

Yara Hawari is co-director of Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, has a PhD in Middle East Politics, and is author of the novella *The Stone House* (2021). In this interview, she speaks with members of Justice for Palestine – a democratic membership-based human rights organisation working in Aotearoa New Zealand to promote justice, freedom, equality, and self-determination for the Palestinian people. The interview begins with Hawari's reflections on the current situation in Gaza and the West Bank, before situating the ongoing devastating Israeli violence towards Palestinians within the context of international human rights abuses and Israel's relationship with US hegemony and imperialism. Hawari then discusses the struggle for Palestinian liberation, both inside and outside Palestine, and finishes by examining the most effective strategies that can be employed by these struggles.

(De-)Exceptionalising Palestine

YARA HAWARI

INTERVIEW BY JUSTICE FOR PALESTINE¹

Justice for Palestine (JfP): I would like to start off with asking you, Yara, to tell us a little bit about yourself, your ancestors, where you're originally from, and the places that make you who you are.

Yara Hawari (YH): I'm a writer and a policy analyst, currently serving as Co-Director of al-Shabaka, which is a Palestinian institute for policy research. I'm from the Galilee, specifically a very small village called Tarshiha, which is very close to the Lebanese border. But I didn't grow up there; I spent two-thirds of my life in Jerusalem, and then just over a decade in the UK.

My academic background is actually in Indigenous studies, but since finishing my PhD in 2017 at the University of Exeter, I have shifted into the policy and political sphere, and now most of my work is around political analysis and commentary. I published my first novel, *The Stone House*,

¹ This interview was undertaken as a webinar hosted and organised by Justice for Palestine on 9 March 2025. The interview was conducted by Wajid El-Matary. Justice for Palestine is a democratic membership-based human rights organisation working in Aotearoa New Zealand to promote justice, freedom, equality, and self-determination for the Palestinian people. They organise meetings, rallies, and cultural events, and work with others, to raise awareness about the Palestinian cause and to advance Palestinian human rights.

in 2021, which was a family story, a very important family story, and something that has very much shaped my identity.

JfP: I wanted to start off this conversation by getting a gauge from your perspective – how do you make sense of what’s happening right now on the ground in Falastin, in Palestine?

YH: Thank you for starting us off with that question. We had the ceasefire between Hamas and the Israeli regime announced in mid-January, and it did offer much-needed relief for the people in Gaza who’ve been enduring over 15 months of carpet bombing – bombing that destroyed over 90 percent of homes, 70 percent of all buildings, including things like hospitals, schools, and universities. It also destroyed the agricultural sector; most crops and livestock have been completely decimated. An aspect of the bombardment that hasn’t really been talked about is the environmental damage – the soil and the water table has been badly polluted from all the toxic materials from the bombs.

And then, of course, the human cost of the bombardment has been unimaginable. The official death toll, as we speak, rests around something like 60,000, a third of whom are children, but that number is likely to rise significantly as more bodies are recovered from the rubble. Even then, that number only relates to direct deaths – those killed from bombardment, Israeli soldier fire, or drones. But there are also tens of thousands who have been killed in what is referred to as indirect deaths – for example, those who have been denied medical care because of the deliberate collapse of the healthcare system; people who have cancer that haven’t been able to have treatment; women who have had complications during childbirth, and so on. There is this huge impact on society in Gaza that I don’t think will be fully comprehended for a long time, such as the more intangible consequences of the genocide, the trauma and the destruction of individual and collective sites of memory: all of these are aspects that are really unquantifiable.

It’s important also to note that since the ceasefire, the Israeli army has

killed hundreds of Palestinians in Gaza, and they've actually arrested more Palestinians than they've released across historic Palestine. It's a ceasefire, as we talk in March 2025, that is very precarious – Netanyahu and the Israeli Government keep stalling the process and threatening to return to war every other day. And because Israel maintains the power over what goes in and out, the recovery process has been very piecemeal. There are very crucial needs denied to Palestinians in Gaza right now, namely adequate shelter and adequate medical care. Last week, six babies died from hypothermia because of the lack of warm shelter, so there are some immediate and vital needs that are not being met.

Reconstruction of Gaza is something that has been talked about extensively. There have been a lot of different plans put forward by different actors, most of them quite nefarious, most of whom haven't garnered or listened to any kind of Palestinian input or consultation. But I think the overarching question that remains is: can there be meaningful and genuine reconstruction under continued Israeli blockade and occupation? And the answer, I think, is quite clear. No, there can't be.

