustices against the Palestinian people. The document also focuses on resistance–specifically the Palestinian right to resist. Being the official position of the collective Churches of Palestine, it is a call for non-violent resistance, but recognizes that violent resistance is born out of decades of injustice, oppression, and displacement: since the Nakba of 1948, and more than sixteen years of an immoral, suffocating blockade on Gaza.` Where Kairos I was a prophetic declaration of injustice, Kairos II

is more advanced in its counter-conduct, naming power structures explicitly, combining theology and international law, and sustaining resistance over time.

As a united Palestinian Christian document, it is notable that the language regarding Christian Zionism in Kairos II is far more specific and damning. It is significant that a set of Christian clergy and faithful are publicly denouncing Christian Zionism for the threat it poses, not only to Palestine and Palestinians, but to Christianity as a whole:

> *We reject the oppression and injustice produced by the theology of racism, colonialism and ethnic supremacy embodied in Christian Zionism, a theology that has produced apartheid, ethnic cleansing and genocide of indigenous people. Christian Zionism calls on a tribal, racist god of war and ethnic cleansing, teachings utterly alien to the core of Christian faith and ethics. Christian Zionism must therefore be named for what it is: a theological distortion and a moral corruption. After all efforts to invite Christian Zionists to genuine repentance have been exhausted, moral, ecclesial and theological responsibility requires that they be held accountable and that their ideology be rejected and boycotted. The time has come for the churches of the world to repudiate Zionist theology and to state clearly their position on Palestine: this is a case of settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing of an indigenous people.*

Christian Zionism is a poison in our faith, one that has gone unchecked by the Christian communities of the world for far too long.

The Kairos Palestine II document reaffirms the belonging of Palestinian Christians to Palestine. In the same way that the Fire Ceremony has remained in the heart of Jerusalem for centuries, so do the people of the Church of Palestine.

> *We are the sons and daughters of the first Church - descendants of the apostles and the saints of the first Christian centuries - those who cultivated this land, built its cities and villages and drank from its waters. We do not live on the margins of this land. We are woven into its fabric. We carry its history and heritage. Its very soil knows us as its own. Many empires have passed over this land and disappeared, buried in the dust of history, yet the bells of our churches continue to ring - bearing witness to the truth and proclaiming resurrection every day.*

Sabt al-Nur is often described as one of the oldest continuous rituals in Christianity, but to frame it only in terms of antiquity is to miss its deeper significance. What this article has sought to show is that the Holy Fire is not simply a ritual that has endured history, it is a practice through which Palestinian Christians have actively lived and reproduced their history in Jerusalem.

Across successive regimes, the conditions surrounding Christian life in Jerusalem have continuously shifted. Under the Ottomans, Palestinian Christians navigated a plural imperial order structured through the millet system, where communal autonomy coexisted with layered identities and local integration. During the British Mandate, this order was fundamentally reconfigured: sectarian identity was hardened into political structure, and Christians were repositioned within a new majority-minority logic tied to the emergence of competing national projects. These transformations did not erase Palestinian Christians, but they altered the terrain upon which presence, authority, and belonging had to be asserted.

Within this shifting landscape, Palestinian Christians were never passive subjects of history. They were central participants in the intellectual, social, and political life of Jerusalem: deeply embedded in its institutions, its press, its educational networks, and its emerging national movements. Even internal struggles, such as the Arab Orthodox movement, reflected broader questions of sovereignty, representation, and resistance to foreign domination. These were not isolated ecclesiastical disputes, but expressions of a community grappling with the same forces reshaping Palestine as a whole.

Sabt al-Nur must be understood within this continuum. The ritual does not stand apart from history; it is one of the primary ways history is carried forward. Each year, as the faithful gather, wait, and receive the flame, they are not merely commemorating an event of the past, they are participating in a collective act that reasserts their relationship to

the city, its sacred spaces, its rhythms, and its memory. The passing of the fire, hand-to-hand, is not symbolic in a superficial sense; it is a material, embodied transmission of belonging across generations.

In the present, this act takes on heightened significance. Israeli control over Jerusalem has introduced a regime in which access to holy sites, freedom of movement, and even the right to reside in the city are subject to restriction. Palestinian Christians, like their Muslim counterparts, face barriers that transform basic acts of worship into sites of negotiation and contestation. Yet, it is precisely under these conditions that Sabt al-Nur continues to be enacted. The ritual persists, not because conditions are stable, but because they are not.

What emerges, then, is a form of continuity that cannot be reduced to mere survival. Sabt al-Nur functions as an annual enactment of presence, what may be understood as a form of Indigenous counter-conduct. Through ritual, Palestinian Christians reclaim space in a city where space is controlled; they mark sacred time in a context where time is politicized, and they reproduce communal identity in the face of ongoing fragmentation. This is not resistance in the conventional sense of confrontation, but in the deeper sense of refusing erasure.

