

## Words, Words Broken: Culture Versus the Ongoing Nakba and Moral Degradation

Elias Khoury

Translated by Dima El-Mouallem

Is language able to express the extended ‘moment’ that oscillates at the intersection of pain and humiliation—the ‘void’ at which all language stops? Are words, which are a source of self-betrayal, able to embrace a transparent medium through which ruthless atrocities can become visible? How can words narrate the agony, horror, and the concrete details of the daily lives of victims who are silenced by force?

I gave this a great deal of thought. I wrote things down and I erased them. As I was putting this essay together, I increasingly found myself tasked with a nigh impossible feat. Writing, amid the gales of blood, suffering, and pain that are ravaging our lands, has become crammed with tautologies. It’s as though words fill the void with more nothingness.

To avoid stumbling over my broken words, I decided to listen to the stories of the people who are creating this moment during which Palestine is reclaiming its name, the idea of itself, and its epitome. Amid this act of recuperation, to which we should listen and from which we should learn, I descry the Arab Levant casting about for its own lost faces among the ruins of cities and villages.

This is why I decided that, before I speak, I would do well to listen. What I will say is a rephrasing of what I had heard, in hopes that, as I tell you these stories, I might suggest some landmarks that would help me find my way out of the cycle of broken words to stand with you all on the cusp of a new language: one that we seek, find, and lose; one that we put together, one that breaks on the tips of our pens and in the hollows of our mouths. And with it, we too break, just as the letters of alphabet break and then restore themselves.

### Story the First: The Bird

Michel Kilo, the late Syrian intellectual, wrote a small piece on “the prison and the bird,” which was turned into a beautiful film under Palestinian director Nasri Hajjaj. It was also narrated by Kilo during one of his TV interviews, available on YouTube.

At first reading, the story is a deep humanistic depiction of the horrors of prison.

The story is not about torture in all of its countless varieties: not “the ghost,” not the “German chair,” not sleep deprivation, not restraining the detainees day and night, nor the many other entries within the dictionary of Arabic prison literature, which is a literary genre that’s managed to occupy pride of place within our modern Arabic literature.

Instead, it’s a simple story of a boy who asked Kilo to tell him a story.

This story took place in the Military Intelligence Interrogation Division in Damascus.

One day, a guard came to Michel Kilo and asked him to come along to a prison cell at the far end of the corridor to tell a story to a child who was imprisoned.

“You’re an intellectual,” the guard had said, “so you must know to tell stories.”

The guard, who had two imprisoned brothers of his own, sympathized with the protagonist and narrator of this story when he learned his name. He took to smuggling him an apple from time to time, and he even gave him a clipper for his nails.

The narrator said, “It was 3:00 in the morning when the guard opened the door and asked me to come with him to tell the child a story. I followed him down the dark corridor until I found myself in a small cell. In one corner sat a woman in her mid-twenties, closed in on herself, and next to her sat a beautiful tan little boy, of about six years old. I said to her, ‘Daughter, I’m here to tell your son a story.’”

“I moved closer to the boy. I told myself I’d tell him a story about a bird since children’s stories revolve around birds and trees and bunnies and deer and the like.

“Once upon a time, there was a bird flying up in the air.

“What’s a bird? the boy asked.

“I mean there was a tree,” I tried again.

“What’s a tree? the boy asked again.

“He was looking at me with his big round eyes that were open onto nothing.

“I was in trouble now. The boy was born in a cell. His mother was arrested and held hostage after her father and husband fled to Jordan. She gave birth in prison.

“The child had seen nothing but walls; he’s been living with his mother in this godforsaken place ever since he was born.”

The narrator said he found himself unable to speak.

“I sang *Mama Zamanha Gayya* and *Rima al-Hindaqqa*. I felt my voice choke up with tears. Tears seized my throat. I found myself knocking on the door as one begging for help.

“The guard opened the door and led me to my cell. In front of my cell, he asked if I told the child a story. I didn’t answer.”

Thus ends the story of the bird. The bird remained stuck on the boughs of the words and could not find the tree, the child did not understand, and the narrator was rendered speechless.

