

Lex Fridman Podcast #411 - Omar Suleiman: Palestine, Gaza, Oct 7, Israel, Resistance,

Faith & Islam

Published - February 1, 2024

Transcribed by - thepodtranscripts.com

Lex Fridman

The following is a conversation with Imam Dr. Omar Suleiman, his second time on the podcast. He is a Palestinian American, a Muslim scholar, a civil rights leader, president of the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, and is one of the most influential Muslims in the world. Our previous conversation was focused on Islam. This time the focus was on Gaza and Palestine. This is the Lex Fridman podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Omar Suleiman. What did you think, feel, and pray for in the days that followed October 7th?

Omar Suleiman

I think the first feeling was that there's going to be a lot of death and destruction in Gaza as a result. We always kind of see this where one Israeli casualty leads to hundreds of Palestinian casualties, right? So, it's a pretty familiar cycle in some ways where there are daily transgressions against Palestinians in the West Bank and in Gaza, the checkpoints, the aggression on mosque al-Aqsa, the settlements expanding, the stories of Palestinian death. And then you have rockets fired from Gaza, and that's when the Western press catches up and starts to cover it. Israel responds with Hellfire missiles, white phosphorus bombs, and the casualties are wildly disproportionate. And so, I think that I wasn't surprised. I prayed for the people that I knew were going to bear the brunt of this outbreak, but the outbreak was predictable.

Lex Fridman

You wrote a statement on October 9th. I was hoping to read it, if it's okay?

Omar Suleiman

Yeah, go ahead.

Lex Fridman

Our Palestinian casualties are always your footnotes. The daily humiliation of occupation ignored, the aggression by settlers and soldiers alike on holy sites and souls, the annihilation of entire families that follows, the devastation of whatever scraps remain in the open air prison of Gaza, unsustainable and inhumane. So, if you're waking up to a sudden interest in the region and want to know what's been happening, dig a bit deeper than two weeks and try to read beyond the headlines of a media that has been dehumanizing us for decades.

Omar Suleiman

Again, this was not surprising. This was very predictable. If you've been watching what's been unfolding before October 7th, 2021, Human Rights Watch puts out the report, Threshold reached, Israel is an apartheid state. Amnesty International 2022, the crime of apartheid, showing how all of the legal determinations of apartheid have been reached, the occupations only getting more aggressive. Shireen Abu Akleh, a Palestinian American

journalist, is shot dead in 2022 in front of the world. The United States says initially that if it is shown that Israel was complicit or that Israel carried out the execution, then there will be consequences. Of course, once it was shown that Israel was indeed responsible for the bullet that killed Shireen Abu Akleh, the United States did absolutely nothing. Shireen's funeral was attacked. The pallbearers were beaten. Her casket almost fell. And again, the world is watching. The aggression against worshipers in al-Aqsa is getting worse. You have the Flag March, the Jerusalem Flag March where extremist settlers are let loose and wild on Palestinians by the thousands, chanting things like, "Muhammad is dead. We're going to murder you, Arabs." All with the protection of the state with Israeli soldiers. And throughout this time, it's like something bad is going to happen. And then 2023 comes along. You had 13,000 settler units in 2023. A plan of 13,000 settler units, the most in the history of the occupation, the most racist and extremist government, Israeli government, that you have ever had. And people don't realize that in 2023 alone, over 600 Palestinians had already been killed. It just doesn't make Western headlines. And so, if you wonder why the American public sees this so much differently than the rest of the world, it's because American media shows the American public something so much different than what the rest of the world has shown. And so, this was a pressure cooker. This was going to explode. It is extremely predictable. You've given people absolutely no hope. And so, I think that as we're watching that, it's important for us to actually interrogate the ignorance that people have of the Palestinian plight, the ignorance of the root causes of this violence, the ignorance of the occupation. And also, ask yourselves, why is it that Israel can violate every single international law on the books, have all these determinations, and the United States keeps on issuing these inconsequential statements while also, at the same time, funding these aggressions? So, it's like, "Stop the settler violence." The United States will issue statement after statements, "Stop the settler violence. Stop the incursions on mosque al-Aqsa. Stop violating the people in Jerusalem. Stop trying to wipe out the Palestinian people. Stop openly saying that there is no two-state solution, that we will never allow a Palestinian state to be established." But at the same time, "Here's your \$3 billion check." And if the United Nations issues any sort of resolution against Israel, or if any international body tries to hold Israel accountable, the United States stands in the way of any accountability. It's important for us to ask why? And so, I always tell people, "Read beyond the headlines." Even now with the backdrop of a genocide, over 30,000 people have been killed. If you open the front page of most American mainstream sites, you will see stories about the hostages, the Israeli hostages. You will see stories about October 7th, but October 8th is missing. October 9th is missing. October 10th is missing. A hundred days of genocide are missing. And you'll barely have a story that shows up every once in a while that is still very much so controlled by the Israeli propaganda machine, because while Israel kills Palestinian journalists, it also makes sure that American journalists are only able to tell a certain story. They're only able to see Gaza from a certain perspective. They're only able to speak about Gaza from a certain perspective. And this is well-documented, that they have to review their media tapes with Israel before they can publicize them. And so, this is state propaganda at this point. The mainstream media and the United States government are in lockstep, telling a very skewed

story. And that is leading to a greater sense of frustration. And I think the American public has been wronged as well by not knowing what's happening.

Lex Fridman

You mentioned settlements. So, to you, this is bigger than Gaza. It is the West Bank. It is the Palestinian people broadly.

Omar Suleiman

Absolutely. You can't disconnect Gaza from Palestine. You can't disconnect the West Bank from Palestine. You can't disconnect Jerusalem from Palestine. And you can't disconnect the very human story from the political plight. You interviewed Mohammed El-Kurd, met him. What did the world do when it saw the images of the Kurd household being taken over by a guy from Brooklyn or Long Island who just shows up and lays claim to their home? What did the world do when American settlers suddenly decided they could walk into historic Palestinian homes and throw people out of their homes? What did the world do? And so, yes, this is very much so connected to the broader issue of Palestinian existence. If you realize here, we are erased in peace and we are erased in war. In peace, it's the Abraham Accords, agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors, which is supposedly to solve the Palestinian problem. The Palestinians are absent from their own fate, from discussions about their own fate. In war, it's the Israel-Hamas war. It's Israel and Gaza. Where are the Palestinian people? The millions of Palestinian people that have either been removed from their land or are being tormented on their land, where are they in this discussion?

Lex Fridman

What are the Palestinians in the diaspora feeling?

Omar Suleiman

I think deeply frustrated, a great sense of anger, sadness. Every single Palestinian right now knows someone that's been killed. Every single Palestinian is a part of a story of displacement or destruction. Every single Palestinian has a relative that's either missing a limb or a loved one. Every single Palestinian in the world is traumatized by this. And in some ways, being outside of Palestine, being away from it all hurts even more because you see your people being killed, and starved, and brutalized, and slaughtered, and you can't do anything about it. And the people around you are justifying that slaughter. If you turn on a TV or if you open a mainstream news site, these sites are justifying your slaughter and people are being killed over there because they look like me, because they're Palestinian like I'm Palestinian. And so, we're watching this in diaspora with agony. We can't go, we can't heal our loved ones. We can't comfort the people that are there. I recently spoke to a doctor who's lost 75 relatives, 75 relatives in Gaza, and he's a medical doctor. And all he wants to do is get in there and just use his medical expertise to help his people and he can't. And so, we're watching it from afar, but our hearts are there. They are in the buildings that are being

destroyed. They're in the hospitals that are being bombed. They are there and they're with the people.

Lex Fridman

You're somebody who's always rushed into the midst of a crisis. So, what does it feel like on a personal level to not be able to do that here, to go to Gaza to help?

