

Palestine Unbound

Published each issue and updated regularly on *Palestine Square* (blog.palestine-studies.org), this section strives to capture the tenor and content of popular conversations related to the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Increasingly, these conversations are held on new and dynamic platforms unbound by traditional media. Therefore, items presented in this section are from a variety of sources and have been selected because they either have gone viral or represent a significant cultural moment or trend.

This Quarter's Topics

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#NFLinIsrael Publicity Flop*

On Super Bowl Sunday (5 February), the Times of Israel announced that eleven National Football League (NFL) stars would visit Israel on a weeklong, all-expenses paid trip. The visit was part of the “Brand Israel” hasbara campaign. A coalition of Israeli government-sponsored marketing and communications experts, the Brand Israel group runs publicity campaigns aimed at improving Israel’s image in the United States. And how better to influence the opinions of young American men than through an NFL campaign? In actuality, only five NFL players of the eleven originally invited showed up. The remaining six boycotted the trip, transforming Israel’s hasbara dream into a flop.

Figures in the arts, pop culture, academia, and the entertainment industry have increasingly stood in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle to end fifty years of occupation, in response to the call of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Such support has now spread to the world of sports, in which Palestinian athletes have long faced restrictions, including Israeli checkpoints that curtail their ability to train and prevent them from participating in sporting events.

With the BDS campaign gathering ever-growing momentum, Brand Israel seeks to portray the country as a fun, progressive destination featuring beaches, great food, LGBTQ friendliness (also known as pinkwashing), and anything else that is deemed suitable to add to the agenda of potential visitors.

Along with the Tourism and Strategic Affairs Ministries, America’s Voices in Israel (AVI), a project of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, had hoped to pull off a publicity coup with the NFL trip. AVI regularly organizes “weeklong missions to Israel for

* An earlier version of this story, written by Khelil Bouarrouj, appeared on *Palestine Square*, the blog of the Institute for Palestine Studies, on 14 March 2017. —Ed.

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prominent headline makers,” and for this hasbara stunt, U.S. male youth were the target audience, a demographic Israel has targeted before.

Seattle Seahawks defensive end Michael Bennett was the first to decline the junket. “I was not aware, until reading this article about the trip in the Times of Israel, that my itinerary was being constructed by the Israeli government for the purposes of making me, in the words of a government official, an ‘influencer of and opinion-former’ who would then be an ‘ambassador of good will,’” he wrote in a letter published on his Twitter account. “I will not be used in such a way,” Bennett added.

Decrying Israel’s attempt to whitewash an egregious human rights record, and clearly championing Palestinian rights, Bennett pointed to the example of the late Muhammad Ali, identifying him as one of his heroes who “stood strongly with the Palestinian people, visiting refugee camps, going to rallies, and always willing to be a ‘voice for the voiceless.’” He also evoked the long history of black athletes struggling for social and racial justice. “Like 1968 Olympian John Carlos always says, ‘There is no partial commitment to justice. You are either in or you’re out.’ Well, I’m in,” Bennett added. The legendary track-and-field athlete Carlos, famous for making a silent Black Power salute on the Olympic podium in 1968, cosigned a letter calling on the NFL players to boycott the trip. The U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights and Jewish Voice for Peace were also signatories to the letter penned by sportswriter Dave Zirin, and published in the Nation.

Five other players, including Miami Dolphins wide receiver Kenny Stills, followed in Bennett’s footsteps. The effect of this display of solidarity rippled across social media platforms. An article by Morehouse College professor Marc Lamont Hill, who had earlier participated in a solidarity trip by prominent African-Americans to Palestine, was widely shared on Twitter. “When people are lucky enough to be in positions of power and influence, such as Bennett and Stills, it’s imperative they use their platforms to speak out against social injustice,” Hill wrote in the Huffington Post.

While the NFL players’ boycott of the hasbara junket generated significant attention on social media, Israel’s partisans nevertheless tried to brand the failed trip as a success.