The Holy Fire, as it spreads through the Church and into the streets of Jerusalem, is often described as miraculous. For Palestinian Christians, its meaning is also profoundly historical. It is a light that has moved across centuries of empire, conflict, and displacement, carried always by a community that has refused to disappear. Empires have claimed Jerusalem, states have sought to reorder it, and powers have attempted to regulate who may enter, who may remain, and who may belong. Yet, each year, the fire emerges again from the Tomb, and with it, a people whose presence cannot be extinguished.

In this sense, Sabt al-Nur is not only a testimony to faith – it is a declaration of continuity. It affirms that Palestinian Christians are not a marginal remnant of Jerusalem's past, but among its oldest living witnesses, whose history is not only remembered, but enacted, embodied, and passed forward, flame by flame.



Jerusalem Is Not Just a Palestinian Cause

Shaden

In 1187, Jerusalem was liberated following years of relentless war against the Crusaders. The city had endured nearly a century under their occupation. Salahuldin's army, driven by longing and devotion, rushed toward Masjid Al-Aqsa, only to be met with a sight that shattered them.

Al-Aqsa had been desecrated by the Crusaders. Sacred grounds were turned into stables. The Dome of the Rock bore a towering cross. The sanctity of the entire Mosque had been violated.

What they felt in that moment was not mere anger, it was a defining fury, etched into history. It gave birth to a vow: never again would the holy places of Islam be desecrated, and never again would the Muslim world fracture to the point where foreign powers could seize its heart.

But "never again" has come again.

I often wonder what Salahuldin would feel if he opened his eyes today and walked once more through the gates of Jerusalem. Would what he sees break his spirit?

The holy land under Zionist siege, a power that mirrors, in many ways, the same forces they once fought. An Ummah watching from afar, divided, distracted, and unmoved, while its sanctities are steadily eroded.

What kind of grief would overcome him?

As I write this, Masjid Al-Aqsa just witnessed one of its most painful chapters: a Ramadan in solitude. While repression has been a marker of the Israeli occupation, the scale and impunity of the Zionist regime has reached unprecedented levels with their shutdown of the holy site.

Jerusalem and Duty of Guardianship

History tells us something different about who Jerusalem belongs to. Under Muslim rule, the city was not only governed, it was safeguarded. Justice, religious coexistence, and the protection of all holy sites were not optional



Credit: Yusuf Hammou

virtues, they were obligations. Muslim rulers understood that Jerusalem was a trust, not personal property chosen for a few. The city is our link to humanity, a mirror of justice.

By contrast, every foreign invasion of Jerusalem, from the Crusaders to Zionists, has represented the opposite: injustice, exclusivity, domination, and desecration.

To reduce it to a political struggle is to misunderstand it entirely. So let me be clear: Jerusalem is not simply a Palestinian cause, it is a Muslim trust, a Duty of Guardianship, an *Amanah*.

Allah (SWT) has ordained that Palestine be the Blessed Land of messengers and prophets championing the cause of monotheism among their peoples. Throughout its ancient history, Palestine was host to many prophets' leadership and fought fiercely to uphold the banner of righteousness in that blessed land.

Jerusalem is the land of Masjid Al-Aqsa, the first qibla, the site of Isra and Mi'raaj. It is one of the three holiest sanctuaries in Islam. A sacred axis of faith, it is not a cause we donate to from a distance, it is the lifeblood of our Ummah; an ongoing symbol of our resilience and dedication to Allah that has endured across generations.

And today, we cannot even secure access to it.

Our duty as Muslims does not stop at the freedom and liberation of Al-Aqsa Mosque, it also extends to the Christian and Jewish Holy sites. Jerusalem's history specifically demonstrates that this responsibility has been upheld by Muslims since the establishment of Muslim rule in the city at the time of Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab in 637 CE.

Understanding Al-Aqsa: Beyond Misconception

To misunderstand Al-Aqsa is to weaken it.

Today, legal and political narratives attempt to fragment the holy site, reducing it to separate structures rather than a unified sanctuary. Courtyards are redefined as “public spaces,” stripping them of their sacred protection.

Fragmentation is not accidental, it is strategy. Once Al-Aqsa is reduced to a simple structure, it becomes easier to control, redefine, and ultimately, erase.

The Al-Aqsa compound consists of 144,000 square meters, housing over 200 sacred landmarks, including The Dome of the Rock mosque and Al-Qibli mosque.

The Qur'an and hadith are fundamental to the study of Jerusalem, particularly its historical context. A Muslim perspective on Jerusalem’s history (as well as Palestine, in fact) starts with Masjid Al Aqsa, which is its first place of worship, not the city itself.

Masjid Al Aqsa is often misunderstood. It is neither the Dome of the Rock (the mosque with the golden dome) nor the mosque with the grey dome. Masjid Al Aqsa refers to the entire walled area within the Old City of Jerusalem, spanning 144 dunams (144,000 sq m).[1] This expansive compound encompasses approximately 200 sacred landmarks, including various mosques and other significant structures, including, but not limited to:

- The Dome of the Rock (the famous golden dome). The Dome of the Rock is constructed over Al Sakhra Al Musharrafa, also known as the Exalted Rock which served as the Qibla (direction of prayer) for prophets before Muhammad (pbuh).