Omar Suleiman

Yeah, it's really hard. I mean, when any group of people are killed, my instinct, and I think a lot of people is to go there to help, whether it's a natural disaster or especially after an incident of terror, wherever it is. It's rush there and do the best that you can to help people get through it. So, it's been extremely hard to watch this from afar and feel like I can't do anything about it. And so, that's why, instead, I think that most of us are driven to continue to be the voice of the voiceless. I always say that if they've made them faceless, they can't make us voiceless. They have reduced our casualties in Palestine to a number. The number is hundreds a day, over 30,000 people. We're averaging 10,000 people a month. The fact that they've been turned into faceless numbers with no stories, with no humanity, makes it that much more important for us to tell their stories here. And to remind the world that you've lost your humanity if you can watch this unfold and not even have the decency to call for a ceasefire. I mean, that's where we've reached. That's how low it is right now. Calling for a ceasefire has now become radical. So, we have to remind the world that if you're okay with the demolition of an entire town, or a city, or whatever it is that you want to call Gaza because it wasn't always the Gaza Strip, but if you're okay with this and you're okay with this casualty count every single day, it's not just them who are being killed; it's your hearts that are dying. And I think that when I look back to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and I mentioned this, he wrote about Vietnam. He said that if America was to succumb to its spiritual death, the autopsy would read Vietnam. I would say that it would read Gaza now.

Lex Fridman

Speaking of the people, the faces, the voices, one of the people you've talked about, you've posted about, you've written about is Wael Al-Dahdouh, him being hospitalized. He's a Palestinian journalist and the bureau chief of Al Jazeera in Gaza City. What can you tell me about this man?

Omar Suleiman

If Wael Al-Dahdouh wasn't Palestinian, he'd be on the cover of Time Magazine right now. He would be the most celebrated journalist in the world. Wael Al-Dahdouh is from Gaza. He has been in Israeli prisons. He has been under Israeli airstrikes. He has seen the worst of the occupation before. He's seen the worst of the genocide while on TV. I mean, and this is insane when you think about it. We have over a hundred journalists now, that's more than any conflict in history, that have been killed. And there is sufficient evidence by international watchdogs that this is intentional. That journalists have been killed

intentionally, but then their families. Wael was reporting on TV when an airstrike hits his wife, two kids and a grandchild. He goes to the scene. And he said this, "You never expect as a journalist to be the subject of the story." Suddenly, the camera's on him mourning over his dead wife and kids and grandkid, and he even says it in Arabic. He says, "They're taking it out on our children. They're taking it out on our children." I've heard this from multiple people that have had relatives targeted that, "I wish it was me instead." He gets back on camera the same day because he feels a responsibility to continue to cover the lives of the people of Gaza. He understands that his story, as devastating as it is, is not unique in regards to the people of Gaza, that there are many people whose families have been killed in airstrikes. All two million people have been traumatized in some way. And so, he gets back on camera, tells the story again, and then he is targeted himself, his arm struck. His cameraman, Samer Abudaqa, dies in front of him. He bleeds out. Wael watches him bleed out for hours. And while any aid workers try to reach them in the building that they were in, snipers would shoot all of those that were rushing to Samer. So, he watches his cameraman and one of his best friends bleed out to death. Wael goes to the hospital. His arm is wrapped up, gets treatment. He's back on camera the next day. A few weeks later, another child is killed again with his friend in a car. So, this was a targeted airstrike. His son is driving. And his son and his best friend are hit in an airstrike. Wael leads the funeral prayer, is back on camera again, and speaks with such dignity, with such compassion. One of the things that always gets to me, as a Palestinian and as a Muslim too, is that we are portrayed to be these beasts and savages. Tell me a man that would be put through what Wael was put through and still stand on that pulpit and in front of the world with such dignity, with such grace. He continues to tell the story. Wael has become a hero to many of us, and he would be a hero in a world that wasn't anti-Palestinian. And unfortunately, Wael has not only lost his family, he's not only lost much of his own existence, but Wael is part of the greater story of erasure. So, even though he's telling the story of the people of Gaza and he is the story of the people of Gaza, most people will never learn about Wael Al-Dahdouh.

Lex Fridman

You have posted videos and written about what is happening in Gaza since October 7th. What has been happening there, the individual stories and the broader impact on the two million people there?

Omar Suleiman

Gaza has been described as the world's largest open air prison, unemployment, blockaded from all directions, no airport, regular added restrictions placed even on their ability to fish. So, every aspect of Gazan life has been under occupation. I would argue that it's an injustice to even call it an open air prison because inmates are not bombed in prisons routinely by the most sophisticated weapons in the world. Regular bombardment of Gaza, every single person in Gaza has lived through multiple rounds of bombardment. It is deeply distressing. I remember in 2021, there was an image that I will never forget of children having to go back to school after the bombardment of 2021. And next to them, they would have the empty

chairs and the posters of the child that used to sit in that chair. I think what encapsulates it most for me, an image that I grew up with was the image of Muhammad al-Durrah, who was in his father's lap over 20 years ago, and his father was begging for Israel to spare his child. And Muhammad was murdered in his lap. And you know what happened these last rounds? His other kids were murdered. So, Muhammad's brothers were murdered and his father's been on the run. Every single person in Gaza has witnessed multiple wars, has witnessed the greatest suffocation of occupation, has even had their diets restricted, and has suffered under Israel state policy, which is called mowing the lawn. And everyone should look this up. This is what Israeli ministers refer to as routine bombardment of Gaza, mowing the lawn, which shows you that before they called us animals, they considered us insects. And unfortunately, the casualty counts get higher and higher every time, and people become more and more desperate, more and more helpless. Gaza has been, unfortunately, the worst manifestation of anti-Palestinian bigotry. I mean, 60% of the population is a refugee population. What that means, and people do need to understand this, is that people move to Gaza from other parts of occupied territory to find refuge and were practically living on top of each other. There are people that are in the Gaza Strip that know that they had homes right beyond that apartheid wall and those homes were stolen from them, and they can't even enter that territory anymore. And they know that on the other side of that wall, there's life. On the other side of that wall, there's opportunity. On the other side of that wall, you have a passport, you have an airport, you have the ability to travel, you have the ability to export and import, you can dream. But behind that wall, you are to live until the next airstrike. You are to live until Israel mows the lawn again and hope that you're not part of the grass. That's what Gaza has been all of these years.

Lex Fridman

So, pragmatically and psychologically, it's very difficult to flourish when you're just waiting for more bombardment.

Omar Suleiman

Because you know that it's around the corner. You always know when you live in Gaza that it's only a matter of time before the next bombs drop. You know if you're in Gaza that you are waiting for your death. People dream about going out in the world and pursuing education. People dream about going out in the world and pursuing economic opportunity. In Gaza, your idea of opportunity is an opportunity to see the next year. That has been the case. And so, when we talk about this not existing in a vacuum, if people only hear about Gaza on October 7th, that is a major part of the problem. And that is, again, part of the problem of our ignorance and our apathy. Why is it that the plight of the people of Gaza is not brought up until an attack happens on Israel?

Lex Fridman

I've gotten a chance to witness a destroyed school in Ukraine. That's something that is really difficult to see.

Omar Suleiman

You have over a hundred destroyed mosques. Every university in Gaza has been demolished. We're seeing TikTok videos of Israeli soldiers laughing and singing as they press a button. And we see the demolition of every single university in Gaza. Schools have been reduced to rubble. There's a cultural genocide as well. I want you to think about what you saw in Ukraine. Look, imagine coming back to school in Gaza in some destroyed building. You're missing legs. You're missing arms. You have white phosphorus burns. Have you ever seen what white phosphorus does to a person? There's a reason why it's a war crime. You have white phosphorus burns. Your mom's dead. Your dad's dead. All of your uncles and aunts are dead. All of your siblings are dead. Somehow you got pulled out of the rubble. In my own family, my father's in-laws, my father remarried after my mother passed away and they're in Gaza, all of them were killed in an airstrike, except for an elderly aunt who somehow made it out of the rubble a day later. If you're a child that's been pulled out of the rubble, what are you going to grow up with? I mean, what are you supposed to feel? What are you supposed to think? And then you have racist commentators that say, "They could have turned that into a Singapore. The Palestinians are the authors of their own destruction, because if they wanted to, they could have turned this into a place of prosperity, but they keep on bringing destruction upon themselves." So, at the root of this is a bigotry. And again, this idea that Palestinians are savages, they're animals, and the only way to deal with them is to continuously mow the lawn while simultaneously expanding the occupation and erasing anything that was ever called Palestine and any human being that was ever called the Palestinian.

