knox news.

LOCAL

Straddling two worlds, UT protest leaders hold close the best of America and Palestine

Areena Arora
Knoxville News Sentinel

Published 5:07 p.m. ET Jan. 17, 2025

For the Husain siblings, demonstrating on the University of Tennessee at Knoxville campus last spring over the Israeli invasion and occupation of Gaza was an act of honoring their relatives, their remembrances and their rights as American citizens with roots in Palestine.

Now, nearly a year later, a ceasefire has been struck between Israel and Hamas, providing the first rays of hope that peace will come again to Gaza and the region.

The siblings were born in America and grew up in Knoxville, but their father is from Palestine. They've visited family in Palestine several times and each time have felt at home instantly, just as they do in East Tennessee, where they grew up with country neighbors whose accent sounds similar to them to the accent of their Palestinian cousins – if you just replace English with Arabic. They find similarities between the commitments in Palestinian culture and Appalachian culture to family, faith and hospitality.

Family member Hasan Atatrah, 30, said East Tennessee, where he grew up, will always be home. Traveling to Palestine, though, has reminded him roots run deep.

"I never knew what it was like to be surrounded just by people who unconditionally love you," Hasan Atatrah said.

The similarities family members experience between the mountains of Appalachia, right in the their backyard, are sweet reminders of the hills in Palestine, where their ancestors planted olives. Their Palestinian cousins are “a more melanated version of the kids we went to South-Doyle High School with,” Abdalla Husain, 28, said.

There are, of course, differences.

There’s so much etiquette here, Abdalla said. When you go to somebody’s home, you have to ask before using the bathroom or eating an apple off the kitchen counter, he said. In Palestine, every family welcomes visitors without formality.

The family occasionally makes pizzas together on Trader Joe’s pizza dough, served on a dining table that also has nuts and dates put out, a staple at Middle Eastern homes.

They debate pizza toppings, like any American family. They also make time to live out their diasporic Palestinian-American identity – one caught between a generational conflict that has riveted the world's attention for more than a year.

Months after the Oct. 7 surprise attack by Hamas militants launched from Gaza killed more than 1,200 in Israel, the Israeli counterattack and occupation of Gaza has killed more than 46,600 people, according to reports by Palestinian health officials cited by Reuters. Ninety-eight hostages abducted from Israel remain in Gaza, with 33 set to be released over six weeks as part of the ceasefire. If the deal holds, more will be freed.

As Israel's counterattack ramped up, students across the United States responded by putting up tents and protesting at universities across the country to pressure their schools into cutting ties from Israel.

In Knoxville, thousands of miles away from the conflict, UT students and community members gathered to demonstrate. Their demands? That the university disclose all university investments and financial ties to Israel and divestment from them, and end study abroad trips to Israel, asserting they deny equal opportunity to students with Palestinian IDs, including those with dual American and Palestinian citizenship.

When the family woke up the news of the infamous Oct. 7 attack, their first thought was, “What took so long?" It was a reaction common among Palestinians who have been stateless since Israeli independence in 1948 and the expansion of

Israel.

For the Husain siblings, demonstrating was personal, and the suffering in Palestine hits close to home. During the monthlong protests on campus, several people were arrested including, two members of the Knoxville family.

The family's wounds from the conflict run deep. More than a decade ago, in 2014, a 20-day conflict left more than 1,030 Palestinians dead, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza, USA Today reported then. In Israel, 46 died, including 43 soldiers, two civilians and a Thai worker, the Israeli military said.

Three of the family members were caught in the midst of the conflict. They had traveled from their home in America to see their loved ones and on that very day, pray at the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third-holiest place for Muslims.

On the fateful day, the Husain siblings were not sure if they would make it back out alive.

The war started within two weeks of the family arriving, said Layla Soliz, 34, the family's older daughter.

"We could hear the planes flying over," Soliz said. In the days witnessing the 2014 war, the siblings said they saw civilians being gunned down.

"It was dehumanizing," Soliz said.

On the last day of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of praying and fasting, the family decided to spend the night praying at the mosque. Access to the mosque is restricted and Palestinians need a permission from the Israeli government to visit it, Abdalla said.

Even when allowed, the mosque is reachable only by a narrow gateway that's just about two feet wide and has a covered top, he said.