- Al Jami’ Al Qibli or Al Qibli Mosque (erroneously labeled as the "real" Aqsa mosque) is named "Qibli" because it faces the Qibla in relation to the rest of the compound.
- Al Musallah Al Marwani is located underground in the South-East area of Masjid Al Aqsa. Originally built as a leveling foundation, it was later used for storage and then as horse stables by the Crusaders.
- Al Aqsa Al Qadim (The Old Aqsa) was constructed beneath the Qibli mosque during the Umayyad period, it functioned exclusively as a royal entrance to Al Aqsa from neighboring royal castles.
- Masjid Al Buraq is situated at the Buraq wall, underground of Al Aqsa.
- Sabeel Qaitbay is the most renowned public water fountain (sabeel) within Al Aqsa.
- Al Madrassa Al Ashrafiyya is the most famous of the Islamic schools located within the Al Aqsa compound.

The very names we use today to address Jerusalem are rooted in Islamic history. Masjid Al Aqsa, specifically, has had many historical names:

- Al Masjid Al Aqsa: This name was explicitly given by God in the Quran (Surah Al-Israa). "Aqsa" translates to "further," indicating its distance in relation to Masjid Al Haram in Mecca.
- Al Bayt Al Muqaddas: "Muqaddas" means sacred and pure, highlighting sacredness and purity as a defining and unique characteristic of Masjid Al Aqsa.
- Bayt Al Maqdis: Referred to by this name in the *hadiths* (sayings and traditions) of the Prophet (PBUH).

Masjid Al Aqsa also shares a deep connection to Masjid Al Haram in Makkah. Dr. Abdullah Maarouf demonstrates that both holy sites, likely built by Prophet Adam (pbuh), were constructed only 40 years apart. A geometric study presented in his book suggests that the original, pre-Cubical shape of the Kaaba aligns with the geometric layout of Masjid Al Aqsa's entire enclosure, pointing to a singular divine blueprint for both. Their shared importance is further emphasized in the Quran (Surah Al-Israa and Surah At-Tin) and their historical role as the

[1] Abdullah Ma‘rouf Omar, *al-Madkhal ilā Dirāsāt Bayt al-Maqdis* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm lil-Malāyīn, 2009).

Qibla for Muslims at different times. Finally and most significantly, Masjid Al Aqsa is the site of Al Miraj, the ascent of our beloved prophet PBUH to the heavens and our five daily prayers prescribed.

A Mirror of the Ummah

The slow emptying of Masjid Al-Aqsa is not just a physical reality; it is a spiritual condition. It signals an Ummah that has grown accustomed to loss and is desensitized to our own desecration.

Colonization has not only taken land, it has reshaped minds. What is happening to Jerusalem is a mirror for the state of the Ummah; it reflects a faith that has been colonized, fragmented, and exhausted.

For decades, excavations beneath Al-Aqsa have weakened its physical foundations, while ideological and cultural forces have eroded the foundations of the Ummah itself.

The result is tangible: An Ummah that hesitates to speak. An Ummah that fears standing for justice. An Ummah that trades conviction for comfort.

Acts of solidarity, speech, protest, and even symbolism, are punished in many parts of the Muslim world. As a result, people retreat and cower. Not because they do not care, but because the cost of caring has become too high.

Slowly, our faith has been reduced to an identity without substance.

Status Quo

Many have heard that Israel is impeding on the Status Quo of Jerusalem. The Status Quo of Jerusalem was implemented by the Ottomans in the 19th century. It is a compilation of historical and legal arrangements that preserve the possession and



division of holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, forbidding any alterations to their status.

The international community worked hard to maintain the Status Quo, using it as a tool to calm the world's outrage around the Zionist project – primarily from the Muslim community. Some communities, such as European Christian groups, did not oppose to Zionist ideology as they believed its European origins would lead to the protection of the Christian Holy Sites in Jerusalem.

In the decades of Palestinian occupation by the Zionist project, many are now starting to see the truth of what it is. They were sold a narrative to garner sympathy for proponents of the Zionist project; an ancient people returning home to their promised land after being exiled from Palestine by the Romans in 70 CE. And guess who they think the Romans are? That's right, it's the west. Now they want to redeem themselves.

This narrative by the Zionists may seem like fantasy to some. But it has been costing Palestinians our lives for nearly a century. And now, it is eroding the Status Quo. This is not simply a political shift. It is a rupture in a centuries-old understanding.

The Status Quo was never perfect, but it imposed limits. It recognized that Jerusalem was too sacred and culturally interconnected to be reshaped unilaterally without consequence. It was, in many ways, an early acknowledgment that power in this city must be restrained by responsibility. It recognized that colonialism in this city would almost guarantee the erasure of its native populace.