Lex Fridman

So, those kids growing up in Gaza now, to you, they have almost no choice but to have hatred for Israel?

Omar Suleiman

It's human. I mean, look, any child that is under that type of oppression is going to hate their oppressor. I don't care who you are. I don't care what you are. But here's my problem with how that gets brought up. You're talking about the future of the security of Israel. Even some people that speak about it seemingly from a place of being well-meaning, that say the only way that Israel can have its security is to stop killing Palestinians. And so, the future of Israel depends upon Palestinians not hating Israel so much. And so, we've got to stop tormenting these people so that they don't grow up to want to torment us. You've already decided then whose life is worth more than the other. And so, instead of talking about the future of Israeli lives, why don't you talk about the present of Palestinian lives? Instead of talking about whether or not your state will be secure in the future, talk to me about why you're killing children now. Two thirds of the 30,000 civilians are women and children. And so, we can't talk about what these children are going to grow up with. We should talk about whether or not these children are going to grow up in the first place. And that should be

what dominates our conscience right now, and what drives our policies, and what drives our emotions right now.

Lex Fridman

When I had a conversation with Elon Musk, he suggested that what Israel should do is conspicuous acts of kindness. So, do as much positive things in Gaza as possible on a basic individual human level and at a policy level at every level. What do you think about that?

Omar Suleiman

You don't pass out candy in a concentration camp, you and the occupation. And so, there has to be a solution that is beyond merely acts of kindness. At the end of the day, if you're occupying a people, you have to remove that occupation. Apartheid is not dealt with by acts of kindness on the part of the occupying power. Apartheid is dealt with by ending apartheid. And so, there has to be a level of accountability. It's not just acts of kindness. It's not just treating the people with more dignity. It's giving them the ability to pursue their own dignity. There's a reason why it's called Palestinian self-determination. The United States likes to use it in all of its inconsequential statements, that we need Palestinian self-determination too. But the United States also voted against 138 states in the United Nations to allow for Palestinian self-determination. Self-determination means I get to pursue my own course of worth. I get to pursue my own happiness. I don't have to depend on the benevolence of my occupier and when my occupier-To depend on the benevolence of my occupier, and when my occupier feels like throwing me a few more crumbs, it has to end. There has to be a point now where the world says this is not sustainable. It's not just about ending the present genocide. A ceasefire is the bare minimum. I think any decent human being would be calling for a ceasefire right now, but at some point you cease occupation, you cease apartheid because what led to the ability of Israel to carry out a genocide without any accountability was that the global arena has permitted it to do so, largely due to American obstruction of justice.

Lex Fridman

Is violence an effective method of resistance?

Omar Suleiman

So, the framework that I would propose is that Dr. King mentioned that peace is not the absence of violence, it's the presence of justice. And so, occupation and apartheid are violent even in their most benevolent manifestations. The default of occupation is that it is unjustified. The default of apartheid is that it is unjustified, and it must be dealt with. The default of resistance to occupation and apartheid is that it is justified, but there can be transgressions even in resisting occupation and apartheid, right? And I come to this from an Islamic perspective. My moral framework is Islam. The prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him, was outraged when he saw a woman or a child that was dead from the other side, the side of his persecutor. And so, yes, we have a saying as Muslims that they are not our

teachers. Our oppressors are not our teachers, but the concept of resistance to occupation, it is morally justified. It is justified by international law. Any occupied people have the right to defend themselves. We talk about Israel's right to defend itself. Israel is the occupier. Any occupied people by international law have the right to defend themselves, and any occupation is unjustified and illegal. And so, that's where I start from. That's the point that I come to this with. I think that the problem is that the Palestinians are told, "Find better ways to resist," and then they are demonized when they try to find any other way to resist. If you go back a few years ago, you had the Great Return March. People in Gaza marched to the wall in what was one of the most inspiring protests or demonstrations that I had ever seen, March to the Wall, nonviolent protest, and snipers took out their legs. AP actually documented that Israeli snipers had knee counts, where you had an Israeli soldier that would say, "I took out 45 knees." They actually had a register, a scroll of knee counts. And so, you have all these kids in Gaza walking around without legs now because they were targeted by snipers when they marched to the wall. We're told to find methods of nonviolent resistance, but when we boycott, when we launch boycotts around the world, in response to this transgression, in response to this ongoing oppression that the world powers have shown either the inability or the unwillingness to reign in, we're told that that's antisemitic, even though it is based on the South African method of bringing an end to the apartheid regime there. So, don't respond with violence. Don't respond nonviolently. Don't protest. Don't try to use people power in the face of global impotence at the political level. Instead, let's just keep talking about the two-state solution. And while talking about the two-state solution, if you were to look at a map under every single Israeli regime, conservative or liberal, whatever it is, the settlements have expanded. More Palestinian land has disappeared, more Palestinians have been dispossessed, more Palestinians have been killed. And so, we have these little pieces of land that keep on shrinking, and Jerusalem keeps disappearing, and there's aggression whether Palestinians are resisting or not. But then we're told, "Why can't you people just pursue peace? Why can't you just believe in a better way?" All along, we're hearing Israeli ministers become far more radical and open about their intentions to wipe us off the face of the earth. And that is actually their policy. It's not just slogans. It's not fringe elements. Actual Israeli ministers starting from the prime Minister himself, who has executed a policy of the removal of all Palestinian lands and Palestinian lives. And then we're told, "Peace, peace, peace, peace." And it is awfully ugly when you use the language of peace to suffocate the work of justice. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one of his early sermons was something along the lines of, "When Peace Is Obnoxious," when peace is obnoxious. It was in the 1950s around the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and he talked about how this obsession with the language of peace, is usually used to try to keep people in status quo and make them complacent with their miserable situation. That has been the story of the Palestinian people, that they've been told that if you do things differently, then you will find peace. But everything the Palestinians have tried, inside and outside, has been met with repression, the most violent forms of it there in Gaza and beyond. And so look, I start from the place of wanting to see peace. I want to see a situation in which no innocent people lose their lives, but we have to analyze the situation with some

justice, with some fairness. What would any group of people do in this situation? That doesn't mean that you hope for hell. That means that you analyze the existing circumstances of hell, which was life in Gaza even before October 7th.

Lex Fridman

That said, you did talk about Wael Al-Dahdouh and dignity - and you mentioned transgressions - so there is places where violence can go too far?

Omar Suleiman

Absolutely. So violence, again, the point is that you ask yourself why we've been silent about the violence all of this time. And you know what? When people say, "Well, what about this? Well, what about that?" My response is this. What I would love to see is effective international bodies of justice, being able to reign in any party that has committed an act of aggression or committed an act of injustice and hold them accountable. Any reasonable human being would say, "Yeah, you know what? There should be effective international bodies that can reign in parties that can't be reigned in domestically, that could stop the violence. That could assign blame properly, and then have methods of accountability." The problem is that Israel has been made invincible in the international arena because of the United States. And then we wonder why there's such a rise in global anti-American sentiment. It's not because of American freedom. It's because America is directly participating. The United States government is directly participating in the worst genocide that we have ever seen in our lives, playing out on screen, on social media, and we can't do anything about it. So, I think that the point is that we need those international bodies. We need methods of effective accountability, and I would love to see blame properly assigned, and anyone that kills any innocent human being, taken to account, anyone that is guilty of a war crime, taken to account. We have to ask ourselves, why is it that Israel has violated over 63 United Nations resolutions, has expanded its occupation, has killed over 600 Palestinians before October 7th? Why is it that Israel cannot be held accountable? And so when you talk about words that get thrown around, that are used to justify violence against more innocent people, when I'm asked about terrorism, is it only terrorism if it's a non-state actor, if someone's sitting inside a room of suits, and can press a button and terrorize thousands of people and murder innocent people with no consequences, how is that not terrorism? So, if terrorism is only to be assigned to non-state actors, then it's a word without function. In fact, it's a word that justifies more terror that is then reigned upon innocent populations. We have to have moral consistency. Children should not be killed. Non-combatant should not be targeted. We can all agree upon that. Why aren't there proper investigative bodies, and then, proper international bodies of accountability then, that can execute their findings in a way that makes the world a better place. In a way that actually brings about more peace? And so, I think this is where we're at right now, and this is the frustration, and this is the place that the Palestinians have been left.