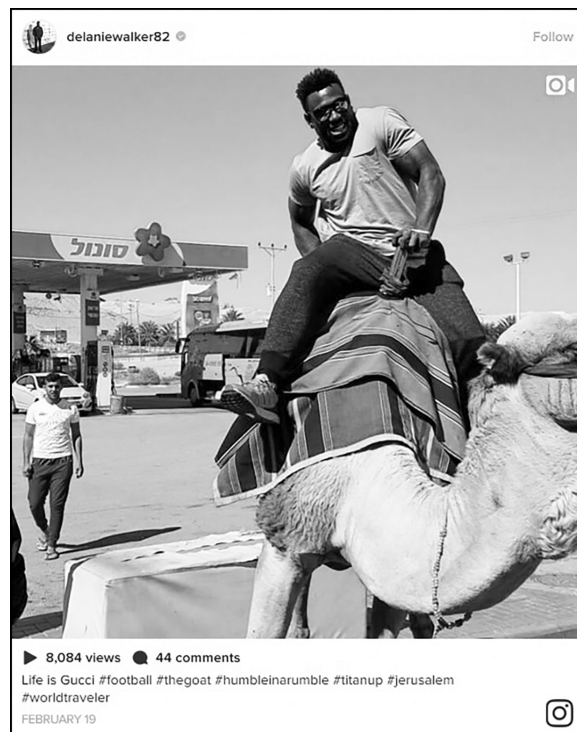
According to one observer, AVI used the hashtag #NFLinIsrael to chronicle the non-boycotting athletes’ daily travels even though the “carefully planned image-buffing . . . turned into a public relations disaster.” The hashtag got little traction on social media, however.



Seattle Seahawks defensive end Michael Bennett announced that he would not join an NFL trip to Israel by posting a photo of civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, Jr., and Stokely Carmichael at a voter registration march in Mississippi in 1966. (9 February, Twitter)

Still, AVI did garner sought-after publicity buzz from the Instagram accounts of New Orleans Saints defensive end Cameron Jordan, Tennessee Titans tight end Delanie Walker, and Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Mychal Kendricks. But even here the publicity wasn't what tour organizers had bargained for. After Jordan posted a selfie from Tiberias, an Instagrammer wrote, "Wish you would have followed the rest of the players who didn't go on this trip. Israel using NFL players to revamp their image is laughable." Another Instagrammer called Walker "a pawn in [Israel's] propaganda machine," after the Titans player posted a video of himself astride a camel.

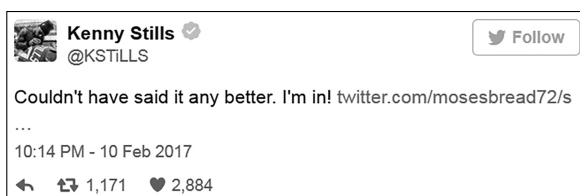
Kendricks appeared to have enjoyed his time; he posted videos and photos, encouraged his followers to visit an Israeli restaurant, and attended a party at a private Israeli home. There were no signs in any of his posts that he had been exposed to Palestinian life or culture, and it was clear that he hadn't followed the advice of one Instagrammer who wrote, "Take a tour of the West Bank so you can really see the entire picture of what is happening there."



Tennessee Titans tight end Delanie Walker participated in a camel ride organized by America's Voices in Israel. Camel rides are a cornerstone of the Israeli tourism industry, exoticizing the traditional Arab vehicles of transport and trade. (19 February, Instagram)

Before and After the PA (#Qabl_Ba'd_al-Sultah)[†]

On 4 January, Palestinian Facebook users fired a storm of satirical Arabic posts at the Palestinian Authority (PA) in response to a post by Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Revolutionary Council member and spokesman Jamal Nazzal. The official had shared a photo contrasting local streets before and after the inception of the PA. The top half of the photo, dated 1989, shows masked militants parading down an unpaved street as



Miami Dolphins wide receiver Kenny Stills joined Bennett's Israel boycott in a Twitter post. (10 February, Twitter)

[†] An earlier version of this story, written by Dorgham Abusalim, appeared on *Palestine Square*, the blog of the Institute for Palestine Studies, on 11 January 2017. —Ed.

onlookers applaud. The bottom half of the photo showcases a paved road, with well-marked signage, likely in an upscale neighborhood in Ramallah.

Nazzal's juxtaposition of the two images was meant as praise for the PA. The caption he appended read, "The sacrifice of those heroes [1989] opened the road for the Palestinian Authority, whose leadership ensured our accomplishments." Many Palestinians objected to the dubious trade-off—Palestinian resistance in exchange for economic development—that the pairing of the images suggested.

