

Courage My Friends Podcast Series IX – Episode 5
You Will Not Kill Our Imagination: Author Saeed Teebi on Palestine, Writing and Imagination

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.

Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

RESH: In the midst of a live-streamed genocide, why must the writer be more than just a witness to history? Why is the targeting of Palestinian culture, learning art, and its creators a priority for annihilation? How do liberal democracies comply with horrific violence against Palestinians and at the same time condemn Palestinian self-expression and solidarity? And how are writing, story and imagination, powerful acts of resistance.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the Courage My Friends Podcast.

RESH: Welcome to Episode 5, *You Will Not Kill Our Imagination: Author Saeed Teebi on Palestine, Writing and Imagination*.

I'm your host Resh Budhu.

In episode five, we are pleased to welcome award-winning author Saeed Teebi, who speaks to us about his powerful new book, *You Will Not Kill Our Imagination: A Memoir of Palestine and Writing in Dark Times*.

In our annual focus on the power of storytelling, we discuss what it means to be a Palestinian writer in these times, the challenges of writing against dehumanizing narratives, complicity in the attempted erasure of Palestinian life, identity and art through both violence and silence, and how imagination story and writing become profound acts of resistance in a time of genocide.

Saeed welcome. Thank you so much for joining us. And congratulations on your latest book, *You Will Not Kill Our Imagination: A Memoir of Palestine and Writing in Dark Times*. You say you may not have wanted to, but what compelled you to write this book?

SAEED: So many things compelled me to write this book. It almost became inevitable, in a way. , Look Resh, I'm a fiction writer first and foremost. I actually never expected to write something like this, but in the early days of the genocide, frankly, I lost the ability to write fiction. It felt like a frivolous endeavor. One that was so disconnected from reality that, for me it felt like a self-indulgence.

Now it isn't. I really believe in fiction. I really believe in stories and they're important, but at the time, I simply couldn't fathom myself doing that when what we were witnessing was so awful. And particularly as a Palestinian writer who had very recently, published a book called *Her First Palestinian*, that had that identity right in its title, it felt, that it was incumbent upon me to do something else to address the moment that we were in.

This was particularly the case because of the huge narrative deluge that we were met with at the beginning of the genocide. A narrative that it was entirely one-sided,, that told Israel's story, but omitted from it any contextual framework for the Palestinians or why Palestinians might want to resist Israel.

And the narrative was to put simply, that there is this massive barbarous group of people who attacked Israel for no reason on October 7th . , committed these massive atrocities. And the only way that Israel could actually defend itself was to begin a campaign of annihilation against everyone in Gaza.

And that narrative was, you know, taken up whole by Western media and continued to fuel and enable, in my view, the military onslaught that accompanied it. And in the face of that kind of narrative deluge, as I said, what I felt was as a Palestinian artist, as somebody for whom stories and written language is my stock and trade, the least I can do is reset the picture to something resembling, or more closely resembling reality.

RESH: And just continuing on this topic of narratives, and again, the centrality of Israel's narrative, which you describe as perhaps one of its greatest victories. And you write that "Palestinian narratives in the West are thus counter-narratives and forever carry the whiff of subversiveness".

SAEED: This is from my chapter called *Stories and Their Telling* which deals a lot with narratives. The greatest battleground in any war is always that of story. It is the heady spray of *raison d'etre* that clears the path for strategy, whether the strategy is military, political, social, or economic. In my view, Israel's greatest accomplishment is that even decades after its colonial inception, its story has remained in the foreground, while the stories of Palestinian natives to the land continue to exist in relative obscurity. Of course, the obscurity of the Palestinian story is a manufactured one, a whole cloth tailored to fit, snug over the minds of Western audiences. It takes forms too numerous to count: From the suppression of our news, however significant beneath the themes of the front page, to the compacting of our bodies into bloodless statistics. To the amplification of the sins of the occupied and the expunging of the sins of the occupier. To the passive voice and other pet tools of the gatekeepers of narrative.

All this is necessary because the Palestinian story is, in its very existence, a refutation of the founding Zionist mythology of a land without people. Whenever it did trickle out of obscurity, the Palestinian story came with limits that mirror those on Palestinian bodies.

The dominant narrative is that Palestinians are barbarous and backward people. No Palestinian is exempt from it. In fact, Palestinians as a collective as well as individuals must forever prove it is inapplicable to them.

It is so insidious that it sometimes shows up in ways that on a cursory look almost seem approving. Even before the war on Gaza, the most critical description for any Palestinian demonstration in Western media was never its size or what it aimed to accomplish, but whether it was peaceful. That worldview is applied to individuals as much as the collective.

A review of my first book in a major newspaper complimented my writing as "calmly civilized". Something a person might find notable only if their expectation of a Palestinian is rabid savagery.

Palestinian narratives in the West are thus counter-narratives and forever carry the whiff of subversiveness for that reason. The oppressed exists in an omnipresent parallel with their oppressors. Palestinians are not permitted to be people on their own outside of their adversariality to Israel.