Lex Fridman

So, to you, violence becomes terrorism when women and children, non-combatants, are killed, no matter who is doing the killing?

Omar Suleiman

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Lex Fridman

In America, for you, for other Palestinians, other Muslims in your community, what has all of this been like?

Omar Suleiman

It feels like there is a return to some of the days after 911, the dehumanization, the feeling of complete disregard for our humanity at the level of government, at the level of media. Feeling of an increase in surveillance, the feeling in an increase in bigotry. People are losing their jobs, and people are being berated on campuses, in grocery stores, and people are being killed. I went to the funeral of a 6-year-old boy who was killed directly due to anti-Palestinian propaganda. And so I think that a lot of us are feeling a return to that, but we also refuse to be cornered into a position where we are told to perpetually condemn acts of violence and not speak about the violence that's committed against us here or abroad.

Lex Fridman

Can you tell the story of this boy, Wadea Al-Fayoume? He's a 6-year-old Palestinian-American boy who was stabbed 26 times in his home in Plainfield Township, Illinois. It was found to be a hate crime motivated by Islamophobia, and the attacker said, "You, Muslims, must die."

Omar Suleiman

So, before Wadea was killed, Wadea was killed on a Saturday. It was the immediate Saturday after October 7th. I remember on Friday, media starts to reach out to every Imam in the country, every Muslim leader in the country, and say, "What are you going to do about this global day of Jihad? What are you going to do about the global day of Jihad?" It's like, "What are you talking about?" It's like, "Well, Hamas has called for a global day of Jihad, so how are you going to stop Muslims from attacking people?" Right? So, it's Friday, and I'm like, "Well, this is the first I'm hearing from you." And I remember responding to a local reporter, most people I just ignored. I responded to a local reporter. I said, "I've got people in my community that have already lost 10, 15 relatives at that point. Now, it's 20, 30, and you haven't said a word, and now you're reaching out to me about the potential violence of Muslims in America. This is great. This is just like 911." What are you going to do to restrain, you angry Muslims, from responding to what's happening overseas, and responding to the call of a global day of Jihad? Guess what? That night, this man takes out a military knife and attacks a six-year-old boy, a six-year-old Palestinian boy. By the way, it gets worse the more details

that you know. And I recently had a chance to go and speak to his mom because she was in the hospital when I was there for the funeral, so I had a chance to visit her not too long ago.

Lex Fridman

And she was attacked, also.

Omar Suleiman

She was attacked first. It was actually their landlord. So Hanaan, the mother, was at home with Wadea, 6-year-old boy. Landlord comes in, and with absolutely no emotion, just charges at her, starts with her. She was able to fight him off. Stabbed her initially seven or eight times with a military grade knife. She fought him off, escaped to call 911. And while she is calling 911, she hears Wadea. Wadea ran up to the man, calling him Uncle Joe because the landlord prior to that, had been kind to them, used to give Wadea toys. Wadea had an infectious, beautiful smile. Every picture you see of that kid, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful smile. And so, Wadea runs up to him, says, "Uncle Joe." He runs up to him to give him a hug, even though he's carrying a military grade knife with blood on it, because Wadea doesn't believe that harm can come to him from that man. And Hanaan didn't think that he would do anything to her kid, even in that fit of rage. The last thing that she says she heard was, "Oh, no," Wadea the says, "Oh, no." And then, he starts to stab him 26 times, says, "You, Muslims, must die." Usually, in a scene like that, police are hesitant to classify something as a hate crime. It was classified as a hate crime the very same day. The thing is that, who's complicit in that hate crime? What filled that man's head for him to believe that he was doing an act of good by murdering a 6-year-old Palestinian boy? And in reality, uncle Joe was motivated by President Joe Biden, who repeated a debunked report that there were 40 beheaded Israeli babies. And he said, "I saw 40 beheaded Israeli babies." The White House walked it back afterwards in a statement that no one reads because it was factually false. But Uncle Joe heard it, and had been binge-watching media about these violent Palestinians, and suddenly the propaganda overcame his own humanity and what he knew of that family. And he went in and ruined their lives. And now, just like any mom, she hasn't moved a thing. His bike is still in the same place it was. His toys are still in the same place. She's left with this great void, this great emptiness. If that was the only crime, it would be enough to wake this country up and say, "Oh, no, this is not where we need to go. Oh, no." Right? The last thing she heard him say was, "Oh no," if that was it. And I got the news, by the way, when I was ironically at a protest. We were protesting on Saturday, Downtown Dallas, and I started getting all these texts about what happened in Chicago. Oh, no. Right? No Muslims attacked anyone. The media was in a frenzy over the global day of Jihad. I got called by national news outlets and local news outlets, "What are you going to do about Muslims that are going to turn into monsters, and start killing people in the streets?" Next thing we know, we have a dead six-year-old Palestinian boy. I went to his funeral, and that's speaks to the proximity part of things. Yeah, it felt like stepping into Gaza for a moment. It didn't feel like America. Didn't feel like America. It felt like stepping into Gaza. His casket, was wrapped in a Palestinian flag. There was not just sadness at his funeral, but a deep sense of anger. At the

funeral, some of his family members shouted out, "Joe Biden, you did this. Joe Biden, you did this." And I remember the next day, it was right after the funeral, looking at the front page of CNN, and the story of Wadea was buried in the last section, and it was right over all these meaningless ads. And I thought to myself, that's it. If this was an Arab man, let's be real. Let's be honest here. If this was a Palestinian landlord that stabbed a six-year-old Jewish boy to death, this would have gotten more attention. It would've been the front page of the news. And rightfully so, people would have grieved over the insanity of stabbing a six-year-old boy 26 times. Wadea became an afterthought the very next day. And so it's an extension of the bigotry, an extension of the racism, and there's so much that happens after that. There's the terrible stabbing of Detroit synagogue president, Samantha Woll, and it's horrible. She was stabbed in her driveway, immediately front page of all the news outlets. Immediately, it's the main news story. And immediately, the implications are, "There go the Muslims. The Palestinians have lost their minds. The Muslims have... They are who we thought they were. That's what it is. They are who we thought they were. They went and they stabbed a synagogue president." It turned out it wasn't a hate crime, although it's an awful crime. It turned out it wasn't a hate crime. Wadea is an afterthought. I had people reach out to me afterwards expressing condolences, and I responded to them, those who have justified the genocide in Gaza but that were somehow offering condolences for Wadea privately, of course. By the way, if a Muslim would've committed that crime, every single Muslim leader would've had press in front of their door to condemn that crime. We would've all been made complicit. Had people reach out to me, say, "I'm sorry about what happened with Wadea. It's terrible. I saw you at the funeral, praying for you." My response was, "What's the difference between Wadea and a boy in Gaza? What's the difference between me and Wadea?" I'm a Palestinian child. My parents made it out of Palestine. I was born in this country. If I didn't have the opportunity to grow up here and to become the person that I became, you would've been justifying my murder right now. You would've been okay with my genocide. You would've been giving the talking points to the press to erase me. But you feel sorry because Wadea was killed. And I think this is when we say that anti-Palestinian bigotry is an extension of Islamophobia. If a mosque gets targeted here, people rightfully rush to protect that mosque and say, "This is horrible, and it shouldn't happen." But when you have an Israeli soldier bombing a mosque and laughing like a maniac on video, and it's going viral on TikTok, and there's no way to reign that in. And you don't have a word of condemnation about it. In fact, you are standing in the way of a ceasefire, then you're a hypocrite. There's no way around it. You are a hypocrite. What's the difference between a mosque here and a mosque there? What's the difference between a Palestinian life here and a Palestinian life there? If you're okay with me being murdered there, don't say that you care about my life here. And so that hypocrisy has been laid bare. We have said multiple times, masks are falling, masks are falling. People that we thought were decent people, somehow have found it in themselves to justify a genocide. There is no shortage at this point of videos. And again, I could have made the excuse for you, maybe in the first few weeks, that you hadn't seen enough. But with all social media suppression across all platforms, there isn't a single platform that hasn't suppressed Palestinian voices. With all that suppression,