What’s amazing about this sad story goes beyond its immediate significance, though it is a heinous significance indeed. The story transports us to the symbolic dimensions of the story of the Arab people and the horrible machinery of repression that seizes authority to shut people up.

When the guard knew the name of this story's protagonist, he marveled at his steadfastness and the steadfastness of another prisoner at the end of the corridor whose name was Riad al-Turk. The guard told al-Turk, "The warden had warned us about you and said you were an Israeli spy!"

What's striking is that the narrator of the story had turned into its protagonist. As he failed to tell a story about a bird to a boy who had never seen a bird in his life, he turned from a narrator to a protagonist, causing a great shift in significance. The heart of the story became the narrator's inability to narrate, and instead of writing the story, we write the story of our failure to write.

Instead of our words coming out of our mouths or from the tips of our pens, they break into smithereens.

### Story the Second: Home

We are in the garden of a house in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem. The neighborhood is named after Prince Husam al-Din b. Sharaf al-Din 'Isa al-Jarrahi, Salah al-Din al-Ayyoubi's personal physician.

The Israeli settlers' attempts to take over the neighborhood's houses and oust its inhabitants was the spark of the outcry that led to the Jerusalem uprising of 2021, culminating in the war on Gaza and the nationwide general strike that swept Palestine in its entirety on Tuesday, May 18. And so, this tiny neighborhood opened up the wounds of the Palestinian *nakba* that has been ongoing for seventy-three years.

The story I'm about to tell is fit to be either a comic scene in an Elia Suleiman movie or a tragic scene in Yousry Nasrallah's *Bab al-Shams (The Gate of Sun)*.

Notice the complementary opposition in my reading of the events; it seems that comedy is the other side of tragedy. This is one of the primary features of the Palestinian *nakba*: the tragedy lies in a biblical legend that obscures the reality of the settler colonialism that is ravaging Palestine.

The legend seeks to become tragic history, but given its mythical content, it turns into mere black comedy.

Come. Let us listen to the story.

We are in the garden of a house in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. In the image, we see a fat Israeli settler with a blond beard, wearing billowing blue pants and a white shirt. He is confronting a Palestinian woman. She is veiled and demure, but in defending her house she is fierce.

Muna El-Kurd is confronting Mr. Yakov (Ya'qub), whose last name we do not come to know. Mr. Yakov was not carrying a weapon; he came alone to occupy the home of al-Kurds and kick them out.

The scene is uncanny, but we must remember that it is only a dress rehearsal for what's going to happen later in the neighborhood. Mr. Yakov came armed with "the law," anticipating the Supreme Court's decision to forcibly expel the inhabitants. He wanted to be the first settler to seize the house.

Yakov's conversation with Muna has a deep significance to it. The man lives in Israel, which is governed by settlers, and he subsists on a feeling of religious ecstasy and irresistible authority. Therefore, he thought that he could, quite simply, seize the house. After all, he lives in a state that is "democratic and subject to the rule of law," and the law is on the side of the victor.

This scene was caught on camera and shared by Palestinian activist Tamer Makalda, and from that point on it went viral.

Come. Let us listen to the conversation.

- Muna: Yakov, you know this is not your house.

- Yakov: Yes, but if I go, you don't go back. So what's the problem? [...] I didn't do this [...] It's easy to yell at me.

- Muna: You are stealing my house.

- Yakov: If I don't steal it, someone else is gonna steal it.

- Muna: No. No one... no one is allowed to steal it.

- Yakov: This is not mine to give back.

In the garden where Yakov stands, we see a young olive tree. We also see a cat sauntering among the blades of grass.

Muna was in the company of men, of whom we briefly see one wearing a mask to guard against Corona virus, but only Muna and Yakov speak: the Palestinian woman versus the Israeli settler.

Yakov expressed succinctly what Walid Khalidi had earlier toiled to prove in the face of colossal Zionist propaganda. Khalidi was able to prove that the expulsions were the product of Plan Dalet, which was put together in the Red House in Tel-Aviv under the supervision of Ben-Gurion.