Walking through the gateway, "I felt like I was a cow headed for slaughter," he said. "It was a Wednesday," Abdalla recalled from his West Knoxville home.

Before the shelling happened, worshippers had gathered, peacefully, to celebrate "one of the most special nights of Ramadan" Abdalla said.

"Israelis know this. They know the people they occupy," he said.

Suddenly, there were gunshots and grenades flying, barricades put up and chaos, Abdalla said. In some ways, that night, hiding from gunshots at the mosque wasn't unusual, Abdalla's sister Mariam said.

"We thought we were going to die," Mariam said. She was with her sister Layla when they heard a stun grenade explode – the loudest sound they'd ever experienced.

When they returned back home to Knoxville months later, a fireworks show gave them chills, a grim reminder of the war they'd witnessed thousands of miles away over the summer.

Fighting hateful narratives in the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks

When Hamas launched the Oct. 7 surprise attack from Gaza, triggering another ongoing war with Israel, Rebecca Husain said was "not at all surprised."

"This had to happen eventually. Something had to give and I hate it and I hate that it had to happen this way, but how else are you going to get the attention of the people who are who are doing what they are doing to our people," she said.

When Fathi first heard the news, he was convinced Israel let the attacks from Hamas go on as long as it did to justify the large-scale retaliation.

The Oct. 7 attack can also not be considered without the context of the history that's led the region to where it is now, Mariam said.

In Gaza specifically, two million people are concentrated to the size of what is about one and a half times the size of Knoxville, she said. Gazans' experience, for generations, has been living "under occupation."

Growing up in Tennessee as Muslim, as Palestinian Americans

Abdalla said his family's names and their religious identity, and their involvement in the Muslim community and trips to Palestine, all mean they are "prime targets for surveillance."

"It's just a fact of life for us," Abdalla said.

His brother Hasan wears black clothes for every day a Palestinian has been killed in the past three days, he told Knox News. He's worn black clothes for years at at time, and there is no end in sight. Per his calculations, he will be wearing black for the next 45 years. For "at least 16,500 little ones," he said.

The symbolism – Hasan's black clothes, or his sister Mariam's watermelon-pattern earrings – is intentional and a visual representation of their commitment to standing up for Palestine.

Headlines from the region, especially those villainizing Muslims, were common to the siblings growing up. Growing up in East Tennessee as a Muslim meant carrying a burden, Abdalla said.

"Twenty-plus years of apologizing and complacency has gotten us right back here," he said. "So what good has that done us. All those years of proving our innocence, proving our humanity has gotten us right back here. ... People believe that we are at our core bloodthirsty humans that would shoot a bunch of people our age, or chop heads off of babies."

His name carries more weight than most people's, he said. "My name is Abdalla Husain, and therefore if you know my name, I'm representing Muslims and representing Arabs and Palestinians. And I always have to bear that weight. I always feel like I have to prove something.

"In high school, if somebody said something slick, another kid might just punch them. But if I punch them, I'm the Muslim kid being violent, the Arab kid being violent."

When he returned from his first trip to Palestine and was hanging out with his white, Southern Baptist friends, who he said he shared similar values with, he noticed how they "just didn't get it."

It didn’t matter that he was the valedictorian at South-Doyle High School, or how hard he worked to be accepted in high school.

"They will never accept me as one of them ever," Abdalla said. "Despite the fact that I grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee. Despite the fact that I'm a diehard Vols fan, I’m never going to be accepted here."

On Sept. 11, 2001, when Rebecca heard about the attacks in New York City, her first thought, she said, was, "Please God let it not be a Muslim."

The family and the Muslim community in Knoxville had to quickly learn to adjust to a changed and charged atmosphere.

In the years after the Sept. 11 attacks, the family has felt pressured, as Muslims, to prove to their fellow Americans that they are "normal people," Layla said.

"In some ways I feel like we unfortunately as a community internalized that guilt for a while and felt like we needed to be extra American and be extra Western," she said.

Responding to racism and bigotry is a skill the siblings and their friends in the Muslim community were taught, Abdalla said. But for many people, he is the only Muslim, the only Palestinian and the only Arab they know.

"I don’t know how many hearts I changed just by being nice to them," he said.