Meanwhile, if we shift our focus to the West Bank, the Israeli army has been conducting the 'Iron Wall' military operation in the West Bank since January 2025. The name of this operation is quite important, because it really gives you an idea of the intention behind it. It's named after the seminal work of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who was a founding father of the revisionist Zionist movement. In his book, *The Iron Wall*, he argues that the Jewish state should not be founded upon Socialist-Zionist views or principles. Rather, he suggests, it should be based on establishing a strong military power that takes land by brute force from the Indigenous Palestinian inhabitants, and that there should be no negotiations. It's widely understood that Jabotinsky's ideology is the driving force behind Netanyahu's policies, and I think that's quite crucial to understanding what's happening in the West Bank today, which is a sort of zero-sum game for the Israelis.

We've seen brute force by the Israeli army over the last couple of months, particularly focused on two areas in the northern West Bank, although

it has also spread beyond this area. There has been a focus on Jenin and Tulkarm, particularly the Jenin and Tulkarm refugee camps, the latter of which is also known as Nur Shams. And it's not a coincidence that the focus has been on these refugee camps, which have been historically home to resistance groups that have been a thorn in the side of Israel, and of the Palestinian Authority, actually. This last point is important to mention, because as a prelude to the Israeli army's invasion, Palestinian Authority's security forces launched a month-and-a-half long siege on the camps, and it's now understood that the Palestinian Authority was effectively clearing the way for the Israeli invasion.

What we've seen during the Israeli military invasion of these camps is residents being forced out at gunpoint, homes blown up, and roads and infrastructure destroyed. Jenin camp has, I think, now been emptied of all of its residents, and most residents have been displaced from Nur Shams camp, so there are at least 40,000 Palestinians who have been forcibly expelled from their homes in these two areas alone. And, of course, there's no governmental mechanism on the Palestinian side to take care of these displaced people. Hundreds have been injured, dozens have been killed, including at least a dozen children. There was one child, a two-year-old, Laila al-Khatib, who was shot and killed whilst having dinner with her family in her own home. She was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers. There was another, a ten-year-old, his name was Saddam Rajab, who was standing on the street in front of his home when Israeli soldiers invaded his village and started firing. There's CCTV footage that captures the moment when he was shot. He was rushed to hospital but on the way the ambulance was held up at an Israeli checkpoint, where an Israeli soldier taunted his father and said: 'I'm the one who shot your son'. This is the kind of brute violence and cruelty that is just a snapshot of what's been happening.

Elsewhere in the West Bank, beyond the scope of operation Iron Wall, the Israeli army has closed roads and installed even more checkpoints. There have been serious and increased restrictions on Palestinian movement, which affects every aspect of daily life. People are unable to reach their schools or their workplaces, and the mass incarceration of Palestinians continues to be

a routine practice. We see Israeli soldiers arresting more prisoners than have been released under the conditions of the ceasefire exchanges.

Overall, life in the West Bank has intensified, and I think it's essential to understand that this intensification is an extension of the genocide in Gaza. I think it's important that we don't make a comparison of the violence in the West Bank with the suffering that has been endured in Gaza, because it's incomparable, but I think rather we need to understand that the West Bank operation is part and parcel of the same structure of ethnic cleansing and settler colonialism that really has the same aim, whether it's in Gaza or the West Bank: as much land with as few Palestinians as possible on that land.

JfP: I think it's important to acknowledge that if we, outside of Palestine, sit and stand idly by, we are accepting that this is just normal for the rest of the world. I think that here in New Zealand, people often feel disconnected from Palestine, which leads me to my next question. How is the rest of the world implicated in and by Israel's actions? What do we have to fear from what is happening, not just from a moral standpoint, but in terms of what Israel's actions are doing to the global landscape?