This is a narrative duality that is only applied in one direction. Zionist stories can and usually do ignore Palestinian existence, even when it would seem impossible to do so credibly. Nevermind that the duality itself is a false one, omitting many colonial and imperial context indispensable to understanding the present.

But I remember reading a contemporary novel about the migration of Soviet Jews to Palestine that contained virtually no consideration of the Palestinians that the migrants displaced to take the land.

The influx in that formulation became an exclusive concern of the Jews mirroring, I suppose, the Zionist ideal of statehood. That book became a finalist for the Giller Prize. Meanwhile, someone in my own tight-knit writing group arched their eyebrows over how in a 10-page short story of mine, the word Israel did not come up. As though I must have absentmindedly forgotten that the existence of Palestinian characters is always a contingent one.

From a Zionist perspective, the entanglement is useful. If Palestinian stories are moored to those of Israelis or Jews, it becomes simple for Westerners, molded by decades of narrative, of the victimhood, of the Jews, of the barbarity of the Arabs, to pick their side.

RESH: It is powerful. And given this context and given that centrality of the Israeli narrative, what burden does this place on the Palestinian storyteller and Palestinian stories.

SAEED: Well the Palestinian storyteller cannot simply tell their own story. They must tell a story that, first of all, disproves an existing story.

It is burdened by an overwhelming amount of preexisting narrative that it must overcome in order to tell their story themselves. I'll give you an example.

I was writing a short story for my first book. And the short story features a Palestinian character and a white character. And you know, I wanted them to fall in love and have a relationship.

But in the course of writing it, I felt almost a pull to explain why this Palestinian character could be lovable, could be somebody that this white person might find attractive. And I spent something like 30 or 40 pages writing all the reasons and I made him incredibly sympathetic to do so. I made him somebody who's honorable, comes from a good background, is poor, works hard, all those things, all to make it, for the purposes of a Western audience, a more palatable thing for the white person to love.

And when I recognized that I was doing that, it was a realization that I myself, even as a Palestinian who has lived in my own context and know what Palestinian history and Palestinian people are like, even I was burdened by that narrative. And so I had to overcome that. I had to write this stuff out of it. The stuff that is born, not of my understanding of, my own self, but of the society's expectations of us.

And so that's a difficult thing to do. And so that's why you see Palestinians frequently modeling the absolute best behavior, an ideal kind of existence, that is unrealistic and that few other people, or other people of, disparate backgrounds have to actually do.

RESH: Right. Now your analysis of the current genocide is mediated through the lens of your own family history. Tell us more about your family and why you chose to write about this moment through memoir.

SAEED: I didn't choose to write it through memoir. Memoir became, unavoidable and inevitable.

I'm somebody who is by nature quite private. I don't so much as leave Google reviews on places that I've frequented because I find it might expose me to my personal information being available in ways that I don't want it to.

So for me, writing a memoir was a daunting thing. And in fact, I wanted to just write a series of essays. But. I also have, as a storyteller, faith in the power of stories. I've

always not just enjoyed stories, but found stories the main way that I connect to other people, particularly people from backgrounds far different from mine.

As a 19-year-old, I fell in love with Russian literature. Now, here I was as a Palestinian living in Montreal, had never met a Russian person before in my life. And yet this was the area that I gravitated to. And much of Russian writers are talking, rightfully so about Russia and what it's like to live in Russia many decades before I was even born.

And yet, because of the way they told their stories, I felt like I wasn't a stranger to them. And my empathy to them was amplified. And so in the course of writing this book, I recognized this. I recognized that the most compelling aspects of what I wanted to say can be delivered via story, versus you know, via sort of a, theoretical or sociocultural commentary.

And when I realized this and knowing that the most powerful and the most clear understanding of stories are my understanding of my own story, then the job seemed clear to me.

I would've wanted to center more Gazan stories, to be honest. And I considered it 'cause I certainly know some people in Gaza and I have through the genocide met more, but I also in the back of my mind understood that Gazans are and will continue to be very capable of telling their own stories. And so it seemed presumptuous for me to be their spokesperson.

And it was important to me to make sure that they retain their agency. And we are seeing a lot more of their books trickling through. But for me, the story of my life as an exile was just as instructive, if not more so for people here, people likely to read a book in Canada in the English language.

RESH: What does being Palestinian mean for you from the distance of exile?

SAEED: It's a strange thing to witness people so very proximate to you, people who are essentially your kin, in many cases they are your kin, but who have many of the cultural and genetic and religious hallmarks that you associate with your own identity.

It's a strange thing to see them being genocided while you are here walking down the street as safe as anything. And it's a guilty feeling. It's a feeling that also, you know, people frequently in diaspora think of themselves as somehow less belonging to an identity than people who are in the old country. And that multiplies it, if anything.

But at the same time, it's a strange thing because that's not how you're perceived on the outside. Immediately because of the onslaught that Israel carried out in Gaza, people here regarded your identity with increased skepticism. You are really one of those people back there, you just happen to be here. And you become a sort of

pariah, a sort of somebody who, at the very least, we can't talk about this conflict with because your positionality is so biased that it cannot be taken seriously.