In these days of Zionist fascism, Yakov summarized the work of Khalidi and the Israeli New Historians who followed in his tracks in one sentence: "If I don't steal it, someone else is gonna steal it."

The scene looks exceedingly stereotypical. A white Ashkenazi Jewish man dressed like the colonizers of yore—missing only the pith helmet—confronting an indigenous woman. Had the scene not been recorded on video, it would've been hard to believe. After Edward Said dismantled the underpinnings of Orientalism and shattered the image of the Orientalist,

represented by Bernard Lewis, neo-Orientalists have become more modest, assuming the role of experts without making any grandiose claims.

And yet, in his naiveté and overweening pride in his state, Yakov—both consciously and unconsciously—recreated the picture of Orientalism anew. He created a scene that Palestinian directors dream to make and yet do not dare to lest they fall into hackneyed stereotypes.

Israeli settler colonialism is the very picture of this hackneyed stereotype: mobs of murderous and thuggish settlers walking in shadow of police rifles, violating Palestine and chanting racist slogans. These slogans not only expose the settlers as they really are but equally expose the colonialist West that covers for them either because of its nostalgia for the bygone era of colonialism or because it seeks to wash the Jewish blood off its hands using Palestinian blood.

### Story the Third: The Smile

I do not know Maryam al-Afifi, cello player and student at the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music. At the moment the Israeli soldier handcuffed her, her smile transposed me to realms of meaning through which words cannot penetrate.

Maryam al-Afifi was arrested in Sheikh Jarrah in an act of solidarity with Muna al-Kurd and the other families of that Jerusalemite neighborhood who are facing the threat of being expelled from their homes.

I said I did not know her. I did not tell the truth.

I know her from the women living in the camps in Lebanon, who wiped away their tears with the palms of their hands as they told of the expulsions, killings, and massacres in Galilee in 1948. They were women who cried through the memory of pain that was engraved onto their eyes. Suddenly, after wiping their tears away, they became aglow with a mysterious smile and entered into quietude.

I said I did not know her, but the cities and villages of Palestine are full of Maryams: the Maryams of Galilee and the Maryams of Jaffa and the Maryams of Haifa and the Maryams of Acre and the Maryams of Nazareth and the Maryams of Jenin and the Maryams of Tulkarm and the Maryams of Hebron.

They are the Maryams that glide upon the domes of the soul in Jerusalem and Nablus because they know that while a person may betray, the land never does.

When they handcuffed her, Maryam al-Afifi looked at the Israeli soldiers with scorn, then she turned back and smiled.

She wanted us to remember her smile, not the handcuffs.

The Israelis were at a loss to explain Maryam's smile: the smile of that young woman upon whose neck an Israeli soldier knelt, who, instead of crying out that she was choking, smiled. That

smile became a slogan for those “who face freedom with a smile”<sup>1</sup> (*pace* Darwish). The smiles of the arrested young men and women spread like wildfire, as though they were the prelude of the rage that inflamed Palestine with demonstrations and rockets, announcing that Israel is nothing more than a monster of iron, one that only knows the tongue of death.

How shall we interpret Maryam’s smile that arose out of the depth of the despair with which we are besieged?

The word despair seems heavy, but it captures both the Arab reality and the state of things in occupied Palestine.

It’s the despair of the major defeats of the Arab Spring’s uprisings that had called for bread and freedom. Instead, these uprisings found themselves drenched in their own children’s blood: on the one hand, the military; on the other, fundamentalist movements. And so Arab societies were besieged with bloody military coups or brutal wars that paved the way for foreign powers to invade and participate in the murderous orgies that were engineered both by the regimes themselves and those foreign powers’ enemy/partner, i.e. Islamic fundamentalism.

The spark of life in the eyes of the young women and men of the Arab uprisings was snuffed out by a grotesque alliance between tyrannical oil regimes, the vestiges of Arab military rule, and the hysteria that’s called ISIS.

This is a despair imposed by the masquerade by the name of the Abraham Accords. The masquerade was in celebration of the crowns of shame adorning the heads of rulers who know only to bow, and it took the form of lauding Israel and allowing the importation of goods to the UAE from settlements in the West Bank, in addition to military coordination, to say nothing of the almost complete adoption of the Israeli narrative.