YH: Those are very important questions, and I think we can think about them in two ways. Firstly, in a very material way, what does the Israeli regime do in terms of contributing to human rights abuses around the world? It's often said that Palestine is a laboratory for weapons and other tools of oppression, and that's not an exaggeration: Israel is the largest exporter of arms per capita in the world. In 2023, it had a record high of total exports estimated at USD\$13 billion, and about a third of those shipments were air-based weaponry, like missiles and rockets, and then other things, such as electronic and radar war systems, weapon launchers, drones, aviation instruments, ammunition, and so on. Israel considers defence exports to be a priority and a part of its effort to strengthen security and strategic relations worldwide, which also illustrates Israel's dependence on war and militarism for both its domestic and international policy. Israel is also in the business of selling security technologies and spyware, which

are used by regimes around the world to monitor and oppress their citizens. We also know that Israel is also involved in training police and security units around the world. So, the Israeli regime is literally in the business of exporting its oppression. I think that should be of grave concern to everyone. I think it really highlights that Palestine isn't this sort of niche, exceptional struggle, but rather it's related to the struggle for all citizens, of all peoples around the world, to live a violence-free life. When we call for Israeli accountability and an end to the arms trade with Israel, we are definitely calling for something that extends beyond Palestine.

Secondly, it's important to think about how the Israeli regime plays into the current global status quo of American hegemony and imperialism, which, as numerous examples illustrate, is a threat to basic rights everywhere. Again, Palestine isn't an exceptional case. Palestine is really just a very small piece of land where so many struggles intersect, and so I think it's essential to de-exceptionalise Palestine, to think of it as part and parcel of a wider struggle for justice and freedom.

JfP: We, at Justice for Palestine, also think it's important that we not only analyse the horrors of what's happening in Falastin, but also the weaknesses of Zionism. Globally, we've seen the strengths of the Palestinian liberation movement, and at the same time, the faltering of Zionism. What do you take from that, Yara, as an academic and as someone who's seen the effects of Zionism first hand?

YH: I think it's really tough to think about the weaknesses of a regime that has just committed genocide, especially when thinking about all the force they were able to use to do so. But I think that any regime that resorts to genocide is inherently weak at its very core. I think Zionism as an ideology was built on a premise of the expulsion and erasure of another people, and that's inherently a weakness. And I think you can see, from the internal divisions and cracks, that Israeli society is in a very weak place at the moment.

As for the strengths of the movement and the struggle for Palestinian

liberation, I want to be careful not to romanticise the situation in Gaza, because the conditions that our people have gone through there are unimaginable. But I do think it's important to say that despite all of the Israeli regime's best efforts, and continuing efforts, the Palestinian people are still there, and they are determined to stay on their land, even though they continue to pay a really high price for that determination. I recognise that it's difficult in this moment to step back and reflect on our strength outside of Palestine, but I think that the fact that people are still able to mobilise such a large and far-reaching solidarity movement – one that has consistently stood with the Palestinian people as they face down genocide – is really significant. I know it's difficult to say that since we've seen sustained continuous protests over a year and a half that haven't led to much policy change, or too much pressure on governments, but I do think that there are political foundations that are being laid for the future, and unfortunately this is not a short-term project. The struggle for Palestinian liberation is a long-term project. That's a difficult pill for us to swallow, but it's one that we have to.

I also think there have been many people that have been politicised by the genocide, and we have to build on that, because now is not the time to be complacent. Even though the mobilisation wasn't really enough to get a ceasefire, there have been significant gains in the movement. It has grown significantly, and I think we'll feel the effects of that in the years to come. The people, especially the younger people that are being politicised today from the genocide, are people that might possibly change governments at the next elections, so I think that's something that we have to hold on to. We have to be very careful not to romanticise, but we also must take the wins when we have them.

JfP: Definitely. I also think that if you've been a part of the movement for a long or short time, you will see this constant fight for freedom and for liberation, and then there's another blow from Israel, and it can feel like that pattern just repeats. I think that for those who are joining the movement at this stage, it is really important to acknowledge that in order

for the movement to be sustainable, our response to setbacks is to just keep strengthening and going forward and fighting, so thank you for sharing that.

I want to touch on that point you made about policy change, because I think that's really critical. What is it going to take to begin that process of policy change? What are we able to do for our fight for liberation for the Palestinian people? What is it going to take, collectively, to hold Israel to account?

YH: I think it's very clear that there is going to have to be a significant level of international pressure. Obviously, Palestinians inside also must mobilise and have a job to do. But just as we've seen with other similar regimes, there is going to have to be significant international pressure on the Israeli regime for things to change, and that requires system change in a lot of places. What we're seeing at the moment across the world, really, is the rise of the far right, the left is in shambles in so many places. Most leftist political parties, especially in Europe, are challenging the far right by moving more towards the centre, which I think is not only a massive mistake, but also it cedes ground to the fascists.