And yet, the language used to describe what is happening in Jerusalem today often strips this reality of its depth. We speak of "tensions," of "clashes," of "disputes over access," but these phrases obscure a fundamental reality: the gradual disappearance of a principle that once protected the city from itself.

The Last Thread

The slow but steady emptying of the grounds of Al Aqsa is setting a new status quo for muslims. And that status quo explicitly defines us as an inferior Ummah, one that stays silent to oppression, and that allows foreign powers to dominate us. The colonial project has

succeeded so well in internalizing the hate and misery of our religions, our cultures, and origins, that the defilement of our holy cities does not shock us anymore. It has eroded our mind before it has physically eroded our Aqsa.

For decades, Zionist projects, under the guise of archaeological work, dig deep under Al-Aqsa, weakening its foundations and structures. It is a man-made catastrophe waiting to happen, so that the Zionists can twist it as God's reckoning. Even archaeological work has been unfruitful in proving anything from Israel's "historical" narrative of Jewish claim over the land.

All it has proved is that they can dig and destroy our places of worship with impunity. What we see today is a rebranded crusade waged against Muslims, not only by many western countries, but also by most Arab and so-called Muslim countries. Since fighting injustice is a core Islamic value, any expression or iteration of it is reprimanded by tyrannical forces that have been lining their pockets by selling their souls to the interests of Israel and the United States.

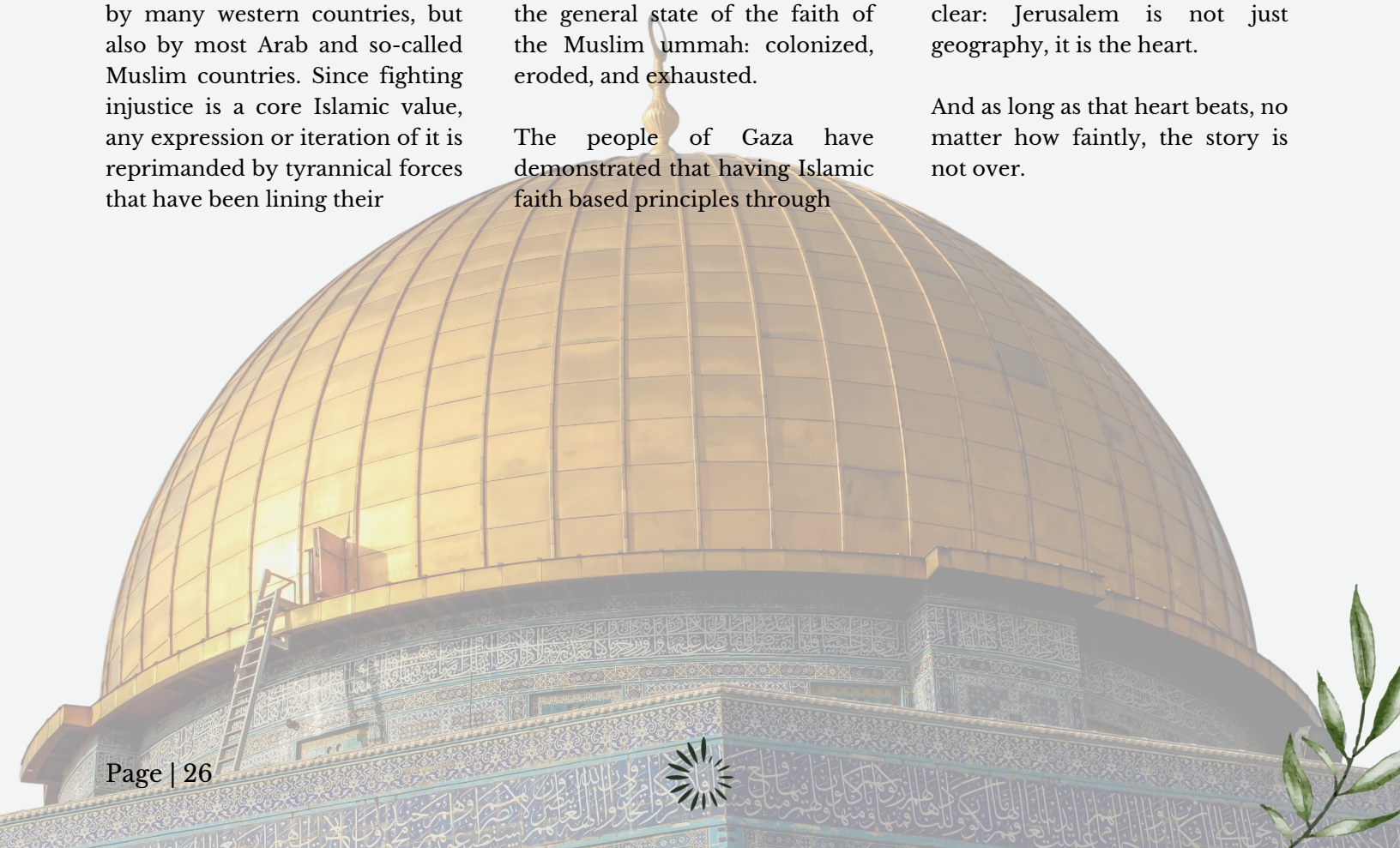
This is why wearing a keffiyeh in solidarity with the Palestinians, or protesting in the streets for the liberation of Palestine, or even posting any content that criticizes complicity with genocide, have such dire and sometimes fatal consequences for regular people, especially in normalizing countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. And so, the Muslims in these "Muslim" countries end up giving up core elements of their faith (i.e., fighting injustice) to survive, and little by little, the rest of their values are eroded as a society until they are Muslim by name, and become the perfect colonized subjects serving the interests of the state. And so, it is not a stretch to say that the state of Jerusalem today is very much indicative of the general state of the faith of the Muslim ummah: colonized, eroded, and exhausted.