The gall of these accords exceeds any other; They are the fruit of leftover Trumpism and rightist populism mixed with Zionist racism and the inferiority complex of the oil Sheikhs of yesteryear. In the final analysis, this is a case of subjugation and not simply normalization.

The only normalization left is the normalization of the tyranny that’s beleaguering the Arab world.

This despair was imposed by a feeling that everyone abandoned Palestine and left it to evanesce and be forgotten.

This despair was the result of the rotting of Palestinian politics amid flagrant internal schisms, tyrannical authoritarianism, and a breakdown in the system of values.

And so, whence did the Maryams of Palestine find their smiles in the face of their oppressors and in the very heart of a neighborhood declared open ground for looting and ethnic cleansing, one called Sheikh Jarrah?

---

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: Mahmoud Darwish, “On This Earth,” in *Unfortunately It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. Munir Akash, Carolyn Forché, Sinan Antoun, and Amira El-Zein, 6.

How were the youth of Jerusalem able to confront the Israeli soldiers and throw them out of Bab al-Amud Square, protesting at al-Aqsa mosque under torrents of tear gas and rubber bullets?

Friends, today we are beyond despair. Maryam al-Afifi taught us one thing, and it was that the phrase “beyond despair” means one thing and one thing only: what lies beyond despair is indomitable; it is the insistence to defend life until the last second.

And at that last second, our post-despair erupted in a revolution that reunited Palestine and brought down the barrier and tore down the walls.

The Israelis called their monstrous bombardment of Gaza “Operation Guardian of the Walls.” The guardian of the Iron Wall—a term coined by Jabotinsky, the godfather of Herut and Likud—failed to imagine that the walls could crumble before the smile of indomitable post-despair.

#### Story the Fourth: Mousa

Mousa Hassounah: truck driver and father of two. Mousa was born in Lydda, one of the Palestinian cities that the Israelis call mixed cities. These cities include Lydda, Ramle, Haifa, Jaffa, and Acre. All of these cities have been subjected to ethnic cleansing, and the remainder of their inhabitants was forced to live in neighborhoods encircled with barbed wire and closed up with iron gates, which the Israeli invader called the ghetto.

Wadi Nisnas in Haifa. Ajami in Jaffa. The Old City in Acre. Al-Jamal in Ramle. The neighborhood between Saint George (al-Khidr) Cathedral and the Grand Mosque of Lydda.

Every city in Palestine were massacred and ethnically-cleansed, but the greatest massacre of all happened in Lydda. There, the walls of Dahmash mosque were splattered with the remains of about one hundred and fifty Palestinians who were killed with anti-tank weapons. The streets of Lydda were sites for murder and pathways for the great Death March that took place on foot through rugged terrain at the zenith of July’s burning heat in 1948. Many died out in that wilderness out of hunger and thirst and exhaustion. Their dead bodies were left out in open country.

What does Mousa Hassounah have to do with this history?

Well, nothing. Or so the young man thought as he was going back home from a visit to a relative’s house. He found himself trapped in the midst of armed Israeli thugs who proceeded to kill him because he was a Palestinian Arab.

His sole crime is being a Palestinian and a Lyddite.

Is every Lyddite guilty?

What kind of logic is that?

There must be a secret behind the murder of this young man.

I will reveal this secret to you. I lived with it for a long time as I researched the *Children of the Ghetto* in Lydda.

You see, Malek Hassounah called his son after his father, Mousa.

The secret of the Mousa who was killed and the Mousa who was martyred lies in his name.

I know for a fact that the elder Mousa Hassounah witnessed the massacre of Lydda in 1948. He was one of the survivors that ended up living in the city's ghetto.

For those of you who are unaware, the Palestinians in the ghetto of Lydda lived for a year and a half in inhuman circumstances. They had to roll barrels of water from a well that was about a kilometer away all the way to their neighborhood that looked like a cage surrounded by barbed wire. Some of the young men, under the aegis of Israeli soldiers, were forced to loot the city's houses, that is, their own homes. The loot was then put in trucks bound for Tel-Aviv. The rest of the youth were tasked with picking up the corpses littering the city's streets and throwing them in mass graves.