And so it's a strange feeling of guilt, estrangement, deepening estrangement while at the same time here becoming even more of an outsider than, you usually are. So, it was a very difficult time for my identity, but at the same time I'm quite proud of it.

And, I hate thinking of silver linings to a genocide, and I don't think anybody should think of it that way. But one thing that has happened over the past two years is, against all the best wishes of empire, against all the best wishes of legacy media, the Palestinian story has come more so to the forefront than it ever has before. And that's a small blessing.

RESH: It is. And I want to talk about that because this has galvanized such a response all across the world. But before we get to that, you know, when I'm reading this book, a powerful figure in it is your father who is a celebrated pediatrician in public, a poet in private and fiercely proud Palestinian, and also just wrought with fear. And fear, particularly for you. You describe in this book a family legacy of metaphorical prisons that are born of this fear. So could you speak a bit more about that?

SAEED: Sure. My father was born in exile. He was born in the first year of his family's exile, in Beirut in 1949. The Nakba, which is the Arabic word for catastrophe, which is how the Palestinians describe the genocidal war that led to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, was what made them exiles. And one of their first stops was actually Beirut, where my father was born. They later relocated to Kuwait.

And so what happens in exile, and especially exile like the Palestinian suffered to places that did not offer you any kind of permanent refuge. They offered you a temporary refuge so long as you are useful to them. So long as you're able to work. So long as you're able to contribute to society.

What happens in those places is that you have a feeling of precariousness. You have a feeling that your existence is one that is contingent on you fulfilling a number of things. First of all, be useful. Second of all, don't get in trouble. Third of all, make sure you avoid all the, people who might somehow, even directly or indirectly harm you.

And so my father was constantly aware of those things despite being, you know, as you mentioned, a quite accomplished physician and researcher. He lived most of his life in Kuwait and he won Kuwait's highest prize for a scientist before he even turned 40. But he always felt like he was somebody who can be gotten rid of at a moment's notice.

And so we weren't allowed to talk to certain people, lest we say something wrong to them or say the wrong thing. We weren't allowed to go to certain places lest we get in trouble with people. And I'm not talking about trouble in terms of like criminal

offenses or anything like that. Literally just saying the wrong thing to the wrong person that might result in them having the whim to get our family out of the country.

I mean, I remember one of the most salient threats I received from school kids growing up who knew I was Palestinian and knew I was not like them, is, if I wanted to, I could get you your dad and your dad's dad out of this country whenever I wanted.

This was a very common thing to be told to me. And whether or not it's true or not, it reflected an understanding on both sides of how precarious you are. And so my father constructed what I call now, these prisons of codes of conduct for us to do certain things and not do certain things that felt very restrictive. But he didn't supplement them with a lot of context for why that is.

So, for example, I knew that I was Palestinian and I knew that we were unjustly exiled from Palestine, but I didn't know why I couldn't talk to certain people other than they're more powerful than me. And this was a very vexing place to be. My father meant it as a kindness, he meant it as a way of sheltering us, as a way of protecting us. And in retrospect, I'm certainly grateful to a lot of it, but it also made my identity a much more confusing one than it even already was.

RESH: And it didn't stop at school obviously, because you've seen this in so many other parts of your life as you relate in the book. This casual cruelty that is just thoughtlessly inflicted on Palestinian people and the fear around that. And the fear is also shared by people who are not Palestinian. Even before 2023, there's been a long-standing silencing and in some cases persecution of anyone who's engaging in speech, expressions of solidarity, even displays of empathy for Palestinians.

Do you wanna speak a bit more about sort of this widespread fear or chilling that we have seen right across our society, especially since 2023?

SAEED: Yeah. I mean, we. In the West, pride ourselves on our society as being free and open and democratic. And for us that has historically been code for saying that you could say whatever you want. You need not worry about upsetting the ruler. Even the most powerful person or agency in the land, you don't need to worry about them. You can say whatever you want you know within the bounds of what is not criminal and you're fine. The only exception, but the longstanding exception to that, the third rail of freedom and democracy and sort of so-called liberal values is Palestine.

You could never say even the merest kind of truth about Palestine. You still can't say it right now. If you want to, for example, publish in Legacy media an article that gives certain history, gives just history of Palestine pre-1948, you'll inevitably be met with editorial intervention that will want you to contextualize. To contextualize history. When you're saying about contextualizing history, you're essentially saying give additional history that somehow is just as relevant as the history that is there, even though it's essentially like a biblical history that they want you to say. That Jews, for

example, have always felt a pull towards the land, and therefore I should mention them in discussing 1920s Palestine, for example.

And those are the kind of strictures on language and on storytelling that are exemplars of what we mean when we say that Palestine is an exception to everything. That you couldn't say anything about Palestine. Whether you're Palestinian or not. In fact, probably the only time when you can say something positive about Palestine or that resets the official narrative is when you're Israeli. Typically those are the only people you know, just the last year who could testify essentially, and whose testimony would be given full weight.

I'll give you an example and I talk about that in the book. The New York Times did not call this a genocide until I think well into 2025 when they had an Israeli scholar, on the front page, call it a genocide. This is the sort of thing where certain parts of language, certain kinds of testimony are allowed to some people, but other people like Palestinians who've been rightfully calling it a genocide for much longer and have firsthand evidence of why it is, we're not permitted that kind of testimony.