The people of Gaza have demonstrated that having Islamic faith based principles through resistance and resilience is the way to maintain dignity and insist on liberation. They have understood that losing Al-Aqsa is losing our faith altogether. In fact, Palestinian resistance movements have expressed time and again that their goal is not only to liberate Gaza, but Jerusalem, which is the geographical centre of their Islamic faith. This shows that despite the Zionist attempt to fragment Palestinians geographically, socially, and politically, they are still connected through Al Aqsa, and the zeal to liberate it.

Despite it all, the people of Palestine, despite everything, have held onto a truth many have forgotten: losing Al-Aqsa is to lose oneself.

This is why their struggle has never been limited to land. Again and again, Palestinians make it clear: Jerusalem is not just geography, it is the heart.

And as long as that heart beats, no matter how faintly, the story is not over.



AL-AQSA HAS NEVER STOOD WITHOUT ITS PEOPLE

Zeina

Al-Aqsa has never stood without its people. In Jerusalem, a city where every stone carries memory and every street has been contested, its courtyards have never been empty. For generations, they have remained filled through prayer, through gathering, through return. That continuity has been challenged but never broken.

For the first time since 1967, Eid passed without prayer in its courtyards. But even that did not empty it. It only displaced what has always defined it. Prayer did not stop—it moved; to the gates, to the walls, to the streets beyond. Wherever people were pushed, they reappeared. Because Al-Aqsa has never been sustained by access. It has been sustained by refusal.

A History of Control and Resistance

The struggle over Al-Aqsa is not recent. It has unfolded over more than a century through repeated attempts to impose control over the mosque, and continuous Palestinian refusal to abandon it.

Tensions were already visible in the early twentieth century. In 1910 and 1911, excavations led by British officer Montague Parker broke into areas beneath the Al-Aqsa compound, provoking widespread anger among Palestinians and forcing him to flee. These incursions were understood for what they were: early efforts to assert control over a place that Palestinians had never surrendered.

By the 1920s, disputes over space and access had intensified. Protests erupted over changes imposed near the Al-Buraq area, part of the Waqf property of the Al-Aqsa compound. In 1929, these tensions escalated into widespread violence across Jerusalem and Palestine. What appeared to be a dispute over space was a struggle over presence, over who had the right to remain rooted in the city.

Following 1948, the political landscape shifted, but the decisive transformation came after 1967. With the occupation of East Jerusalem, Israeli occupation authorities assumed control over



access to the mosque. Within days, the Mughrabi Quarter, a long-standing Palestinian community, was demolished. Its residents were displaced, and its existence was erased from the edge of the compound.

What followed was not a single act, but a continual restructuring of land, access, and authority. Israeli occupation authorities confiscated keys to gates and absorbed administrative systems into their control. Excavations began along the southern and western edges of the compound, continuing for decades. Palestinian religious authorities and engineers repeatedly warned of structural damage to surrounding buildings and to the mosque itself, warnings that reflected the scale of what was unfolding beneath the surface.

In 1969, a fire tore through Al-Aqsa Mosque, destroying the historic pulpit of Salah al-Din. The loss was not only material but symbolic. Yet, even then, the mosque did not stand abandoned; it was restored, and it was returned to.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a pattern became distinctive: excavation, restriction, and repeated incursions by Zionist settler groups attempting to impose new realities within the compound. Israeli courts increasingly advanced efforts to redefine what could be done in the space, while plots to attack or destroy the mosque were uncovered and armed assaults were carried out within its grounds.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, restrictions on Palestinian access became more formalized. Age-based entry limits were imposed. Worshippers were denied access during religious occasions. Israeli occupation forces repeatedly entered the compound during periods of protest.

In 1990, Israeli occupation forces opened fire on Palestinian worshippers inside the compound, killing more than twenty and injuring over one hundred. This was not an exception, but part of a pattern in which force was used to reshape presence.

In 1996, the opening of tunnels beneath the compound triggered widespread clashes across Jerusalem and the West Bank, reinforcing that same pattern—transformation below, confrontation above.