I don't know exactly which unit it was that Mousa was forced to work in. What I do know is that the experience left its scars on the man's soul. He continued to feel the barbed wire scratching his eyeballs until the day he died.

The younger Mousa belonged to the generation of grandchildren who had decided to forget this history, but as he took in the deadly bullets to his body, he discovered that the past is not past and that the ghetto was sinking its barbs into his soul.

Does this bloody scene explain why and how the Palestinian ghetto that has been fenced with all manner of Israelization since the establishment of the state of Israel blew up and participated in the *intifada* of Jerusalem, acting as a shield for the West Bank and Gaza? Or must we read the map of sorrow and resistance in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah where a new chapter of the Palestinian *nakba* is now taking place?

We must not misinterpret the events here: Sheikh Jarrah doesn't remind; it points out. The *nakba* is not a past that we remember but a present in which we live. The *nakba* is a nonstop trajectory from 1948 onward. The Jerusalemite eruption only came after the Israeli authorities went too far in their scorn of Palestinian pain and Arab sorrow. And then the disgraced "Abraham regimes" went too far in their stupidity, making Netanyahu believe that gobbling up Jerusalem was a possibility, that such an act would pave the way for his continued tenure as prime minister.

But the ghetto rose up to say that the victim is refusing to play the part of the censored victim any longer and that Palestine is not dead because its people refuse to evanesce.

Story the Fifth: Death Tree

I do not know the stories of the al-Kaulak and Abu al-Ouf families in Gaza. What I do know is something that has already been mentioned in Arab and Israeli media: these two families were annihilated during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza.

The Israeli guardian of the walls, who claims the right to self-defense in the face of Palestinian “terrorism,” committed a massacre against civilians in Gaza.

On Sunday, May 16, 2021, during the heavy bombardment of three buildings on al-Wehda street in Gaza, two families, the Abu al-Oufs and al-Kaulaks, went almost entirely out of existence.

The dead among the Abu Al-Oufs are Ayman, the father and a doctor at al-Shifa hospital, his two children, Tawfik, 17, and Tala, 13, as well as two other members of the family, Reem, 41, and Rawan, 19. These were the bodies found immediately after the bombing. At night, more bodies were found: Sobhiyyah, 73, Amin, 90, Tawfik, 80, as well as Rajaa and her three children: Mira, 13, Yazan, 12, and Amir, 9.

In the neighboring building, the al-Kaulak family was similarly annihilated. Fawwaz Amin Mohammad al-Kaulak, 63, and four of his children, Abd al-Hamid, 32, Riham, 33, Bahaa, 49, Sameh, 28, Sameh’s wife Alaa, 19, and their six-month old infant Qusay, as well as Amal Jamil Salamah al-Kaulak, 42, and three of her children: Taher, 24, Ahmad, 16, Hanaa, 15. Also were killed Mohammad Mu’in Mohammad al-Kaulak, 42, and his brother ‘Izzat and his two children: Zaid, 8, and Adam, 3. The bodies of Alaa Omar Abdallah al-Kaulak, 39, and Saadiyyah Yousef Daher al-Kaulak, 84 were also found.

Instead of drawing a family tree, like many “prestigious” families in our region do, it has become possible to draw family death trees spanning three generations.

Many thanks to the Israeli guardian of the walls who invented, all for Palestinians’ sakes, trees drawn in blood, turning their memories of the *nakba* into a lived present.

How can we interpret this act of genocide? Can we swallow the Israeli allegation that it is nothing more than collateral damage in the war against the so-called “ Hamas Metro ”?

The investigation published by the human rights organization B’Tselem tended to consider that the eradication of about seventy Palestinian families in the war on Gaza in 2014 was premeditated. In her article in *Haaretz* on May 19, 2021, Amira Hass points to the fact that the Oslo Accords compel the Palestinian Ministry of Interior to send detailed information to the Israeli side, particularly about Palestinian births, which Palestinians have to register with the Israeli side to receive identification cards: “It is clear, then, that the army knows the number and names of children, women and elderly who live in every residential building it bombs for any reason.” Israeli air force pilots are war criminals who perpetrated war crimes against civilians at the orders of their superiors who knew everything there was to know about their victims, including even their phone numbers.