When people think about Palestine, it can feel a bit overwhelming. It can feel like nothing you do will change the reality. For people in New Zealand, for example, they might feel so far removed from Palestine that they sort of end up feeling helpless, but that's simply not the case. I think changing one's local politics, the political landscape in which you live, is vital to the Palestinian struggle. It's crucial to have local representatives, a government, that is willing to stand up to this kind of oppression and US hegemony, which is almost as important as doing the more Palestine-focused work. To bring that Palestine activist work into a larger political project is crucial. And then, of course, strategic campaigning has to be a vital part of that movement, not just by boycotting everything. I know sometimes it's really hard because we see the lists of companies that are complicit in Palestinian oppression, and it feels like you're not going to be able to leave your house, that you can't buy anything ever again, that every supermarket, every bank, every technology company is part of this system. And it's true; it's massive, it's no coincidence that capitalism and

colonialism are so deeply intertwined, and that can feel very overwhelming. I think we should take guidance from Palestinians, including the BDS movement, which really emphasises strategic campaigning and strategic boycotting. There are, for example, ongoing boycott campaigns for certain companies, so rather than just feeling very overwhelmed and thinking you have to boycott everything, you can really focus on those targets. I think HP is one target, for example, and Carrefour supermarket is another target, but you can find specific targets for your context. Of course, it's admirable as well if you are able to boycott as much as possible, but to really put your energies into more targeted campaigns is crucial at this time.

JfP: Absolutely, and I think we know activism more broadly can be very fatiguing. I think a lot of us are constantly fighting that struggle, and I think that the targeted campaign is also a tactic that not many people understand. Policy changes happen rapidly, attacks happen rapidly in an attempt to fatigue activists, making it harder to target a specific concern, so being targeted with your campaigning and your boycotting is vital to any movement, but especially with the BDS movement. Targeting is something that we do a lot with Justice for Palestine.

You also mentioned the rise of the far right, which we're seeing globally. It's a scary time for people all over the world, but especially for the Palestinian people, who are directly impacted by the global rise of the far right. How can we counter these notions of hate with understanding, and how do we break the endless cycle of swinging between the left and right? What does the rise of the far right teach us about the occupation?

YH: We are in a very strange time globally. We're seeing a convergence of different people on the political spectrum falling into a very strange category – that is, people who were maybe once considered left or liberal are suddenly becoming far right. And while it is a very strange time, I think one of the things it's crucial to take note of is the ability of the Israeli regime to adapt to the changing political reality, which is really one of its strengths. When the Israeli regime was first established as an official state in 1948,

literally on top of Palestine, some of the first governments and groups to offer it official recognition were socialists and communists and those on the left. The historical leftist parties in Europe, the communist and socialist parties, were among the first to rush to recognise the Israeli regime because they viewed the Zionist project as this great socialist enterprise. Obviously, this phenomenon speaks to the fact that many of these were white European parties that hadn't reckoned with their own histories of colonialism, so to view Zionism in this way made sense in that context. So, in the early days the Israeli regime was very much supported by those on the left, at least in the Global North. It hasn't been a smooth trajectory, but what we've seen in the last decade is the rise of a very extreme far right, many of whom are also antisemites. We've seen the Israeli regime quite happily have diplomatic relations and get cozy with very vocal antisemites; it feels like a very strange time that we're living in. But I think it's crucial to know that the Israeli regime is very adaptable, and it is able to manoeuvre itself according to the global political situation.

Again, when we're feeling that sense of being overwhelmed, that Palestine is a small piece of this bigger picture, I think we have to remember that we're in it together, that there's a lot more of us than them. We can't be complacent, however, as we require a lot more strategic thinking and action. I can only accurately speak to my own context, but what I've seen is that the left has really failed to do the political work that is necessary to challenge this far-right resurgence. It's been sad to see, but I think there are crucial lessons to be learned, and unfortunately as I mentioned earlier, there's no short-term fix. These are struggles we have to commit to in the long term, and it's not easy, but we have to reflect on the last year and a half, we have to reflect on the last few years. How has this all happened? How have we allowed all of this to happen, and what can we do moving forward? How do we organise differently?