there are enough videos at this point of children whose heads have been blowing off. Of children walking around without limbs. Of parents carrying their kids in bags, not body bags, I mean grocery bags because they don't even have body bags, and screaming out, and saying, "Why are you doing this to me? Make it stop." And you come back, and you tell the person, "It's Hamas' fault." Where is your humanity? Where is your sense of decency? Isn't that the logic of the so-called terrorism that you condemn? Yeah, you can wipe out entire populations. You should have talked to Hamas. It's Hamas' fault. All the kids in the West Bank... Where does this end? So, what are your moral boundaries here? If that's the logic that you're okay with, then, in that case, when there's a mass shooter in a school in the United States, just bomb the whole school. In fact, bomb the whole town if you can't find the mass shooter. Where does this end for you? And so when I say people have lost their humanity, they're killing us overseas, but their hearts are dying. People have lost their humanity. They've lost any sense of morality and their moral boundaries, and being there, and participating in this funeral, it was anger. I'm not used to that. I'm not used to that. I'm an imam. I pastor to people. I went to Christchurch, and that was the worst I'd ever seen before where 50 Muslims were killed by a white supremacist, and he murdered them with such callousness. And I remember being at those funerals, and there was anger, but it was just profound sadness because at least the rest of the world could all come out in one voice and say, "That's wrong." Now, most of the world sees what's happening in Gaza and says, this is disgusting. Most of the world sees this, and says, "This is a genocide." But we happen to live in this bubble here where we're constantly being told, "We did this to ourselves." And that's the same logic that led to our initial expulsion, 1948. What was the crime of those 700,000 Palestinians that were driven out of their home in 1948? What did they do? They did not commit the Holocaust. They didn't have a mass murder of Jews at their hands. What did they do? What crime were they paying for? And so, it's been the consistent theme, this is the story of our people, not since October 7th, this is the story of our people for the last 75 years.

Lex Fridman

There is a deep geopolitical connection between the United States and that part of the world. What is the role of US politicians in all of this?

Omar Suleiman

James Baldwin wrote about how Israel was created as an extension of United States policy to be a colonial entity at the gates of the Middle East, and to function essentially as a military base out there, and as a means of extending its policy throughout the Middle East, and it has functioned as such. The United States is not an honest peace broker. It never has been an honest peace broker. The United States has never shown any meaningful inclination towards peace. Has guarded and protected Israel from international accountability, has made Israel invincible. The United States is not just responsible at the governmental level for the genocide. It's responsible for letting it get to this point in the first place. We have funded that arsenal. We've given them the most sophisticated weapons in

the world to test on the most desperate population in the world. We've given them the weapons. It's been bipartisan. We have issued, at most, inconsequential statements of condemnation, but at the same time, stopped any international body of law from actually holding it accountable. So, the United States, at this point, unfortunately, has rightfully lost all credibility. It should remove itself from this because it is not an honest peace broker. I think Americans are probably sick of us paying for wars in general. I think Americans are probably sick of our tax dollars going to funding a genocide, while we have a rise of homelessness and income disparity here in the United States. I think that Americans probably don't like that we're making ourselves so deeply unpopular in the world because of Israel's actions. So, in the immediate moment, make the stop. The United States could have had a ceasefire a long time ago. The United States could have ended this genocide right away. The reason why this is continuing is because of US foreign policy. And in the process of Joe Biden talking about managing this crisis and talking about making things better, there have only been more bills that have come out of Congress. In fact, he's bypassed Congress to fund the arsenal, to keep replenishing the arsenal. Stop paying for weapons. Stop paying for someone else's war crimes. Stop protecting another country as it commits these war crimes. And if you can't be an honest peace broker, get out of the process.

Lex Fridman

So, there's money that you just mentioned, and bills. And then, there's rhetoric, which you also criticized, that he spoke about, the beheaded babies and things of that nature, so where has Joe Biden fallen short?

Omar Suleiman

We need another podcast. That's going to take a few hours to talk about where Joe Biden has failed. For one, the first time he seemed to find the word Palestinian in his vocabulary was when he accused the Palestinians of lying about the death toll in Gaza. And then, that turned out to also be false. In fact, the numbers that were coming out of the Gaza Health Ministry, according to multiple international bodies, have been underreporting Palestinian casualty counts. Israeli intelligence has said that the civilian count or the death toll is actually higher than what's been coming out of the Gaza Health Ministry, so he's failed on that front. He has failed to speak to Palestinian humanity. He has spoken with deep passion and concern, as has Anthony Blinken, about the devastation in Israel and the way that people are feeling in Israel and has shown nothing of that sort towards Palestinians. We don't want the rhetoric. We really don't want the rhetoric. When people say, "Call for a ceasefire," the United States has had an opportunity, and has an opportunity to really walk back and reflect on its entire policy towards Israel-Palestine. This is a moment of reflection. This is a moment of..... of reflection. This is a moment of restoration if you want it to be, right? And to think about what we've enabled in the first place, he's shown absolutely no real empathy, and I think that he is under great delusion in thinking that the Muslim community or people of conscience are going to forgive this, are going to forget this come November. You can't tell us that, "Well, at least I don't have the Trump Muslim ban,"

while also carrying out a genocide primarily against Muslims and think that the Muslims are still going to vote for you. And so we will make him hear us set the polls and any politician, for Congress or otherwise, that has not called for a ceasefire that has been a part of this dehumanization, we will make sure that we cease support for them in any way as a community. It's only right.

Lex Fridman

So Biden has lost or is losing the hearts and the support of the Palestinian people and the Muslim people in America?

Omar Suleiman

I don't know if he ever had the hearts of the Muslim community to be honest with you. I personally was never a Joe Biden fan. I think a lot of people felt the same. This country unfortunately, the way that our political system is built is that you're always voting for the lesser of the two evils. That's always the way that it is, analyzing which evil is lesser, right?

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Omar Suleiman

And when people say, "If you vote for Donald Trump," and I'm not planning to vote for Donald Trump either, but, "if you don't vote for Joe Biden, then you are destroying democracy." I'm like a democracy that's given us a choice between Donald Trump. And Joe Biden is already a failed democracy, and so he never had the hearts and minds of the Muslim community. People always saw past his rhetoric. He always has had a terrible disposition towards Palestine. He's always had a terrible disposition towards the Muslim world. His segregationist past comes out sometimes when he starts talking about the Muslim world, and you can hear the racism in his voice and you can hear the way that he talks about Palestinian life in such devalued fashion. So he lost us a long time ago, but he's definitely not getting us back after this in any way. And I can't speak for all Muslims, but I think that come November, he and all of those politicians, especially in swing states that have turned their back on the Muslim community, and not just the Muslim community, by the way. 67% of this country wants a ceasefire. 3/4 of Democratic voters want a ceasefire. Half of Republican voters want a ceasefire. It's not just the Muslim community. This is not some radical opinion to call for a ceasefire, and every single politician that has refused to hear us is going to pay a price at the polls, as they should. That doesn't mean that we're under any illusion that the other side promises us anything better. In fact, it feels like Republicans have simply rushed to out-racist the Democrats, to outpace them in terms of talking about how they're going to be more unapologetic in supporting Israel unconditionally. It's been pathetic, but something has to change, and I think that Americans of conscience have to look at how this failed political system has hurt people here and abroad and talk about how to transcend that with just more humanity. Again, when you have 67% of the American