Why so?

The answer to this question lies in a eulogy delivered by Moshe Dayan in the kibbutz of Nahal Oz in 1956 when he was Chief of Staff of the Israeli army.

### Story the Sixth: Roi Rotberg

In 1951, the kibbutz of Nahal Oz was founded upon the ruins on the village of Khirbet al-Wahidi, which was one of the forty-five cities and villages in the district of Gaza whose buildings were razed and inhabitants displaced.

I refer anyone who wants more information on the displacement of these inhabitants, which broadly took place after the war of 1948 and the Armistice Agreements of 1949, to S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh*. It is a semi-documentary novel bearing many features of the autobiography.

Upon its establishment, Nahal Oz was a military settlement founded by the Nahal units of the Israeli army to serve as a line of defense against Palestinian farmers who were driven out of their villages, becoming refugees in Gaza.

In March 1956, Roi Rotberg, who was one of security officers guarding the kibbutz, was killed by Palestinian fedayeen who had snuck in from Gaza.

On May 2, 2016, *al-Quds al-Arabi* published an article citing *Yedioth Ahronoth*, in which sixty-year-old Boaz, son of the killed Israeli officer, told his story after his father's death.

Thus Boaz spoke: My paternal grandfather died after the death of his son. My mother never remarried and she died ill. As for me, I emigrated to Thailand in search of peace. The shock of my father's death has never left me. I'm tired of my father's story. I never even took his portrait with me because I didn't want to carry nightmares along.

Boaz said that the war with the Palestinians was without end and that he's harbored hatred for the Gazans from childhood.

We're before a personal tragedy here, no doubt, but how are we to understand this tragedy?

Should we consider the farmers of Khirbet al-Wahidi who were thrown out of their village "terrorists and saboteurs," like Israeli narrative would have us believe or must we seek a different answer?

Moshe Dayan gave us the answer in an eloquent eulogy that he delivered at Roi's funeral. In what follows, I will be quoting paragraphs of his eulogy as cited in *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

"Early yesterday morning Roi was murdered. The quiet of the spring morning dazzled him and he did not see those waiting in ambush for him, at the edge of the furrow. Let us not cast the blame on the murderers today. Why should we declare their burning hatred for us? For eight years they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate. It is not among the Arabs in Gaza but in our own midst that we must seek Roi's blood. How did we

shut our eyes and refuse to look squarely at our fate, and see, in all its brutality, the destiny of our generation? Have we forgotten that this group of young people dwelling at Nahal Oz is bearing the heavy gates of Gaza on its shoulders? Beyond the furrow of the border, a sea of hatred and desire for revenge is swelling.

[W]e are a generation that settles the land and without the steel helmet and the cannon's maw, we will not be able to plant a tree and build a home. Let us not be deterred from seeing the loathing that is inflaming and filling the lives of the hundreds of thousands of Arabs who live around us [...]. This is the fate of our generation. This is our life's choice. The young Roi who left Tel Aviv to build his home at the gates of Gaza to be a wall for us was blinded by the light in his heart and he did not see the flash of the sword. The yearning for peace deafened his ears and he did not hear the voice of murder waiting in ambush. The gates of Gaza weighed too heavily on his shoulders and overcame him."

Now then.

I can keep on telling stories indefinitely, for stories beget stories. I am not telling stories that are over and past here; the Palestinian story is taking place right here, right now, at the gates of Gaza, on the streets of Jerusalem, and in the cities and villages that are destroyed or besieged by settlements.

Stories, like meanings, "are cast out in the streets" like al-Jāhiz told us. We have to pick them up, collect them, and narrate them if we are to build up the mirrors of our own souls.

The issue doesn't lie in whether we forget or do not forget. The ability to forget is part of the mechanism that enables us to withstand life's tragedies and walk in their shadows.

Like all human beings, we too want to forget.

And yet, a person can forget the past, but try as she might, she cannot forget the present.