RESH: Right. And, and you talk about this Palestine exception and it's so well known now, it's gained the acronym of PEP "Progressive Except for Palestine". And in the book you describe being invited to read from your debut work, *Her First Palestinian*, in 2018 at a DEI - diversity, equity, inclusion - event at your former law firm, you're also a lawyer, and the backlash you received, despite it being a rather apolitical work of fiction. And that moment when I'm reading this really crystallizes again, this central hypocrisy that you confront in *You Will Not Kill Our Imagination*, again that double standard, the ease with which our multicultural liberal democracy complies with, condones and then ignores genocide and the erasure of Palestinian life and identity.

You write that in this context, writing itself becomes an act of profound resistance. Talk about writing as resistance.

SAEED: As my earlier reading perhaps gave a preview of, you know, I really think that one of the greatest battlegrounds that we have is a narrative battleground.

And a lot of that is because the narrative is what really allows people "justification" to do unspeakable things. Because if you say, for example, yes, I killed the person, well that's murder, but I killed the person in self-defense is justification. And so if you start the story at a certain point, and the point is somebody came and attacked me and then I attacked back, that's a justification.

And so the entire act of writing for me is a resetting of what's important. And why Palestinians are in the position they're in right now. And so when you say that it's an act of resistance, it's resistance in so far as it's not the acceptable story. And there are incredibly important reasons why it's been suppressed, obscured for decades. And that reason is if the story became known, then there will be, as we see today, mass popular sentiment against the Zionist regime and against how they've treated Palestinians historically. And so for me that's the resistance I'm capable of here. Particularly as somebody who is a writer, the least I can do is put into words the

story that I see it. And the story that I think is the closest to the truth. And also the justifications for how we feel as Palestinians.

A lot of what I'm talking about is how we came to a point where our narratives are verboten. How we came to the point where our storytelling is so restricted. And to be able to put it into a book and have people then say read this book if you want to understand what I'm talking.

In fact, I've had strangers who are not Palestinian, who don't have a lot of connection to Palestine, tell me that once they read the book, they've used it as a kind of shield. They would bring it up into conversations and they would say to people, you know I didn't know a lot about this before, but read this book and you'll get a better understanding of things.

And it allows them entry into a conversation that previously they didn't want to get into because they feel not sufficiently armed with knowledge, not sufficiently armed with credibility against such a huge narrative overflow in the other direction.

RESH: Right. And maybe even if they knew they again, because of that fear, they didn't want to. And it's interesting how you talk about that fear. But given what you said about this context of genocide and being able to speak as a Palestinian or on Palestinian identity. In this context, is it even possible for the unapologetically Palestinian creator to be apolitical or to draw any line between art and activism when just to say, I'm Palestinian seems to be speaking against the status quo?

SAEED: Yeah. I used to think as an artist that yes, politics are part of my stories, but I'm apolitical. I'm just creating art. I'm talking about Palestinian characters and they have certain circumstances in their lives and I'm just presenting it. But what you find out very quickly is that your work, by virtue of being true to your reality or the things that you want to express, it is, as you say, defacto taken as political. Just by saying I'm Palestinian, unlike somebody who says, for example, they're Brazilian or they're from Croatia, immediately, as soon as I say I'm Palestinian, a whole bunch of narrative emerges in people's brains. I say, oh, boy, let's make sure to not touch on a lot of things that might get us into trouble.

What can we talk about? Maybe hummus? Wait, even hummus is contested ground, so let's not even bother with that. And so when your entire identity, as you rightly mention, is a political one, it's no use to pretend that your work is not political.

Your work is politicized because of your very identity. And I don't, would never want to run away from my identity as I may have done when I was younger. And as a result of that, if it's political, great.

This book is certainly political and I'm proud of that because our politics need to be changed and we need to have a different way of looking at things. And yes, it's a process that is fraught with fear.

You know, this book, a lot of people describe it as courageous or fearless. I think in fact, the marketing copy says that even. And yet it didn't feel that way to write it. It felt fearful every single day. And yet it's important to put that aside and to say, just because the politics have made this a difficult process, doesn't mean it's not a needful one. Doesn't mean that it's one that isn't worth going into.

RESH: Yeah. And absolutely necessary.

Now, you point out that the deliberate destruction of centers of culture and education in Gaza particularly, the killing of cultural producers, artists, educators, journalists, have been a priority in this genocide. Why?

SAEED: Well, artists are the best and most capable transmitters of culture. And in that position, they are the ones who keep alive the vestiges of people's connection to a place. A lot of times when we talk about culture, it's people who are united by proximity, usually physical proximity. And the physical proximity creates certain cultural values, cultural practices, expressions, and the ones who are the best at transmitting those things are the artists.

And so targeting that culture, erasing that culture will get you that much closer to erasing the identity itself. You can kill people as much as you want. It will never be a hundred percent, although you can try as hard as you want. And it seems frequently that that's what we're seeing.