Stand your ground resonates for Palestinians

Tennessee is a stand your ground state, meaning you are justified in threatening or using force against someone if you reasonably believe force is necessary to defend yourself. Abdalla applies the logic of the stand your ground law to the fight put up by Palestinians.

In conversations he has had over the years, and especially since Oct. 7 last year, he has asked friends, acquaintances and strangers he encountered while demonstrating on the university’s campus: "If your home was threatened, wouldn’t you

fight back?"

"They always say yes," he said.

When he talks to people in Tennessee, everyone agrees they don't believe in civilians being killed. But, it's a struggle to show people the humanity of Palestinians, he said.

"Consider the fact that Israel is not an altruistic country that doesn't actually care about human rights," Abdalla said, pointing out the generations of occupation by Israel of lands designated Arab in the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan, the encroachment of Israel since then into Palestinian lands and the yearlong blockade that has choked off people living in Gaza.

His sister agrees.

"We are righteously and rightfully angry about what is happening to our people," Mariam said. "Resistance is justified in the face of oppression."

Palestinian resistance and a yearning for peace

In 1963, the war in Vietnam was increasingly being questioned and the country was in a grip of a societal reckoning, including the transformational Civil Rights Movement.

In August 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. led the March on Washington. In November, President John F. Kennedy was struck down by an assassin. Just month before those two defining moments in American history, and thousands of miles away in Jenin, Palestine, Fathi, was born on May 1.

He would not stay for long in his birthplace.

He was only 4 years old when war pushed his family from Palestine to Kuwait, the Middle Eastern country less than a third the size of Tennessee. They were seeking refuge from the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the third starting with the U.N. Partition

Plan that created Israel. Being forced from his home because of war is a theme that remained consistent in his life until he made his way to East Tennessee.

One of his earliest memories dates back to his birthplace: He was aught by Israeli soldiers when he was out to collect manure to be used as fuel. Though he was just 4, but he knew to drop his bucket and put his hands up to surrender.

They were standing in a row, “almost ready as if to take a picture,” he said. When he put his bucket down, the soldiers started laughing, he said and told him to go back.

Memories like that one has stayed with him decades since and he recalls them from his Knoxville home now.

When war between Israel and the Arab states again disrupted his homeland in 1967, some Palestinians fled to Kuwait, some to Lebanon and some to Jordan. Escaping war meant being cramped in apartments with other refugees. He living for months in four-bedroom apartments housing four different families.

In Kuwait, he helped his family out working odd jobs, selling Lupini beans and coffee. He even had a jingle he sang to help sell coffee. The routine involved snapping his fingers and clinking cups together to get people’s attention.

He grew up then in Salmiya, a city on the Persian Gulf, living minutes from the Arabian Sea, until he moved to the States when he was 19.

“It’s a miracle that I even made it to this country … I thought this was out of reach for me. It was out of reach.”

His mom, described as his “hero” was committed to sending him here. She was “unlettered” herself, he said but was willing to beg, if needed, to raise money to support his American dream.

Years later, he named his daughter after his mother.

His mother and “a guy working at the U.S. embassy” in Kuwait helped him get here.

When Fathi talks of his parents, he always says “Allah Yerhamo,” an Arabic phrase that means may Allah have mercy on them.

In Knoxville, while at UT, Fathi met Rebecca, a Florida-born and raised woman, who had never experienced war. They fell in love and married in 1988 after knowing each other for about a year.

Together, they raised four children – two sons and two daughters. Their home is a blend of two identities that's second nature to diasporic people in the country.

Their children were raised going to both Annoor Academy, the Islamic institute in Knoxville, and Knox County's public schools.

In many ways, Fathi has raised his children similar to how he was brought up. The bond between the siblings is strong. They insist on sitting next to each other at gatherings.

Even from thousands of miles way, Fathi kept up with the happenings back home. In 1993, when the Oslo Accords outlining peace between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, were signed, he saw a glimmer of hope, since dashed as the agreement fell apart in the years to come.

The Husain family is not a monolith. They do not practice their faith in lockstep, nor pursue the same professions or life goals. But they are one in their commitment to bringing peace to Palestine.

***Areena Arora**, data and investigative reporter for Knox News, can be reached by email at areena.arora@knoxnews.com. Follow her on X @AreenaArora.*