At the hands of the Israelis, our past has become an ever-living present that does not pass, so how are we to forget, and for that matter, how are we to remember?

Now then...

What was it that happened causing the major *intifada* in Jerusalem to become an attempt to restore words that had seemed broken and fragmented?

The words of the Palestinians and the words of the people in the Arab Levant broke during two intertwined moments.

The first moment we may call the moment of beguiling the present.

This act of beguilement did not begin with the Oslo Accords whose signatories manufactured a peace they well knew was not forthcoming. The accords, after all, solved nothing. Israel didn't even acknowledge the Palestinian people's right to self-determination; it proceeded to build more settlements and postponed the issues of Jerusalem and the refugees to an impossible final accord.

Amid the arrogance, supremacy, and waves of fascism that began sweeping Israel since 2000, the second *intifada* erupted.

Nor did the beguilement begin with the prevalence of the language of military coups that appropriated the Palestinian cause after Palestine was erased completely off the map by annexing the West Bank and Jerusalem to the Emirate of Transjordan and putting Gaza under Egyptian administration.

The putschists, particularly after the harrowing defeat of June 5 and the decline of Nasserism following the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, violated Palestine as part of their widescale violation of Arab society in general. “Nationalist” officers laid social structures to waste such that society lost its defenses and shattered into pieces, first in the furnace of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and then in the monstrous slaughter that the despots foisted on the Arab Levant in a final attempt to stay the winds of change that began to blow with the uprisings of the Arab Spring.

The dominance of oil countries over the Arab Levant was not a cause for our broken words; rather it was a result of this breakage. As Arab towns fell in the wars that the regimes waged on their own people, Gulf countries swept in. At the height of the siege that the Palestinian leadership was suffering in Ramallah, the Gulf imposed the so-called Arab Peace Initiative. Some Gulf countries were the first to announce that this same initiative was ancient history.

As for the beguilement of the present, it began when a false assumption took hold, whose basis was that the Palestinian *nakba* had happened in 1948 and was over and done with. Therefore, the Arab Levant merely had to overthrow its reality, as per Damascene historian Constantin Zurayk, and with this overthrow would begin the march toward reason and modernity.

This march was necessary but it didn’t heed the nature of the *nakba*: the *nakba* was not an event that happened in the past; it is a continuous trajectory. In this sense, the putschists themselves were a part of the *nakba* despite their claims that they were a response to it.

The beguilement of the present and the groveling of culture to the coup were part of another overthrow that dragged the Arabs to rock bottom. From the moment that the Americans and the oil kings raised the cry of *jihād* in Afghanistan, the land of the Arabs drowned in darkness and blood.

The second of these intertwined moments is based in delusion, from the delusion of peace that destroyed Palestine in a violent political schism, to the delusion of surrender that gave us a mutant creation by name of the Abraham Accords, not to mention the delusion of regional alliances that led to Israel becoming an ally to some Arabs, and the delusion that authority is sempiternal even if were to float over seas of blood.

Between those two moments, our words broke, and all the promises of renaissance and modernity were but as mirages.

When the Palestinians lost their right to an independent national decision, and when the Arab Levant lost its cultural and social coherence, the darkness of despair descended on the whole region.

And yet.

This time of post-despair is reshaping Palestine as an idea, as a people, as a project of liberation and freedom.

The reverberations of the great *intifada* of Jerusalem will surprise everyone. I imagine it as a storm that will carry with it great possibilities that we have to discern and interact with and help shape.

The time of post-despair is indomitable, but it does not give tidings of a naïve and passive optimism. Resisting settler colonialism and moral degradation requires, at the political level, social structures that are more needful than ever.

It also requires a new kind of thought that reshapes the idea of national liberation as a project of freedom and a fight to uproot both colonialist thought and the dregs of the nationalist thought that is now dead. What is needed is a thought that reshapes the story of the inhabitants of Palestine and the Arab region, all, because freedom is all-embracing.

It is pride enough for Palestine, in its great *intifada*, to have retrieved the letters of the alphabet. All we have to do is make use of this alphabet to build up our language even as we guard it from words parroted and words broken.