But if you erase the major sources of culture, it becomes a lot easier. And we've seen that before, Palestinian writers have frequently been targeted. You talk about Ghassan Kanafani for example, I mentioned in the book was assassinated, but even the cartoonist Naji al-Ali, who's a brilliant artist, he was also assassinated. And that's because these artists are not just transmitters of culture, but additionally, they're huge symbols. They're important symbols for people. Their works are what give people a sense of community, give people a sense of solidarity, a sense of strength.

We've seen in many colonized or oppressed cultures how critical artists become. Uh, Ahmed Fayed Ahmed in Pakistan, he became a symbol for his country's resistance. People like Chinua Achebe in Africa, people like again, Naji al-Ali for Palestinians, we see that over and over. And targeting of these artists is a particularly effective way of silencing people. Because if the best expressors of a people are eliminated, then the idea is what chance does anybody else have?

RESH: And you know, we had talked on this podcast, about scholasticide. And that's the term that it is a part of genocide. I mean the destruction of all 12 universities in Gaza, all education centers.

And you make the point that for the Palestinians, particularly where education and literacy are so important, that this really is such a key part of absolute destruction.

SAEED: The main reason why my family was able to find refuge initially in Kuwait is because they were well educated.

And Palestinians generally have incredibly high literacy rates, among the highest, in that part of the world, if not the highest. But my parents and my grandparents were people whose education enabled them to survive. And without that education, without that value that they held to societies, particularly like Kuwait, which was in the early days of establishing itself, they would not have found a place. They would've been essentially somewhere, and who knows if they survive or not, but they certainly wouldn't have had security. They certainly wouldn't have had prosperity by any stretch of the imagination.

That's why that level of education is important to target. And that's why we see in our society here all the time the targeting of books, the targeting of curricula that are in any way sympathetic to Palestinians.

I had a couple of talks at educational institutions here canceled because of the threat that essentially somebody who can act as an educator or a proxy to educators wishing to educate about Palestine, represents. And so for me that targeting is very much intentional and it makes sense.

It makes sense because if you don't get these ideas in the heads of students and people who are most receptive to them, people for whom the understanding of the world is still evolving, then as a colonizer, as somebody who wants to put the imperial worldview foremost in students' minds, you have a better chance of doing so if you block that sort of education from them.

RESH: And you, write about how this happens through this concept of *linguistic apartheid*.

SAEED: So this is for my chapter titled *Clarity and Blur*. We betray language itself by allowing the oppressor to destroy its communicative core in service of domination and protecting the status quo. We betray language when we let it be what primes the body for the violence that its oppressors have planned for it.

The students of the encampments were branded as violent and dangerous because of their speech. This was a necessary prelude to enacting the actual violence of destroying the encampments and imprisoning or deporting the protestors.

A US congresswoman of Palestinian descent used the term "from the river to the sea", but was censured by her colleagues. A putatively powerful individual, shunned by a much more powerful institution.

The head of a social media platform called the same phrase, a "euphemism" that must "necessarily imply genocide". Despite avowing free speech absolutism, he committed to removing all instances of the phrase on his platform.

In the face of actual violence waged against them, Palestinians are tried and convicted of presumptive violence for their language.

Our words are assumed to be code words or dog whistles that mean something else necessarily more nefarious than what we say they mean. The result is that we are barred from the language that everyone else uses.

We are made to cram into a different, much more limited and inexact language. One that is unfit for what we want to express, but proximate to the danger we supposedly present.

The usual language remains available to the rest of the world to use freely. It is only Palestinians and their allies who have been segregated out of it. A linguistic apartheid that applies to us wherever we are, in the same way that the geographic apartheid applies to us in occupied Palestine.

RESH: It is a, a powerful concept, and connection to the apartheid. You've talked about this, but through your last book, through this book, through your experience, what are some of the ways in which you have experienced this linguistic apartheid?

SAEED: There are so many ways. The mind almost is overwhelmed trying to come up with one or two examples. But for example, anytime you want to write in any kind of mainstream publication, the level of difficulty that one has, using basic words, basic words that mean what they have always meant, is absolutely incredible.

So one of the most canonical examples is whenever a Palestinian wants to refer to a Palestine, to the word Palestine in any mainstream publication. I dare you to try. It is absolutely impossible.

For example, I had one piece published in a newspaper where I, in my original draft, said something like, whenever news comes out of Palestine, I get upset, or something like that.

And they wanted me to change it to something like, because Palestine is not an available word in their style guides, they wanted me to change it to, whenever something comes out of the West Bank or Gaza, I feel upset.

Well, that's not at all what I meant because for me, I'm someone who comes from a place called Jaffa, which was one of the biggest cities, it was the biggest city in Palestine, pre-1948.

That area is now Israel. I'm not omitting that area when I say Palestine. For me, Palestine is like saying Turtle Island, for example, right? Like, it, it includes a bigger section than saying the West Bank and Gaza.

Okay, so they said, why don't you just say Israel or Palestine?

Well, actually when there's news of something happening in an Israeli settlement. I'm actually not that concerned about it. So I actually don't mean Israel or Palestine.