By 2000, tensions reached a breaking point. A heavily guarded visit by Ariel Sharon to the compound ignited protests that were met with force, marking the beginning of the Second Intifada. In its aftermath, restrictions intensified through closures, age limits, and widespread denial of access during Friday prayers.

In the years that followed, these restrictions became systematized. Entry was controlled through permits, age, and residency. Worshippers were routinely prevented from entering the compound and forced to pray outside its gates, while groups of Israeli settlers, escorted under the protection of occupation forces, entered the compound freely.

Excavations and tunneling continued. Surveillance expanded. Raids into the mosque became a recurring feature of life, especially during Ramadan.

What emerges from this history is not a series of isolated events, but a continuous structure.



Control imposed by Israeli authorities through force, law, and physical transformation was met at every stage with refusal.
The history of Al-Aqsa is not only a history of restriction. It is a history of resistance.

The Present Moment

Al-Aqsa Mosque has been held under continued closure, with worshippers repeatedly prevented from accessing it, even at the most sacred moments of the Islamic calendar. This is not an isolated closure. It follows a long pattern of restricting access at the very moments it carries the most meaning.

For the first time in its modern history, Eid arrived and the mosque's courtyards were sealed. Israeli occupation forces barricaded entrances, and worshippers were stopped before they could reach it. Jerusalem's Old City, usually filled in the final nights of Ramadan, was forced into an unnatural quiet.

Yet even in closure, the pattern did not break. Worshippers gathered at the gates, lined the walls of the city, and prayed in the streets as close as they could reach. This was not redirection, it was defiance. Calls spread for people to gather in their thousands, and religious leaders urged worshippers to move toward the mosque and pray at the nearest possible point, ensuring that Al-Aqsa would not stand empty.

It did not. Even in closure, it remained surrounded—held in place by those who refused to leave it.

Gaza, and What It Has Given

Gaza is not separate from this story. It is bound to the same struggle over land, presence, and the right to remain.

The cost it has borne cannot be reduced to numbers. That cost has been produced through sustained military violence and displacement. Those who have been killed, those buried beneath rubble, those whose names are carried forward by others, are not absent from Jerusalem. They are part of what sustains it.

Their sacrifice is tied to the same

reality that has defined Al-Aqsa for generations: a refusal to surrender what cannot be replaced. To speak of Al-Aqsa is to remember them. To speak of Jerusalem is to carry them within it.

The struggle for liberation has never been divided, and neither has its resistance.

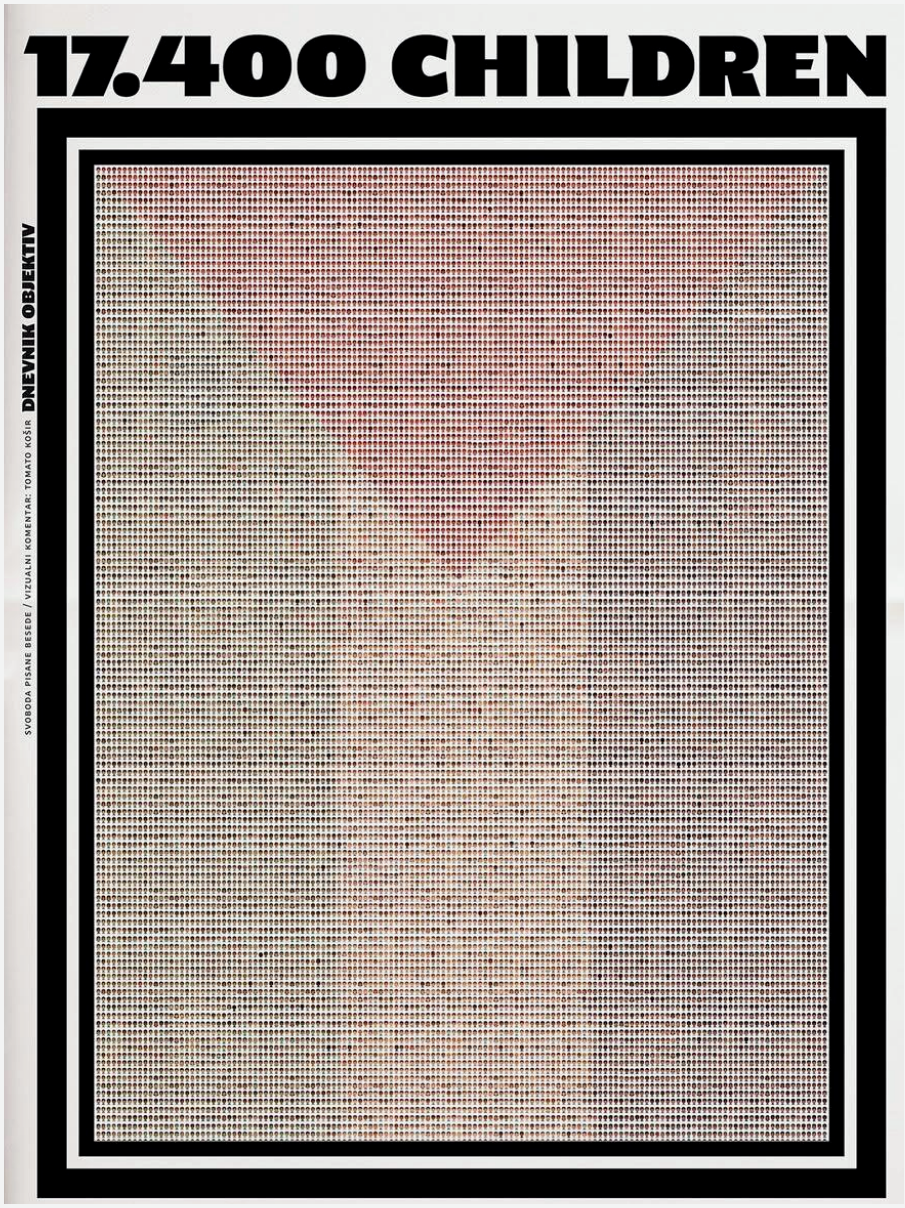
To our martyrs who have been taken away in that struggle, to those whose lives were given in the path of liberation; we remember them. Not as absence, but as part of what continues to hold this land in place.

