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A Voice in a Crowd

On the streets of downtown Houston, people of all races, ethnicities, genders, and religions gathered to protest recent events in Palestine.

They were walking for a cause, and there was a noticeable motivation and energy in their steps.

They were letting their opinions be known to the world, to anyone who would listen.

There were thousands of eyes, thousands of mouths, thousands of signs, and thousands of brains banding together to *be known*.

The conflict between Palestine and Israel has been going on since 1948. That's 73 years. There has been a constant off and on where some years there were no events or attacks and some the conflict rose again.

There had been 7 years of silence, of no conflict.

What seemed to break the wall of silence that had built itself over the years was a raid that occurred on April 13th, 2021. This day also happened to be the first day of the holy month of Ramadan. The Israeli police raided a mosque that is considered the third holiest mosque in Islam as people prayed and were celebrating the first day of Ramadan.

Since then, thousands of rockets have been fired on Israel and thousands of airstrikes on Palestine have occurred.

Egypt helped broker the May 21st cease fire to halt this fighting. This ceasefire lasted 11 days. Israel then allowed a very right wing march to happen through Jerusalem's Old City. The people were chanting "Death to Arabs" and disrespecting Muslims.

In response, Hamas sent incendiary balloons into Israel causing 20 fires. Then Israel sent an airstrike to Palestine.

In Palestine 192 people, including 58 children and 34 women, have been killed in 2021.

In Israel 10 people, including 2 children, have been killed in 2021.

These are all lives. No single life is more important than the other. As the conflict continues, more lives will be taken every day from both sides.

I am a Syrian American, so I am going to see this differently than others might.

If you ask an Israeli...

They are on the right side and have done nothing wrong.

If you ask a Palestinian...

They are on the right side and have more of a reason to be upset.

One of the many in the crowd was Aaron Rahman, a junior at the University of Houston. He has been to all three of the "Free Palestine" protests that have taken place in Houston, Texas. However, he isn't a run-of-the-mill college student who is protesting with friends for something that doesn't affect them. For him, it is personal.

Aaron's family is from Palestine, specifically the village of Lifta. When his grandparents lived there, the streets were enriched with the feeling of community and culture. Everywhere you turned there was a person in sight just living their everyday lives. People greeted each other with

a kiss on each cheek. The Arabic language echoed through the streets.

Now there is silence. Since 1948, the life that once lived in Lifta has slowly disappeared. All that's left is a grey lifeless energy that lingers, and everyone who use to live there can't help but remember the life it once radiated.

No one is able to go to Lifta unless they have special permission from the Israeli government. Its abandonment has been set.

Due to it being an outstanding example of a traditional settlement, Lifta was added to the Israeli Tentative List of World Heritage Sites by the Israeli Committee for UNESCO in the Ministry of Education, which is the reason for it not having been bombed yet while other Palestinian settlements have. Now Israel wants to try to claim this land as their own so they can demolish it and build condos, ignoring its new status as a World Heritage Site.

Unfortunately, Aaron hasn't gotten the chance to visit where his family came from. His dad had not been there since he was 2 years old. His grandparents left when the war began. They were olive tree farmers who left their land behind because of how unsafe it had become to stay.

The first time Aaron heard about the current tug-of-war between Israel and Palestine was through both his family and social media. At the dinner table, where the news was shared as if it were the main dish, the Palestine-Israel conflict created a sudden eruption of frustrated tones. Looking and learning, with his curious eyes, about this situation, he was instantly hooked.

Then his agenda with this situation became: research, talk to his parents, even more research, then trying to help spread the word.

May 13th, 2021 (Eid), the bombing of Palestine began.

May 15th, 2021, the first march took place.

A crowd of thousands walked in the scorching sun and heat from the Courthouse to Discovery Green, in Downtown Houston. People came prepared by bringing bottled water to share and tents for shade. Aaron used his hands a lot while talking. At this moment he motioned coolers containing water and outlined the structure of the tent he saw.

Before getting to the protest he had no idea what to expect. All he knew was it was something he had to be a part of. He had to support his country and protest for what he believed in.

Once he got there, he was not only surprised by the turnout, but he was genuinely shocked to see so many people from different backgrounds coming together in support of Palestine. There was a hint, no not just a hint... A *gush* of community flowing through the crowd. It was inspiring, uplifting, even comforting.

Then once he began to see familiar faces, that's when it felt even more connecting. We got a little sidetracked and started talking about who he ran into. As he talked you could hear how touched he was to see others he knew going to these protests. One person, a public speaker he met, even went to the Washington DC march.

“That was so great to see someone so passionate about this cause and it was so cool that he got the chance to go,” Aaron started, “Just seeing protests happen in other places even if I'm not there is great.”

He cut himself off before going into a rant. This just shows his passion for the topic.