In other words, what they're doing is they're trying to take away the meaning that we have for words and take it away from us. And when you do that, you're left with sort of only approximation. So when I say the West Bank and Gaza, I'm necessarily erasing myself because of the editorial, oversight or the editorial input, wrongful editorial input that exists in these kinds of publications.

And this sort of thing doesn't extend just to use of certain words, it has huge effects and huge layers. So, for example, a lot of times the tone of Palestinians is policed. I can't be angry. I'm allowed to be in grief. In grief about things that happen in the world that don't have a perpetrator. You know, Palestinians have died. I'm allowed to be in grief about that.

I can't be angry because anger is usually directed at someone or an entity, and it's unseen. I've been told this is too angry. We can't, we can't say that. But imagine if you tell that to a Jewish person in the wake of October 7th . That they're not allowed to be angry in public or in the pages of a publication.

That's what the linguistic apartheid that I'm talking about really refers to. That you are restricted to certain roads that you can go into, you're not allowed other roads. You're not allowed the angerr road. You're not allowed the road that says Palestine. You're not allowed the road that says genocide. A whole bunch of roads are like that for Palestinians and their sympathizers.

RESH: Right. Canadian tolerance can only go so far.

SAEED: Exactly

RESH: Right? There you go. Now, what has been the reaction to *You Will Not Kill Our Imagination*? Because it's been out for a little over a month now.

SAEED: I think the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. And it has been on a certain level, shocking to see because you know, as a Palestinian you never expect a positive reception or certainly not an overwhelmingly positive reception to anything that you write, but I think it speaks to two things.

It speaks a. to the difference in the level of education, the level of information that people and audiences have right now after witnessing the most horrendous genocide that anybody has seen in their lives or most people have seen in their lives. It speaks to that number one.

But it also speaks importantly to the level of thirst that people have for something like this that says things plainly and without restrictions and that mirrors what they feel.

You know how uncommon that is in our publications? Like our mainstream media has simply failed to reflect what the majority of the people in this country and in this society in the West generally want to see or think is important. And that kind of obstruction obstructive role that they've had, has led to a huge hunger for these kinds of narratives.

I'm under no illusions that it's about me specifically. It's really about the message and the way that the message is delivered.

Now this is not to say that there hasn't been opposition to it. Of course there has been opposition to it. The commentariat of every article in which I'm featured you know, droves of people, many of them very obviously trolls or troll-like people, you know, saying awful things about me. But the actual reception of real people has been overwhelmingly positive and it's heartening to see for sure.

RESH: That's wonderful. And you know, when I was reading it, it is unafraid. It is unflinching and you feel that type of catharsis. You feel that type of relief in a way.

Now you mentioned witnessing. And not far into the book, you list the varied and cruel ways Palestinians, many of them very young, have been killed over the last two years. And I'm reading this and it's going on and on and on. And though horrifying, none of it was news to me because like anyone who's been paying attention I was already familiar with I think almost all of them,. You know, to quote one of your favorite artists, Leonard Cohen, Everybody Knows. And you write and have spoken of your struggle with the meaning in place of the artist during this genocide. Talk about that, but also why the writer has to now be more than a witness to history.

SAEED: Yeah. I think witnessing itself, which has always been a standby value of writers and artists, that's something that they do. That they offer witness as a service to people. I think witnessing is no longer enough. And I say that quite frankly and quite flatly.

If you think as an artist that your role is just witnessing when it comes to calamitous events like the genocide, I just disagree with you.

And the reason is we have a million witnesses in Palestine. We have a million people armed with their phones pointing at things that are happening in real time in front of them. And so your role as an artist to tell us that this is happening, that's out of date. This may have been, the concept of witnessing helpful at an earlier point in history.

It's important for us to have read the *Diary of Anne Frank*, because that was a firsthand witness who recorded in real time what was happening to her and her environment. And without it, we actually don't know because there weren't cameras trained everywhere. People had significant trouble figuring out how to get news from one place to another. The Holocaust happened essentially under, cover of darkness for most people. They didn't know. They knew something was happening, they didn't know the extent of it until much later. And for that, the witnessing is super important.

For us now, the witnessing by itself is not important. And so for me, what's the next thing? What can I offer beyond witnessing?

You're right, A lot of the ways I documented in terms of killing, they're not meant to be A. an exhaustive list, but B. not things that people didn't know about. They were things that I saw many times and I just wanted to record them for essentially posterity to show that I witnessed and to enable the reader to know that they witnessed the same thing.

So what's the next thing? And for me, it has to be a kind of moral judgment that says, this is obviously wrong and we need to do something about it.

Before witnessing was enough because the presumption was that it will be obvious that this is morally wrong. And it will be obvious if people knew then they would do something.

Here we know that people know, but they haven't done anything.

So we have to somehow move forward as artists and say, I've witnessed, that's only the bare minimum. Second, I've said morally that this is wrong. Third, I've militated somehow, I've become a defacto activist because of my values as an artist. As an artist, I care about humans and humanity. And therefore I can't just be this person who inertly, years later reports on what happened. That's simply not enough.