JFP: Of course. Looking forward is always the only tangible thing that we can do at the moment; that's a really important point. I was wondering if you could share a bit about your time doing Indigenous studies, and

what that education offers you now. Did it change how you view the Palestinian struggle?

YH: I think it did. I was doing my PhD at a time when settler colonial studies was taking off and becoming a very exciting new topic for understanding Palestine. There was also, at that time, a sort of falling out between settler colonial studies and Indigenous studies, so it was a very interesting time to be doing my PhD. I think Indigenous studies was significant for many of us doing that work at that time because it helped us understand much more the process that we're in, and it allowed us to learn from the struggles of other Indigenous and colonised peoples around the world. I think that's crucial. There's not a one-size-fits-all approach in terms of how Indigenous peoples should conduct their struggles for sovereignty and for liberation, but I think there are many lessons to be learned from one another about the structures that oppress us and how to fight against those structures. It isn't just about theory and academic posturing, but it's very much about lived realities. I found just being submerged in that literature of Indigenous scholars from around the world was such a privilege, especially in the context of studying Palestine. It really opened a whole new world of literature for me.

JfP: What does the political left need to do? What can we do? What lessons should we draw from the failures so far?²

YH: That's a really good question. Again, I'm speaking to the context I'm familiar with, which is Europe, so I apologise for having that Eurocentric outlook, but I think there has been a tendency of the European left to challenge the far right by fighting on their turf, if that makes sense. To give you an example, in the UK, the Labour Party, rather than fight the inherently racist rhetoric around immigration and holding firm on leftist values of welcoming immigrants, refugees, and those seeking shelter, they've actually adopted very racist language on immigrants and refugees. They've fallen into the trap that this is a concern for the British public, what they

call the open-doors policy, which is ridiculous because it's not an open-doors policy in any case. Rather than tackle the root cause of the issue, which is increased poverty in the UK, not enough taxation for the super-rich, not enough services and social care, they've fallen into that trap of scapegoating immigrants and refugees. That's something that might work in the very short term, but it will have dire long-term consequences. Rather than move to the centre, the left have to hold ground on their principles and their values, which they haven't done in many places.

Thinking about coalition building and political education, however, is something we haven't done enough. There are some initiatives that are springing up. There's one called Progressive International, which is a sort of global initiative that is trying to revitalise more internationalist leftist politics. But there's a lot of space to do more work. The problem that a lot of us on the left have been faced with is that we are constantly responding to crises and emergencies, and we are really distracted with responding to needs in the present. How do we mobilise against this now? How do we protect these people now? That is incredibly important work, but it takes up so much time that there isn't enough time to do the more long-term work, the future strategising work. I think creating the space for future thinking and political strategy is really crucial.

JFP: Absolutely. Thank you so much for your time today, Yara, it's been incredibly interesting, incredibly valuable to hear some tangible actions and what we can do, but also about the tools that are currently being used by Israel on the Palestinian people. I think your point about the universal nature of the Palestinian struggle without detracting from the lived realities of Palestinians was held so beautifully. This is a seriously sombre conversation, but you're also right in your emphasis on the fact that this is a long-term battle that we will win.

An audience member asked a question that we didn't get to, but I just want to offer a quick remark on it. They asked Wajd and Yara to talk about the connections between Palestinian and other Indigenous struggles globally, and it feels right to me to just remark on that fact here on Māori

land in Aotearoa New Zealand. Māori are facing massive attacks on Te Tiriti o Waitangi, not only through the Treaty Principles Bill, but also through 28 pieces of legislation where references to Te Tiriti o Waitangi are being removed, and there are massive overhauls of programs that support Māori. We see this as a tactic for division and as an extension of settler colonialism. But what we have also witnessed, and what I want to share with Yara and remind everyone, is some of the biggest and most incredible united coalition building, one of the biggest political protests in the political history of this country, hīkoi mō te Tiriti, which happened here last year. There was real clarity from Māori on that day, and in that unity, that although Māori were on the brink of extermination at one point – or at least that was what European settler-colonists said here – Māori today are one million strong in this country. And just like Māori, Palestinians are going to continue to exist. Fundamentally, these are both projects of erasure and extermination, and they will not succeed. They will not succeed in this extermination, but it is going to require us being unified and understanding the infinite connections that we have with each other, whether we're Indigenous or not.