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji-un.

What Remains

Al-Aqsa does not stand alone. It has always been held in place by those who refused to disappear.
The courtyards may be closed and the gates may be sealed, but what defines it has never been confined to what exists within its walls. It lives in the act of return, in the refusal to withdraw, and in the certainty that absence will not be accepted.

And Jerusalem knows this rhythm well. Its pulse has never been quiet. It moves through footsteps that refuse to fade, through voices that refuse silence, through a presence that persists even when it is pushed to the margins. Al-Aqsa is not separate from that pulse; it is where it is felt most clearly.



Credit: Tomato Košir 14,700 Children

This is not resilience as endurance alone; it is resilience as insistence. Not survival, but defiance. It is the refusal to allow absence to take root, the refusal to allow a place so deeply held to become distant, emptied, or forgotten.

Because Al-Aqsa has never stood on its own. It stands because its people do and because the pulse of Jerusalem continues to beat through them.







POETRY COMPETITION - SPORAS

VOICES THAT REFUSE SILENCE

There are moments when words do more than describe reality, they resist it.

In a time when Palestine is too often spoken about over rather than from within, poetry reclaims something essential: voice, memory, and the right to narrate one's own existence. It is within this spirit that we are honored to present a selection of winning poems from a recent poetry competition organized by Sporas dedicated to Palestine. This initiative brought together emerging and established voices committed to truth, beauty, and remembrance.

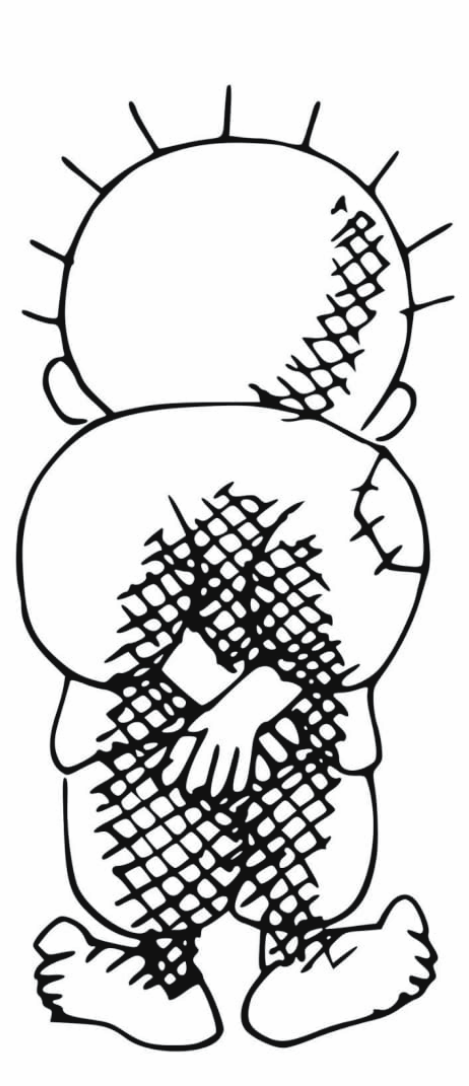
One of our own members had the privilege of serving as a judge in this competition, witnessing firsthand the depth, sincerity, and courage that these submissions carried. Each poem was not merely an artistic expression, but a testimony, rooted in history, shaped by lived experience, and carried forward through imagination and faith.

Our work has always aimed to move beyond analysis and into narrative, beyond facts and into feeling. Poetry does what reports cannot: it captures the tremor of loss, the persistence of hope, and the quiet, unwavering dignity of a people who continue to endure.

These poems are not confined to a single geography. They travel across borders, echoing in the voices of those who have seen Palestine, those who carry it in memory, and those who have come to know it through conviction. Together, they form a chorus that refuses erasure.