And if it takes a certain level of courage, if it takes a certain level of endangering yourself as an artist, for me that was a small price to pay. Even though it might actually prove like a high price in the long run, but it's a small price to pay for transmitting the message that I have to transmit.

RESH: And as you say, being able to say the unsayable in a very public way. Right?

Now, this book is obviously an indictment of, and resistance to complicity with this genocide by government, media, all of the institutions that surround us, but also complicity on the individual level. And in a section of the book, you bring in a hypothetical that also outlines the stages of personal complicity that you went through. You talked a bit about this. And that will be uncomfortably familiar, I have to say, to many readers. Could you speak a bit about this? The ways in which we can be personally complicit even if we are pro-Palestinian?

SAEED: I mean, I think many people have outlined this before me, so I'm not some kind of new messenger on this.

Omar El Akkad talks that you have a baseline level of complicity just by being a taxpayer. And he's right. By being a taxpayer to a government that has a longstanding relationship, both military and otherwise with Israel, you are complicit.

But a lot of us feel a deeper level of complicity. We work in spaces that have very clear, complicit ties to Israel and Israeli military. Whether you work in government, for example, whether you work in a multinational corporation, whether you work with a company that has contractual relationships to Israel or its military. There's many ways in which we feel complicit.

And so it was important for me to not say that here I am, somebody with a thousand percent clean hands, who lives in the ideal world of my own complete non-complicity with what's going on. And that's why I'm able to speak. And everybody should model their behavior after me, the perfect person.

Just the opposite. I want it to be clear that it's not even just the baseline level of complicity as a taxpayer, that there are actually other layers in which I myself are complicit.

You know, I phrase it in the book as a hypothetical, primarily to get people closer to it. To make them feel like they are part of it. To underline the level to which we're all complicit. But that doesn't mean that we should be okay with it. It doesn't mean that we should just say, well, we're complicit, let's just be quiet and not rock the boat, otherwise, we might get fired.

Yeah, you might get fired, but likely you'll just receive some pushback. You'll be uncomfortable. Is it okay for you to be uncomfortable? I think it's okay for you to be uncomfortable. I think that is an okay price for most people and should be an okay price for most people for the ability to speak out.

For me, the question is, have you pushed the boundaries of what you're allowed to say in your complicit context? Have you pushed the boundaries of what you're allowed to do in your complicit context? I'm not asking for a bunch of workplace lawyers, for example, but, have you tried to do what you think will help or will eventually lead to change?. And that's possible to do even if you're complicit.

Now, obviously there's a certain level of complicity that should be intolerable to people, but different people have different tolerances, I suppose.

RESH: Yeah. And we have seen that more people are saying, yeah, I'm gonna take a stand, right? Over two years into this, and it has not gotten smaller, it's gotten larger. The building of a massive global solidarity movement. And the book you talk about visiting one of the, the student encampments. This is the largest global movement that I certainly have seen in my lifetime. You probably have, I think many people have. Why do you think the Palestinian struggle has galvanized so many people to come out despite the risks of being fired, of being arrested, of being shunned?

SAEED: A couple of things. First of all, as we mentioned before, there's been an unprecedented level of witnessing.

We have never been so aware of such an acute and very clear level of injustice as we are right now. So that is the first differentiator for me.

The second differentiator is that Palestine lays bare every level of complicity, every level of impunity, every level of just how disgustingly dirty our hands as a society really are. And for many people, that's intolerable, particularly for students who read in their books historical things that have happened, who understand the delta between what they're seeing in front of them and what they're told democratic, liberal societies should and are supposed to have functioned as. And that's a level, of difference that they're simply not willing to put up with. Nor should they be willing to put up with.

You know, in the past we have been able to say things like, oh, well, I mean, we're not involved exactly in that we only do some proxy type of stuff in those third world countries, so to speak. In this case, it couldn't be any clearer. The only reason that Israel was able to continue to do what it wants to do is because of our specific countries, Canada and the US and the UK unquestioned support to them. And absent that, they would simply not be able to, whether from an economic perspective, from a military resourcing perspective, from a populist sentiment perspective. And it's too much for people.

You know, I, I'm not one of those who thinks people are necessarily good or evil, but there is a, a point after which people cannot tolerate that much evil.

And I think we have been well past it for a long time with this conflict. And it's miraculous that it's continued to this long. And that's where the outrage came from.

RESH: In 2023, Colombian President, Gustavo Petro, who is also in the crosshairs of Empire right now, tweeted that, "What we see in Palestine will also be the suffering of all the people of the [Global] South". For many, including in this part of the world, this genocide is not only a telescope into a possible, more horrific future, but also mirrors the brutal past of colonial conquest. And you've referred to this in terms of the links of colonialism and empire.

What are your thoughts on this? That Gaza, that Palestine is a gateway to a type of 21st century colonial conquest?

SAEED: That's a hundred percent accurate because we have seen, you know, I've used the word *unprecedented* a few times, but another thing that's unprecedented is the level to which we have as a set of governments been willing to enable what's gone on.

And it's important that we note that it's unprecedented because it actually represents a new baseline for what they are willing to do, not just in Palestine, but everywhere else.