The PA has long been viewed as a body that subverted Palestinian resistance as a result of its "security coordination" with the Israeli occupation forces, the linchpin of the Oslo Accords. Two practices emblematic of this relationship are the PA's detention of prisoners released from their Israeli captors, and the monitoring and suppression of critical voices.

Similarly, the promised economic gains of the Oslo Accords have proven elusive. The truth is that the agreements' economic stipulations, enshrined in the Paris Protocol and the Cairo Agreement, have crippled Palestinian innovation by building a framework that prioritizes Israeli security over the basic requirements for true economic development such as freedom of movement and access to natural resources. The result has been disastrous. The Palestinian economy is largely dependent on foreign aid, with unemployment hovering at 30 percent. Outside of enclaves such as Ramallah, poverty is prevalent. Under these circumstances, corruption runs rampant in both the private and public sectors, and 79 percent of Palestinians view PA institutions as corrupt, according to the most recent public opinion poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. This perception is underscored by the finding that, notwithstanding Nazzal's post, a slight majority considers the PA a burden rather than an accomplishment for Palestinians.

These facts were not lost on the many Palestinians who took to social media to challenge Nazzal's self-congratulatory assessment of the PA using the hashtag, #Qabl_Ba'd_al-Sultah (before and after the PA). In a Facebook post, popular satirist Ali Qaraq, who fled to Turkey to escape PA retaliation for his scathing satire of Palestinian leadership, called on his nearly 170,000 Facebook fans to jeer at Nazzal's photo. Users went on to depict the PA as a



A post by PLO official Jamal Nazzal contrasts Palestinian streets before (1989) and after the inception of the Palestinian Authority. (4 January, Facebook)

bunch of rotting bananas or an eagle-turned-chicken, with some also taking aim at Hamas officials and Palestinian celebrities.

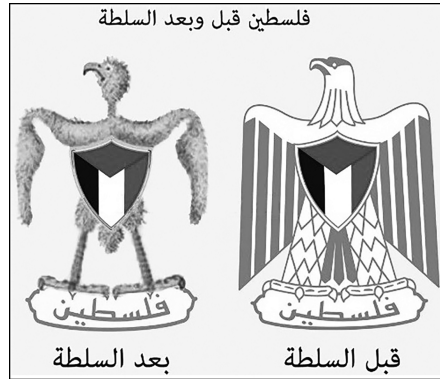
As the hashtag went viral, Nazzal removed the post and reposted an edited version. In an attempt to stave off criticism, he edited his caption four times, according to the post history. It was unclear whether the PA reacted to the online activity and whether it might exact retribution by blocking some of the users' accounts or detaining them.

#WeLoveYouPalestine[‡]

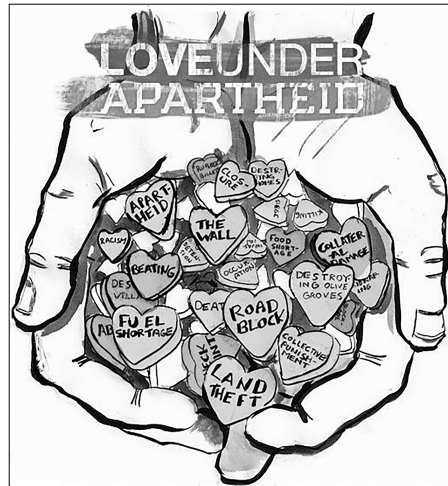
"Everyone can love, but the love of the homeland is different," read a tweet posted by the Bank of Palestine on Valentine's Day. Unlike most places, Palestine imbued this time-honored celebration of love with a sense of unyielding defiance. Despite the brutal Israeli occupation that separates people in countless ways, love in Palestine is a statement that extends far beyond romance and relationships.

Following a surge of Israeli violence in recent months characterized by extrajudicial killings, home demolitions, and evictions, Palestinians expressed their defiance of Israel and commitment to their homeland with the hashtag #WeLoveYouPalestine, the title of a song performed by popular singers Shadi Alborini and Qasem al-Najjar and sponsored by the Bank of Palestine.