public that wants a ceasefire, but only a handful of congressmen out of over 500 can muster up the courage in the face of these super PACs to say that we should stop the genocide, what are you asking for here? You're asking for the genocide to stop. You're asking for Israeli hostages to be brought home. You're asking for Palestinian prisoners to be released. You're asking for peace and to start carving the path out to end this once and for all in the most ambiguous way possible, by the way, because there aren't many radical American politicians. It's the way that the system is. In the most ambiguous, bare way possible, and you can't even bring yourself to do that. This is already a failed democracy then. All the while, again, it always boggles my mind, if you're from the America First crew, what's America First about? Funneling billions and billions and billions of dollars to Israel while it carries out this genocide while people are starving here. And if you're part of the human rights crew and progressive crew, they have a term called progressive except Palestine, right? PeP, Progressive except Palestine. Where are all your notions of social justice? You talk about policing here, but you don't talk about who trains our police departments in many major cities and the type of brutality that's being carried out there. You talk about human rights at the border here, but you don't talk about the assault on people at the border there. You talk about all of these things here, but you somehow use the exact same framings against the people there. So it's exposed, I think, the moral bankruptcy of both political polar opposites that exist in this country right now and hopefully, evoked a greater societal sentiment to say this is ridiculous. One of the things that is happening is that more people are getting their news outside of legacy media outlets. You can't hide that many dead babies anymore. You just can't. More people have woken up to the Palestinian plight now than ever before. More people are outraged that this has been our American foreign policy all throughout Democratic and Republican administrations. This is what we've been paying for? This is what we've been excusing? And Israeli leaders literally spit in the faces of whoever the American president is and says, "Yeah, we don't care what they tell us to do." American leadership says, "We're pushing Israel to minimize the casualties, to get less indiscriminate with its bombing, to manage the crisis, get a few more humanitarian corridors in, to make sure that Gaza is not evacuated and not ethnically cleansed, to make sure Palestinians can come back." And Netanyahu comes on TV and says, "From the river to the sea," how ironic is that? From the river to the sea, and that is his policy. "We're going to make sure that Israel controls from the river to the sea, and we're going to push Palestinians into Sinai and Muslim countries need to take them in." You have Israeli ministers, national defense ministers saying things openly like, "We want to thin out the population," i.e. ethnic cleansing. "We want to remove people, and the Muslim world needs to step up and take in these refugees." And the American administration or the American President says, or an American Secretary of State says, "We're talking to them and we're making sure that that's not going to happen." And if one of their ministers says something, Blinken maybe tweets out something about how that's not going to happen, but then it happens anyway, and then we still write them the checks. So I think most of the American public is probably going to get sick of this at some point, and just people of decency and

people of conscience are going to say, "Yeah, this is not something we want to be a part of anymore."

Lex Fridman

Do you think there's something that Donald Trump can do to help move this in the right direction?

Omar Suleiman

Trump's first words were about how he's going to be worse on this. So he talked about how he's going to deport people, revoke visas of students that are part of these pro-Palestinian rallies.

Lex Fridman

Also, the focus was on the rallies versus what's going on abroad.

Omar Suleiman

Yeah, but look, we had a Donald Trump presidency. He moved the embassy to Jerusalem. He was not better on this. Unfortunately, this is a bipartisan problem. And so again, we're under no illusion here. We're not looking to Donald Trump as a savior here, but we are going to penalize Joe Biden, and I can't speak for everybody, but I think that that's where a lot of our minds are at right now.

Lex Fridman

You spoke at the November 4th demonstration of Washington called the Free Palestine March. It had a lot of people, several hundred thousand people there. What do you remember from that experience?

Omar Suleiman

Well, the first thing I remember is that there was no news coverage of it. So 400,000 people march on DC, one of the largest marches in history. It was nowhere to be found in mainstream media coverage. Whereas when the Stand With Israel Rally happened between the 300,000 strong Palestine rally and the 400,000 strong Palestine rally, there was a Stand with Israel rally where congressmen were bused from Congress to speak at that rally, Democrats and Republicans and high profile celebrities, and it was live-streamed across multiple places. I have to say this, the ICJ, if that wasn't the greatest display of media bias in the domain of United States mainstream media, then I don't know what is. They live-streamed the Israeli defense on multiple news outlets defending itself against the case for genocide and completely omitted the South African presentation of the crimes of Israel the day before. So what I remember first and foremost about the protest is that they were nowhere to be found on mainstream media, which was expected. But what I also remember from the actual day of and from all of the pro Palestine rallies is that I have never seen a more multi-faith, more diverse group of people consistently coming out for Palestine

against the genocide in Gaza than I have this time around. And I think that has been the experience all around. There has been a pronounced Jewish presence, Jewish voice for peace, if not now, other anti-Zionist Jewish groups, groups that are against the genocide, against the occupation. Former Israeli soldiers even that have been showing up at these protests. There has been a pronounced presence from Native American groups, indigenous groups, all across the board, right? Christians, Jews, Muslims. I've never seen more diversity at these rallies than I've seen this time around, which I think is a sign of where things are going. And if you look at the under 35 opinion polls, it's very clear that there's a generational gap here. That the country is moving into a more coherent direction and understanding what has been happening over there, and people from all backgrounds are standing up to it now.

Lex Fridman

What do you think about the protests on campus against Israel?

Omar Suleiman

Every protest I've been to has had the exact same tenor, has had the exact same messaging, but you always have that idiot or two that shows up with a sign and no one knows who that idiot is, ironically. Never comes with anybody else, always shows up somehow in the middle of the protest and puts up a sign that says something completely contrary to the messaging of the protest, and then all the cameras shift towards that guy. I see it every single time. But the overwhelming tenor of all of these protests has been consistent. It's been calling for freedom. It's been calling for liberation. It's been calling for an end to the genocide, a ceasefire, an end to the occupation, an end to the apartheid. I will tell you what many people are not seeing, Columbia University, two former IDF soldiers spraying Palestinian protesters with skunk water, which is what the IDF uses on Palestinian protesters and sometimes on worshipers on their way to Masjid al-Aqsa, which has multiple health repercussions. And so I was reading about how one of the students that was sprayed on campus, that Columbia Palestinian student has showered, at this point of us doing this podcast, 11 times, cannot get the smell out of her, has suffered all sorts of health issues as a result of being sprayed. Again, people are not seeing the other side here. People are not seeing what we've had to deal with at these protests. The open bigotry, and I want you to think about this by the way. People go and serve in the IDF and then come back to the United States or the United Kingdom, and they're not stigmatized for participating in apartheid policies or participating in a genocide. How am I supposed to feel as a Palestinian knowing that this guy right next to me participated in murdering my relatives in Gaza and has open rein to say what he wants to say or do what he wants to do? And so we haven't seen the other side of that as well, but I'd recommend to anyone that's talking about pro-Palestine protests to actually go see one. If you go to the protests, you listen to what's being said, and you don't just capture them, you got 400,000 people. You're going to find four stupid people at a protest of 400,000 people because the protest scene is always messy. But I think that this is a sign of the outrage and the anger and the frustration that

many students have about being silenced. Again, in the media, in academic settings, professors are losing their jobs. Students are having their faces put on trucks, being doxed, these shady watch lists that get put out. I'm on a few of them as well and I just don't care anymore. But you got these shady watch lists. People are losing their jobs at law firms. They're losing all of their future opportunities, young Palestinian students, because of something that they tweeted that's being taken out of context 10 years ago when they were 17 years old. It's ridiculous. And so I think that we have to listen to the overwhelming majority of voices of people that are demonstrating for justice, not demonstrating against anyone, but demonstrating for people. Again, there's a large pronounced Jewish presence at every single pro-Palestine March. In fact, if you look at the organizations, the groups that have taken over Capitol Hill and train stations, it's been, If Not Now, Not In Our Name, Never Again Means For Anyone. It's been Jewish groups, many Jewish anti-occupation groups that have been at the forefronts. And I think that that's where we have to pay attention to the beauty of how diverse this movement for a free Palestine has actually been.

Lex Fridman

So the average sentiment is anti-occupation, not anti-Semitic?

