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## Opinion

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# Why are Palestinians protesting? Because we want to live

## *Mariam Barghouti*

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I started going to demonstrations when I was 17. At first, I went to protests against Israel's military occupation. Then we also began to protest against the authoritarianism of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, and the **sickening rivalry** between Palestinian political factions. For Palestinians, protest has become a way of life - a way to **be steadfast**, to persevere.

Over the past decade, much of this burden of protest has been borne by individual Palestinian families facing expulsion or violence at the hands of soldiers and settlers. The threat of evictions or demolitions will spark a local protest, in the hope of preventing this or that particular outrage. But right now the attention of the world is on us not as individuals, but as a collective, [as Palestinians](#). It is not only about one village or one family or “only those in the West Bank” or “only those in Jerusalem”.

What we are in the streets protesting about now is not one killing or one violent raid, but a whole regime of oppression that destroys our bodies, our homes, our communities, our hopes - just as the protests for Black lives that spread across the US last year were not only about [George Floyd](#) or [Breonna Taylor](#) or any one killing.

This is what colonialism does: it suffocates every part of your life, and then it finishes by burying you. It is a strategic, deliberate process, and it is only obstructed or delayed because oppressors are almost always confronted and challenged by those under their rule. In the end, who wants to be chained down for being born who they are?

Last week, I was near the illegal settlement of [Beit El](#) by Ramallah in the West Bank as the Israeli army sent jeeps rushing towards demonstrators, journalists and medical staff, firing high-velocity teargas canisters directly at the crowd.

The sound of those canisters spiralling towards us in the dozens still makes me tremble. It reminds me of the day in December 2011, in the village of Nabi Saleh, when an Israeli soldier fired a teargas canister, from close range, directly at the face of 28-year-old Palestinian stone-thrower [Mustafa Tamimi](#), who died as a result of the injury.

I remember the face of then six-year-old Janna Tamimi, his cousin, as she screamed in her fragile voice: “Why did you kill my best friend?” Behind her was the illegal settlement of Halamish. Mustafa’s protest was against the settlement expansion and the impunity of settler violence as he and his community were imprisoned in the village, with no access to water springs or public services.

The fact that these protests are leaderless is a sign of what has been festering for decades among all Palestinians. This is the coming-of-age of a generation born since the [pitiful Oslo accords](#) of 1993-1995, who grew up during decades that only solidified Israel’s settlement expansion and grip on Palestinian lives.

More than this, it is a continued growth of stamina, endurance and loss of faith. But at the same time, it is a complete reclamation of faith, not in international

policymakers, not in negotiation committees, not in humanitarian observers and NGOs, but in ourselves.

“Why do you always have to put yourself on the frontlines?” my mother reprimanded me years ago, as she threw away my clothes that were soaked in noxious “*kharara*”, [skunk water](#), sprayed by the Israeli military.

Often used in protests in the West Bank, Israeli forces have also now been spraying it on the streets of Sheikh Jarrah and the homes of Palestinians. It’s an attempt to make our [lives so unbearable](#) that we are driven out.

I wanted to tell my mother, if it isn’t me, it’s someone else. I wanted to tell her how in Gaza the [unarmed protests of 2018](#) were met with the sniping down of hundreds, as Israeli soldiers turned it into an unrelenting sniper free-for-all, deliberately causing [debilitating injuries](#).

But we both knew that what made her so angry was the horrible recognition that we had no choice but to protest - that as long as injustice persists, and our dreams for better realities continue to push us towards confrontation, getting soaked in skunk water meant that I was at least alive.

This is exactly why we are protesting, because we are ready to be alive.

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