However, at the end of the first protest, the people marching burned an Isreal Flag. In the

heat, flames engulfed the flag as protesters watched. Not all of them cheered, but some did.

Aaron paused. There was a sudden moment of silence.

“I was just so disappointed by this. It’s not right. You are completely disrespecting a country, its culture, and its people. I don’t like seeing people driven by hatred, it doesn’t get us anywhere.” He said, looking down at his hands. “I was worried the media was gonna get a picture and twist the story to seem like we were violently protesting or portray us in a bad way.”

Treat, respect, and listen to others the way you want to be.

One afternoon after his father came home from work, they bumped into each other and started talking.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Aaron’s father asked.

“I’m planning on going to the protest for Palestine with a few friends.... why?”

Aaron said with a look of confusion all across his face.

“You are?!... Really?!” His father’s voice went up an octave, there was a hint of excitement in this voice. You could consider it a hint of pride.

“Ummm... Yup”

“That’s wonderful! I love to see that the younger generation is reaching out and taking in their culture as a part of their identity. I was a little worried when moving here that our family’s culture might get lost and not be recognized. Thank you for proving me wrong.” There was a sparkle he saw in his dad’s eyes as he talked. Then the man turned around and walked away. That was that.

“Have you ever run into anyone expressing their support for Israel during the protest?”

After I asked, he mentioned a few times but one stuck out to me the most.

This was during the second protest.

It was May 18th, 2021. The sun was out. The sky was clear. The heat was aggressively present and made itself clear that it was there to stay. They were walking in the area surrounding the Israeli Consulate and continuously stopped right in front of the building to protest in place.

One of the times they were walking in the area, he looked to the corner of the street. Outside the crowd. That's when he saw a sign that said "Honk for Israel."

Next thing he knew, he was being nudged.

"Hey, let's go over there and hover over her with our signs," he said, motioning to the old lady standing alone holding up the sign, "and cover her up from being seen."

"I don't think that's a good idea, man. Just leave her be," Aaron said, with calmness and determination in his voice. "It's her opinion. Plus it's not gonna help Palestine. We gotta stay focused on what we wanna do."

Russell Brand once said "People ask me whose side I'm on and I'm not on any side. I'm on the side of peace and not violence."

This is something that stuck with Aaron and has now stuck with me. People quickly revert to one side and in turn hate the other side and all the people who support that side.

"Have you ever thought about why someone might be in support of Israel in this situation?" I asked Aaron not expecting what the response was going to be.

"Actually I have." He replied.

"So what'd you come up with?"

“Depending on where the person comes from, they could be being fed information that is false or grew up in an environment where they only have that one view and also propaganda, but it could just also be their opinion.” He ranted on but this seemed to be the most important part he wanted me to understand.

“Have you ever met someone in support of Israel? What would you say or do?” The questions kept popping up in my brain, like the creatures in Wack-A-Mole, so I kept asking them.

“I have not met anyone in person. But, I would love to sit and have a conversation with them. Get their views and share mine.” He paused and thought about his words then continued. “I have yet to come across explanations that have made me understand why people support Israel.”

During each protest there were speakers. Each time the speakers were different. A different voice rose up. A different opinion was let out into the world.

The third protest took place on June 15th, 2021 in the Galleria area of Houston, Texas.

This protest took place on Naksa Day. This is the annual day of commemoration for when Israel invaded Gaza (Palestine) in the 1967 war.

During this protest, Aaron was surprised to see Black Lives Matter (BLM) speakers get up and use their voices to speak up for Palestine and the situation. In fact, it filled him with comfort knowing that other people were helping this cause that is important to him and his fellow Palestinians.

Right as the BLM speaker began to speak, Aaron quickly reached for his phone wanting to record what they said.

He stumbled.

Then turned on his phone.

Went to his camera and tapped the screen to start recording.

After some time, his phone overheated and none of his videos had saved.

“Yup...That was disappointing” He said to me as he laughed.

Even though he did not get the videos of the speeches he still had them saved in his brain.

Empowerment. Community. Purpose.

These three words describe what Aaron got from these protests and will get from the ones to come.

He felt *Empowered*.

He saw a *Community* coming together in support of one cause.

He heard the feeling of *Purpose*, in his own voice and others.

Authors Note

This article has been extremely difficult to write. I struggled with trying to figure out how to connect scenes. There are a few scenes I didn't put in and it was hard figuring out if I should or not. This article in this way and in a number of other ways shows how much I have improved in my writing, I now know what to include and my transitions have significantly improved. I want to include the information as a neutral party and stance to not influence one view on my readers and help them decide for themselves what they think. I had some difficulty with some sources because some had an obvious bias so I had to figure out the information around the bias. Overall, I just really believe that from the first article until this one I have taken more

chances and let myself follow my gut. I think my writing has improved so much and this article best expresses what I have learned not only from interviewing but also researching.

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