As you read the works that follow, we invite you to sit with them, not as distant observers, but as witnesses. In every line, there is an offering: of grief, of resilience, of love. And in every verse, there is a reminder that Palestine is not only a place on a map, it is a story still being told and a future still being forged.

Below are the winning poems of each Cohort of the competition!

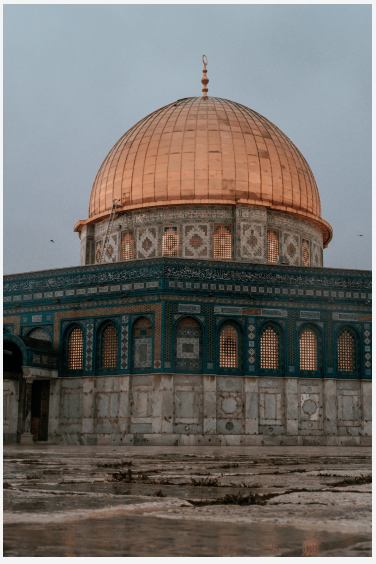


IN PALESTINE

Lilian Adnan

Cohort 1: 9-11 years old

In Palestine,
a mother sets the table for
though only two remain.
She smooths her child's hair
with hands that have buried too much.
The walls are cracked,
but her voice does not break
when she says, we are still here.
Outside, a mother's cry takes wing,
it splits the silent sky.
It falls like rain on blood-stained stone
where fallen children lie.
The olive trees stand witness still,
their roots in reddened ground
they drink the grief, they hold the names,
they guard each shattered sound.



SEEDS OF HOPE

Akram Abu Sabha

Cohort 2: 12-14 years old

They said the night was long and deep,
That dreams of home were hard to keep.
But in the soil, beneath the pain,
The seeds of hope rise once again.

Olive branches touch the sky,
Whispering truths that never die.
Stones remember every name,
Every loss, every flame.

A voice once said:
"You have something in this world, so stand up."

So hearts still rise, though roads are torn,
For every dusk, a dawn is born.
And through the wind, both strong and free,
Palestine lives in memory.
Quote by Ghassan Kanafani



THINGS YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT

Taleen Obeidah Assi

Cohort 3: 17 years old

Things you've heard about
They ask all throughout
Have you heard about...
The man who was killed
His children's blood has spilled
By one who owns no land
But has the nerve to stand
Where he has no right
But still put up a fight
Wails across the street
Echo in discrete
They ask all throughout
Have you heard about...
The woman and her daughter
Separated by slaughter
Not the kind with knives
But one that reaps the lives
The lives of those untainted
Whose stories we've acquainted
They ask all throughout
Have you heard about...
The father and his son
The ones who couldn't run
Hidden behind the barrels
No time to say their farewells
Caught inside a crossfire
Shielded from the gunfire
Til' the bullet dealt his end
Cruelty we can never mend
They ask all throughout
Have you heard about...
The child all alone
Confined beneath the stone
The stone of the rubble
To rescue him they hustle

But time is the biggest thief
Leaving one with grief
But even with this all
They refuse to fall
The people of faith
Fight against scathe
With nothing but gratitude
Smiles and pulchritude
So...have you heard about
The people of devout
The people of Al-Aqsa
Their hearts bloom with Taqwa



SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE OLIVE TREES

Ayma Bukhari

Cohort 4: 18 years and older

they don't teach you how to pack grief in a suitcase,
or how to fold your grandmother's accent
into a language customs will accept.

my grandmother tried anyway,
wrapped her scarves in linen,
tucked olive oil between the sweaters,
slipped the house key into her shoe.

we left before the tanks reached the end of our street,
before the sky learned the language of smoke.

my uncle dug a hole beneath the olive tree
and buried the family photograph there.
and said if God lets the soil live,
We'll come back for it someday.

now i carry that tree in my chest,
its roots tangled with every prayer
I was too scared to finish.

somewhere the morning call to prayer
Still rises over the stones of AlQuds,
and the city remembers footsteps
that the world tries to forget.

i am made of places no longer on maps.
still, somewhere between the olive trees
and the streets of AlQuds,

the earth is holding my name.
like a seed
waiting for us to come home.



SANABEL OF PALESTINE

This section highlights the love and affinity our young Palestinian Canadians have for their homeland. These expressions of belonging are engrained in the DNA of every Palestinian worldwide. If you wish to submit your kid's Palestinian artwork in future publications, please send them to our attention:
info@olive-branch.ca

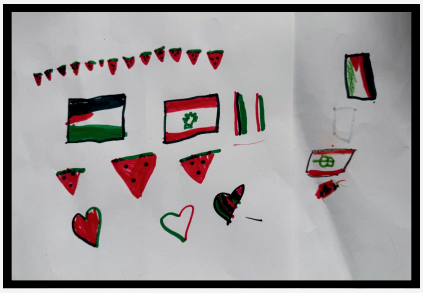


















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