Omar Suleiman

It's incredibly lazy to say that anti-Zionism or that anti-occupation is anti-Semitic. First and foremost, the Palestinians are a Semitic people. That's number one. Number two, look, I'm proud of my community. My community has stood against anti-Semitism in this country. The Muslim community has been at the forefront of condemning anti-Semitism. We have stood in front of synagogues. We have stood with the Jewish community when the Jewish community is attacked. This is about occupation. This is a story of a colonial entity that has driven us out of our homes and has done so in such a way that has forced us to try to be the voice of a people that are being exterminated overseas right now. This is not an anti-Semitic movement. This is a pro-freedom movement.

Lex Fridman

Do you think the protests ever go too far?

Omar Suleiman

The protest scene is a messy scene, and so again, you're going to have sometimes that odd speaker or people get carried away in their emotions. And yes, sometimes people chant things or do things that are contrary to the protests. It's pretty unfair when you judge the entire protest movement by some of these incidents that have happened at protests, and you don't pay attention to what they're protesting about in the first place, which is a genocide. Right now, everything is secondary to ending a genocide that is ongoing. In the course of this discussion, it's not an exaggeration to say that at least 30, 40 people would've been killed just over the last few hours because we're averaging 135 to 150 a day. So

everything else is secondary to that. This is where we all need to be right now as people of conscience. How do we stop this? Because every single day is deeply costly.

Lex Fridman

Do you think there has been a rise of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hate in the US?

Omar Suleiman

Yeah, I think that's factual. Look, anti-Semitism is always to be condemned. It's wrong. It's something that as a Muslim community and as people of conscience, we have always taken a stand against. Jewish people should not be attacked for being Jewish people here or anywhere else. Synagogues should be protected, and if a person is attacked for being Jewish, we will be the first to go and to stand with them and to reject that attack on them. And there has been, as I said, an inspiring pronounced Jewish presence in the movement to end the occupation. And so we're being morally consistent here. As far as the rise in Islamophobia, it is felt. It's under-reported, and it is part of the same framing that has led to the devastation of our people overseas. So there's a rise in Islamophobia. There's a rise in anti-Semitism. There's a rise in hatred. All of that is true, but there's also an ongoing genocide, and that should be our priority right now to end.

Lex Fridman

I think we spoke last time, about a year ago, how has your view on Benjamin Netanyahu evolved over time?

Omar Suleiman

Benjamin Netanyahu has committed himself to the erasure of Palestinian people and Palestinian symbols and Palestinian land. From the very beginning of his political career, this is who he has been. We just haven't been listening to him. He campaigned on bigotry and racism and on the promise that there would never be a Palestinian state. He campaigned on the promise that Gaza would be wiped out. He campaigned by saying, "The Arabs are rushing to the polls. We need to make sure that they don't infect our policy." He has always been this person. This has always been his policy. He has always indicated that genocide and ethnic cleansing is where he wants to go. So he's simply manifesting what his message has always been, and anyone that ignores that is being disingenuous. You can find statements from Benjamin Netanyahu in the '80s, '90s, 2000s. You can find him talking about this prior to October 7th and after October 7th. He's definitely doing this now to save his political career. I think he wants to drive this as long as he possibly can because he knows that his days in office are numbered. But let's also ask ourselves, why is it that Benjamin Netanyahu was able to rise to power in the first place? There's something deeply troubling about the fact that his messaging ever resonated and what the prospects are for peace if Benjamin Netanyahu is able to rise with such pronounced hateful messaging.

Lex Fridman

So the claim that security of Israel is the primary concern is, you're saying, a dishonest claim?

Omar Suleiman

I think he's trying to secure his seat in office. He knows his days are numbered. This is not about Israel. This isn't about the hostages for him. This isn't about anything but Benjamin Netanyahu, he is a narcissist. He's a tyrant. He is despised around the world, and I think even amongst Israelis, I think there's a deep hatred for him. I think the hostages' families know that he doesn't care about the families or about the hostages, that he's driving a political agenda that doesn't care about people, not Palestinian people or otherwise. However, the problem of the occupation is not Benjamin Netanyahu. The problem of the occupation is the occupation. Yair Lapid was the progressive, moderate alternative, and he drove just as bigoted of an agenda against the Palestinian people as possible. So to the Palestinian that's living in Gaza or the Palestinian in the West Bank, whoever whoever's sitting in that seat has meant the exact same thing to them. But Benjamin Netanyahu is certainly, I think, the loudest bigot that we have seen in that seat.

Lex Fridman

Do you think Israel has the right to defend his borders?

Omar Suleiman

I think Israel has a responsibility to protect those that it occupies. I think you have to ask that question differently. Noura Erakat wrote a tremendous article on this from a legal perspective. When you talk about Israel defending itself, Israel is bound to occupation law. This is the problem all along. When John Kerry said, of course, "The US is great sometimes at issuing inconsequential statements that Israel has to choose whether or not it wants to be a Jewish or a Democratic state, but it can't be both." Israel wants to occupy and deny, and at the same time not be held to the standards of being an occupier, but be treated as if it's some normal state. Those borders were drawn across occupied land and have been expanding into Palestinian territory, and people have been thrown out of their homes systematically and transgressed upon, even in the places that they fled to, which is Gaza. So when you talk about Israel having a right to defend itself, you should be talking about Israel's duty to protect everyone under its occupation. Either lift the occupation or protect everyone under your occupation. Where are your borders? What is your responsibility? Who are you protecting? And I think that it speaks to the fact that Israeli policy considers Palestinians to be animals. They say as much and they do as much. I've spoken about James Baldwin and James Baldwin talked about this pious silence surrounding Israel that we're supposed to pretend like it's just another state and ignore how it came into being and what it functions as. And I think that pious silence has to be broken. I remember John Stewart when he had the Daily Show several years ago, and he talked about this policy of, "We have to defend ourselves." And if someone was attacking your home, what would you do? And the

response was, "Well, why are you forcing people into a closet?" So you force people into this desperate situation. You drive them out of their homes, claim their homes, and then say that you're defending yourself against them. The default is that an occupied people have a right to defend themselves. The occupier is obligated to those that they occupy.

Lex Fridman

Can you speak to this term "occupation" in Gaza? Because the people that say it is not an occupation say that Israeli troops have been pulled out from there before October 7th for many years. And to you, it still is a de facto occupation.

Omar Suleiman

Israel doesn't get to set the terms and then define them. It is an occupation according to any international legal standard. Israel controls the movement of everyone in Gaza. It controls the air and the seas. It controls the ability to import or export. The people that live in Gaza and the people that live in the West Bank, the Palestinians have had their identity stolen from them. So there's the freedom of movement. There is the freedom of thriving. There is self-determination. All of that has been stolen from the people of Gaza. There's no airport in Gaza, that was destroyed by Israel as well. It is an occupation at every level and by any meaningful legal determination.

Lex Fridman

What do you think about Yemen's Houthi rebels attacking Israel in response to October 7th and then the United States and the UK initiating bombing of multiple targets in Yemen in response to that?

Omar Suleiman

Yeah. I think that it's clear that the United States cares more about its shipping lanes than it does about Palestinian lives, and that actually has proved it. Look, I do not support the Houthis as Houthis or their policies in general, but if you look at what has transpired and what they have said, they're attacking these ships in response to the occupation or in response to the genocide and saying that they will continue to do so, to stop business as usual until a ceasefire is reached. They have not killed anyone. They have seized ships. They have blocked the lanes, but they have said that if a ceasefire happens, they will cease their activity. So instead of the United States trying to get a ceasefire through, the United States decided, let's go bomb Yemen too. Let's spend more money on weapons and killing innocent people, which shows you exactly where our policy always leads itself to, unfortunately. So I think that most reasonable people would say that the problem is not with Yemeni rebels attacking ships. The problem is with Israel attacking innocent Palestinian lives.

Lex Fridman

You mentioned paying respects to the legacy of EBJ, Eddie Bernice Johnson, and remembering Palestinian child prisoners. Can you explain?

