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Palestine/US

# Justice for Palestine - A Call to Action from Indigenous and Women of Color Feminists

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**Between June 14 and June 23, 2011, a delegation of 11 scholars, activists, and artists visited occupied Palestine. As indigenous and women of color feminists involved in multiple social justice struggles, we sought to affirm our association with the growing international movement for a free Palestine. We wanted to see for ourselves the conditions under which Palestinian people live and struggle against what we can now confidently name as the Israeli project of apartheid and ethnic cleansing. Each and every one of us - including those members of our delegation who grew up in the Jim Crow South, in apartheid South Africa, and on Indian reservations in the U.S. - was shocked by what we saw. In this statement we describe some of our experiences and issue an urgent call to others who share our commitment to racial justice, equality, and freedom.**

During our short stay in Palestine, we met with academics, students, youth, leaders of civic organizations, elected officials, trade unionists, political leaders, artists, and civil society activists, as well as residents of refugee camps and villages that have been recently attacked by Israeli soldiers and settlers. Everyone we encountered - in Nablus, Awarta, Balata, Jerusalem, Hebron, Dheisheh, Bethlehem, Birzeit, Ramallah, Um el-Fahem, and Haifa - asked us to tell the truth about life under occupation and about their unwavering commitment to a free Palestine. We were deeply impressed by people's insistence on the linkages between the movement for a free Palestine and struggles for justice throughout the world; as Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted throughout his life, "Justice is indivisible. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Traveling by bus throughout the country, we saw vast numbers of Israeli settlements ominously perched in the hills, bearing witness to the systematic confiscation of Palestinian land in flagrant violation of international law and United Nations resolutions. We met with refugees across the country whose families had been evicted from their homes by Zionist forces, their land confiscated, their villages and olive groves razed. As a consequence of this ongoing displacement, Palestinians comprise the largest refugee population in the world (over five million), the majority living within 100 kilometers of their natal homes, villages, and farmlands. In defiance of United Nations Resolution 194, Israel has an active policy of opposing the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their ancestral homes and lands on the grounds that they are not entitled to exercise the Israeli Law of Return, which is reserved for Jews.

In Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood in eastern occupied Jerusalem, we met an 88-year-old woman who was forcibly evicted in the middle of the night; she watched as the Israeli military moved settlers into her house a mere two hours later. Now living in the small back rooms of what was once her large family residence, she defiantly asserted that neither Israel's courts nor its military could ever force her from her home. In the city of Hebron, we were stunned by the conspicuous presence of Israeli soldiers, who maintain veritable conditions of apartheid for the city's Palestinian population of almost 200,000, as against its 700 Jewish settlers. We crossed several Israeli checkpoints designed to control Palestinian movement on West Bank roads and along the Green Line. Throughout our stay, we met Palestinians who, because of Israel's annexation of Jerusalem and plans to remove its native population, have been denied entry to the Holy City. We spoke to a man who lives ten minutes away from Jerusalem but who has not been able to enter the city for twenty-seven years. The Israeli government thus continues to wage a demographic war for Jewish dominance over the Palestinian population.

We were never able to escape the jarring sight of the ubiquitous apartheid wall, which stands in contempt of international law and human rights principles. Constructed of twenty-five-foot-high concrete slabs, electrified cyclone fencing, and winding razor wire, it almost completely encloses the West Bank and extends well east of the Green Line marking Israel's pre-1967 borders. It snakes its way through ancient olive groves, destroying the beauty of the landscape, dividing communities and families, severing farmers from their fields and depriving them of their

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livelihood. In Abu Dis, the wall cuts across the campus of Al Quds University through the soccer field. In Qalqiliya, we saw massive gates built to control the entry and access of Palestinians to their lands and homes, including a gated corridor through which Palestinians with increasingly rare Israeli-issued permits are processed as they enter Israel for work, sustaining the very state that has displaced them. Palestinian children are forced through similar corridors, lining-up for hours twice each day to attend school. As one Palestinian colleague put it, "Occupied Palestine is the largest prison in the world."

An extensive prison system bolsters the occupation and suppresses resistance. Everywhere we went we met people who had either been imprisoned themselves or had relatives who had been incarcerated. Twenty thousand Palestinians are locked inside Israeli prisons, at least 8,000 of them are political prisoners and more than 300 are children. In Jerusalem, we met with members of the Palestinian Legislative Council who are being protected from arrest by the International Committee of the Red Cross. In Um el- Fahem, we met with an Islamist leader just after his release from prison and heard a riveting account of his experience on the Mavi Marmara and the 2010 Gaza Flotilla. The criminalization of their political activity, and that of the many Palestinians we met, was a constant and harrowing theme.

We also came to understand how overt repression is buttressed by deceptive representations of the state of Israel as the most developed social democracy in the region. As feminists, we deplore the Israeli practice of "pink-washing," the state's use of ostensible support for gender and sexual equality to dress-up its occupation. In Palestine, we consistently found evidence and analyses of a more substantive approach to an indivisible justice. We met the President and the leadership of the Arab Feminist Union and several other women's groups in Nablus who spoke about the role and struggles of Palestinian women on several fronts. We visited one of the oldest women's empowerment centers in Palestine, In'ash al-Ustra, and learned about various income-generating cultural projects. We also spoke with Palestinian Queers for BDS [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions], young organizers who frame the struggle for gender and sexual justice as part and parcel of a comprehensive framework for self-determination and liberation. Feminist colleagues at Birzeit University, An- Najah University, and Mada al-Carmel spoke to us about the organic linkage of anti-colonial resistance with gender and sexual equality, as well as about the transformative role Palestinian institutions of higher education play in these struggles.

We were continually inspired by the deep and abiding spirit of resistance in the stories people told us, in the murals inside buildings such as Ibdaa Center in Dheisheh Refugee Camp, in slogans painted on the apartheid wall in Qalqiliya, Bethlehem, and Abu Dis, in the education of young children, and in the commitment to emancipatory knowledge production. At our meeting with the Boycott National Committee - an umbrella alliance of over 200 Palestinian civil society organizations, including the General Union of Palestinian Women, the General Union of Palestinian Workers, the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel [PACBI], and the Palestinian Network of NGOs - we were humbled by their appeal: "We are not asking you for heroic action or to form freedom brigades. We are simply asking you not to be complicit in perpetuating the crimes of the Israeli state."

Therefore, we unequivocally endorse the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Campaign. The purpose of this campaign is to pressure Israeli state-sponsored institutions to adhere to international law, basic human rights, and democratic principles as a condition for just and equitable social relations. We reject the argument that to criticize the State of Israel is anti-Semitic. We stand with Palestinians, an increasing number of Jews, and other human rights activists all over the world in condemning the flagrant injustices of the Israeli occupation. We call upon all of our academic and activist colleagues in the U.S. and elsewhere to join us by endorsing the BDS campaign and by working to end U.S. financial support, at \$8.2 million daily, for the Israeli state and its occupation. We call upon all people of conscience to engage in serious dialogue about Palestine and to acknowledge connections between the Palestinian cause and other struggles for justice. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

*July 12, 2011*

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