On Valentine's Day 2016, Israeli occupation forces had shot and critically wounded twenty-one-year-old Yasmin al-Zarou as she crossed a military checkpoint in Hebron. Al-Zarou was later sentenced to prison after the Israeli army claimed she had attempted to attack one of their soldiers. Witnesses, for their part, said al-Zarou had been crossing the checkpoint with her sister, and neither had attempted to carry out an attack. They described the soldiers firing at her after she had crossed and was already a few meters away from the checkpoint. Al-Zarou quickly became a symbol of the day as many commentators



Facebook user Ahmed Serdah caricatured the Eagle of Saladin that embellishes the Palestinian coat of arms as having been entirely plucked of its feathers. (5 January, Facebook)



On Valentine's Day, social media users shared an image of Sweethearts candies inscribed with Israeli occupation policies.

[‡] An earlier version of this story, written by Dorgham Abusalim, appeared on *Palestine Square*, the blog of the Institute for Palestine Studies, on 19 February 2017. —Ed.

lamented the demise of the young woman and her aborted dreams and hopes for a loving and prosperous future.

The fusion of romance and homeland also manifested in the form of popular “Palestinian Pickup Lines” deriding the predicaments Palestinians face on a daily basis. These included, “Your beauty is harder to define than Israeli borders,” “Is your name Palestine? Because I would fight for you day and night,” and “We can go through checkpoints together.”

In addition to being an opportunity to affirm their identity and ties to the land, for Palestinians Valentine’s Day also offered the chance to shatter societal stereotypes, albeit not without challenge. A video titled “Love and War” released by PAL+, a local digital media company, showed a young Palestinian man’s public marriage proposal in Gaza. The video quickly went viral, receiving a mixed response. Many applauded the romantic and original gesture, while others insisted such a marriage proposal was a “Western norm” that deviated from Palestinian tradition, which would have the man ask the woman’s father for her hand in marriage. Whether the young man in fact coordinated the romantic gesture with his future in-laws wasn’t clear; but it is certain that Palestine will continue to mark numerous occasions in imaginative ways that subvert the Israeli occupation and the stereotypes it seeks to propagate about Palestinians.



Popular Palestinian singers Qassem al-Najjar and Shadi Alborini pose on the set of their music video for the song “Bnhibbik ya Filistin” (“We love you, Palestine”). (13 February, Instagram)

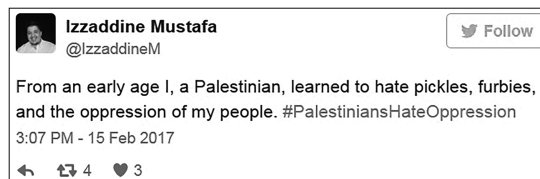
#PalestiniansHateOppression⁵

On 15 February, U.S. president Donald Trump held his first joint news conference with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This followed months of speculation regarding the incoming administration’s policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and observers watched the event keenly for the details it would unveil. Trump’s remarks generated more questions than answers, however, particularly his comment, “I’m looking at two-state and one-state [solutions], and I like the one that both parties like, I can live with either one.” For seasoned analysts and politicians familiar with U.S. foreign policy on the issue, the comment opened a Pandora’s box as it suggested a break with the long-standing U.S. official support for a two-state solution.

⁵ An earlier version of this story, written by Dorgham Abusalim, appeared on *Palestine Square*, the blog of the Institute for Palestine Studies, on 8 March 2017. —Ed.

Another comment, however, caught the attention of Palestinian-American youth and online advocates. After Trump asserted that Palestinians are “taught tremendous hate” and called for them “to get rid of some of that hate that they’re taught from a very young age,” the hashtag #PalestiniansHateOppression quickly spread across social media platforms. First posted on Facebook by Palestinian-American Izzaddine Mustafa, the hashtag was created to challenge the “stereotype that Palestinians learn to hate from the womb,” Mustafa explained. Mustafa added that pro-Israel partisans and extremist groups misrepresented the contents of Palestinian textbooks to continue propagating this myth, which Trump and his nominee for ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, repeated.

Many posts using the hashtag took satirical aim at President Trump’s comment, referencing childhood experiences with foods that many children hate, as well as Palestinian resilience and entrepreneurship. Other posts made stark references to Israeli apartheid, settler colonialism, and cultural appropriation.



Izzaddine Mustafa and Dalal Hillou retort with mordant humor to U.S. president Trump’s claim that Palestinian children are indoctrinated with hate. (15 February, Twitter)