We are now willing to put up with massive amounts of people knowing that we are doing the wrong thing, doing the morally evil thing. And still, as governments, we're still willing to do it anyway.

We're still willing to continually not just fund, but actually send people over, but actually send our private contractors over. And that's a different level from what we used to do before. We used to just not tell people that we're doing things. Now people know that we're doing things and we're doing it anyway.

So that's a level of neocolonialism that is coming if we allow it to come. And the only way that we can avoid it is if we make sure that we tell these governments, send strong messages over and over and over, that it's not acceptable.

So I, I certainly see how that's something that we really have to reckon with as global societies who know that the reach of these governments is only increasing.

Just by way of example, they've been willing to patriate entire corporations, massive corporations like TikTok in order to control what these disseminators of information can actually say. In service of not even the US. In service of sort of an ally of the US right?

Imagine what the US will be willing to do in service of its own self then if left to its own devices. It's certainly a very dangerous time to be alive.

, I think, there's a, temptation when we say that we've had victories in terms of public awareness. There's a temptation to think that it won't be scaled back. That we'll always have this level of public awareness. That couldn't be further from the truth. It's important to keep pushing forward in terms of public awareness. And in terms of, not just awareness, but the willingness of the public to do something about it. To engage in activism, to engage in the kinds of substantive changes of governments throughout, in order to capitalize on the new level of information the public has.

RESH: What do you think of Canada's recognition of a Palestinian State?

SAEED: I think it's tempting to think that any movement in the direction of recognizing Palestinian identity and validating Palestinian statehood is a positive one. But I think this is largely a performative action because it comes without a reciprocal commitment to ending diplomatic relationship with what is by any measure a pariah State, a completely rogue State that has no regard for any international norm or law. ,

Refusing to fund it anymore, not just militarily, but in every way. There's so many ways that you could have more substantively shown a commitment to ending the cycles of violence. And the only way that our government unfortunately chose is the most useless way, for lack of better term.

Now you know, it's been years since the majority of countries in the world, something like 140 first recognized the State of Palestine. The reason we're doing it now is not because we somehow have greater respect for Palestine or belief in the reason for Palestine to exist. It's only because we know, or Carney knows that the masses have a certain view and he wants to throw them a bone. And this is the bone.

RESH: Near the conclusion of *You Will Not Kill Our Imagination*, you write, "I want to never hope. I want to always imagine. Because there is nothing that compares with the engine of imagination".

Talk about the power of imagination and what you imagine for Palestine.

SAEED: Well, for me, I wrote that because hope is not a particularly propulsive force. Hope is the sort of thing that you sit back and see if things change. You know, you say, Hey, it's raining today, but hopefully tomorrow it doesn't rain. But you have sort of no real control over it.

Imagination is a lot more active a process, at least for me as a writer. And I think for a lot of other people because if you can imagine something, you are much more likely to do something about it because it feels like it can be actuated. It feels like you're this close to it.

And something that you can do about it, for me has always been at least write, at least tell the story, at least speak out. And I think for other people it's the same. It's activating.

I was very clear in my title. The title is *You Will Not Kill Our Imagination*. It's not, *You Will Not Kill My Imagination*, Saeed Teebi's. And that's purposeful because I think it's our collective imagination that's really important.

To harken to something that you asked me earlier. The reason Palestine activates so many people is because it engages so many core values like justice and liberty and security, things that are in our Charter right? In the world's UN Charter. All of which Palestinians don't have.

And a lot of us in our collective imaginations, that's what we're imagining. And if we're able to talk about that imagination, if we're able to emphasize that imagination, that way forward that we see based on very basic intrinsic human values, I think we'll be a lot better off. And I think we'll be in a position, not long from now, where we see a different place.

RESH: Saeed, last question. What does this book, in the final analysis mean to you, and what do you want it to mean for your readers?

SAEED: Well, I think to my readers who are pro-Palestinian, who are the people that I wrote the book for, I hope it acts as a affirmation and a validation of your feelings, your rage, your grief, your hope, your imagination, what propels you.

Because a lot of this world has been crazy-making over the last two years. And I hope it says to you that you're not alone. And I hope it deepens your understanding of why we are in such a horrendous, place, both sociopolitically but also psychically. And with that understanding, I hope as it did for me, act as a way to propel into the future. To steel me in my own convictions and in my own understanding of what I need to do moving forward.

I hope that's what it does for other people as well.

RESH: Lovely. A powerful interrogation of genocide and our complicity within it, and a call for resistance through the unshackling of language, imagination, and storytelling, Saeed Teebi's, *You Will Not Kill Our Imagination: A Memoir of Palestine and Writing in Dark Times* is now out and will be linked in the show notes to this episode.

Saeed, it has been a pleasure. Congratulations again on this very important, urgent and powerful book, and thank you so much for joining us.

SAEED: Thank you, Resh.

RESH: That was award-winning author Saeed Teebi on his latest book, *You Will Not Kill our Imagination: A Memoir of Palestine and Writing in Dark Times*. The link to the book can be found in the show notes to this episode.

And this is The Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu. Thanks for listening.

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