Omar Suleiman

So Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson was one of the few co-sponsors of a bill that has been on the floor of Congress for years, initially sponsored by Congresswoman Betty McCollum to penalize Israel for its detention of child prisoners. Thousands of children arbitrarily detained, put in military courts, solitary confinement, and yes, sexual violence that's been documented by human rights organizations against them, and there have been no repercussions. So I want you to think about this, just the thought of conditioning aid to Israel so that it doesn't indiscriminately bomb entire populations has not been able to find any home in mainstream American politics. For years. Just trying to stop Israel from picking up children and throwing them into military prisons where they disappear for decades at times, has not found any thrust in mainstream American politics. Whereas any resolution that is pro-Israel will make it past both chambers relatively quickly. When people talk about Israeli hostages and then talk about Palestinian prisoners, there's already a problem with that framing. First of all, 2.2 million people in Gaza are hostages. Every Palestinian that live... Two million people in Gaza are hostages. Every Palestinian that lives under occupation is a hostage. But all of those prisoners that have been picked up, women, children, innocent people with absolutely no process of making sure that they're treated right, or given fair trials, or even given a communication line with their families, or with any government to help them, is absolutely criminal. All of those prisoners are also hostages. When you already propose this idea that there are Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, you're already implying that one group is complicit in their own devastation, whereas another group has had devastation visited upon them entirely out of their own doing. So it's important for people to learn about children prisoners who are indeed hostages to an apartheid system. Even what happened during that four-day truce, which all of us hoped would be extended and become permanent, where 150 Palestinian prisoners were released, Israel just went and picked up another 135 in the West Bank and threw them in prisons. That's what I mean when I say you're not addressing the root of the problem. The root of the problem is the occupation. The root of the problem is the apartheid. The root of the problem is the desperation that then drives the creation of all sorts of circumstances that will only further lead to the devastation of everyone, right? If you don't solve that problem. At the root of that problem is the dehumanization of the Palestinian, because no one is raising alarms for those Palestinian hostages in Israeli military prisons. No one is putting up their pictures, and no one is talking about who they are, and their human stories, and the violence that's been wreaked against them at every level. If you don't solve not just the root of occupation, but also the dehumanization that drives the occupation, which is unfortunately so pervasive right now in the discourse, then you're going to continue to have this gap in how the world sees the plight of the Palestinians and how, unfortunately, the American public sees the problem of the Palestinians.

Lex Fridman

And to you, big peace agreements of the like of Abraham Accords should include Palestine.

Omar Suleiman

Abraham Accords is nothing but an agreement in which you slap the name of Abraham on arms deals. In exchange for countries being able to undertake their own unholy pursuits, they use one of the holiest names in history and continue to erase the main victims of this atrocity. So the Abraham Accords are an insult to humanity, an insult to the Palestinians, an insult to the name of Abraham.

Lex Fridman

But do you think something like that, agreements of that nature, of that scale, could be made that include the Palestinian people and that would actually make progress?

Omar Suleiman

If they're honest to the plight of the Palestinians. If they are honest to the roots of the problem, absolutely. Look, again, peace is sought, but peace cannot be used to silence. The entire peace process has been hung over the Palestinians all of these years while settlements continue to expand and their situation only continue to get worse. Is Israel really going to remove the 700,000, 800,000 settlers and suddenly change its tune on a two-state solution? Benjamin Netanyahu is saying right now, and he's speaking to, unfortunately, what is clearly a majority of the Israeli public, that there will never be a Palestinian state. So these peace talks cannot be used to suffocate all of the work of justice and bringing Israel to accountability. The world has to act when they see apartheid. The world has to act when they see occupation. If the world fails to bring Israel to a place of accountability, then a few countries that have their own agendas cannot put forth anything meaningful for the victims of Israel, being the Palestinian people.

Lex Fridman

There's a lot of questions I want to ask you about the nature of resistance and what is the proper way to resist. What is the practical, pragmatic, effective ways of resisting. One example that is often brought up is the difference between MLK and Malcolm X. One emphasized nonviolent resistance, the other emphasized any-means-necessary resistance. Which do you side with in general, and in this particular case of what has happened over the past 100-plus days?

Omar Suleiman

In general, that framing relies on a sanitization of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and a vilification of Malcolm X, that a lot of people do put forth and present as two polar opposites in how they approached the plight of Black people in America and resisting racism here in America. When I taught a course at Southern Methodist University on MLK, and Malcolm X, and Islam, and the Civil Rights Movement, what I'd often do is I'd give my students a set of quotes. I would say, "Assign this to Malcolm or Martin." and they'd always get it wrong, right? You can find quotes from MLK in Breaking the Silence, and especially when he took a stand against the Vietnam War, that sound so radical when you compare them to the image of

MLK. And Malcolm is, of course, turned into this militant, angry Muslim who just wanted violence and was seeking chaos here in the United States. So let's be clear about something here, that Malcolm never himself was part of any violence. Malcolm never did anything violent. Malcolm found it hypocritical to commit the oppressed people to nonviolence while not restraining the oppressor from its violence. I agree with Malcolm. It is absolutely hypocritical to focus your attention and your energy on the oppressed people, and committing them to nonviolence, while not directing your attention to the oppressor. When you have such asymmetry, when you have a clear aggressor and aggressed upon, you have a clear colonial entity and a clear colonized people, you focus your energy on restraining the colonial power. You focus your energy on restraining the oppressor, not the oppressed. That was Malcolm's point, and it's clear in his messaging throughout his religious growth, because, of course, Malcolm did evolve as a person. But Malcolm found it deeply hypocritical to commit the oppressed to nonviolence. Malcolm also had a deep understanding of the way that brutality here, state violence in the United States was connected to its state violence abroad and American imperialism as a whole. Malcolm was the first to speak on Vietnam, the first major African American leader to speak on Vietnam. Martin followed. Malcolm also went to Gaza in 1964. 1964, went to Khan Yunis, which is now under heavy bombardment, and Malcolm penned an essay on Zionism, and connected Zionism to American imperialism and the broader implications of America's foreign policy. So Martin and Malcolm, if you look at them in the capacity of what's happening right now, where I would say you can find something that is deeply profound, James Cone wrote a book called Malcolm & Martin: Dreams and Nightmares. He wrote something profound to the effect that Martin tried to liberate white people from their own racism, whereas Malcolm tried to liberate Black people from the effects of that racism on them. They both played a deeply important role. Self-determination is crucial to maintain the fuel of a movement. I think one of the things that probably deeply frustrates those that have sought the erasure of Palestine is that Palestinian consciousness has only continued to grow after 75 years. Palestinians in diaspora and Palestinians within occupied territory all are deeply rooted in their Palestinian identity and existence, and they're not going away. So I think that that's where the function is important of this, whereas those that are complicit in the oppression need to be liberated from their own oppression and liberated from what they're participating in. Most Americans that I talk to, that have absolutely no idea about what's going on, when they come to hear just a few stories of the plight of the Palestinian people, and the types of brutality that we have encountered, wake up to this and say, "Oh, my God. This is what my tax dollars go to? This is what I'm a part of?" Right? So we have to liberate people across the board from being oppressors or from being oppressed.

Lex Fridman

What do you think about the seeming fact the majority of Palestinians support the October 7th attacks?

Omar Suleiman

You have to see their world through their eyes. You can't try to see their world through your eyes. If you live under occupation, you're routinely harassed at Israeli checkpoints. The occupation is expanding into your territory. You're meeting families regularly that have been thrown out of their homes and that are looking for a new place in this shrinking territory. You deal with routine airstrikes. You have no way to get out. You have no way to grow. You don't even have a passport. Your education is subpar. Your standards of living are lower than the rest of the world. And all you hear from the other side, which dominates the discourse and dominates every element of your existence, are promises of complete erasure. I mentioned 2023, 13,000 new settlement units being advanced. If that happened anywhere, right? Just think about what that means when you clear out a village or two, and it's not that big of a territory, right? When you know that that's happening, and when you have been subjected to that, anyone that claims to be supporting you or uplifting you from that state of misery is going to have sympathy. Whether you agree with their mission, or their methods, or not, it's human. It is human that if anyone says that they are going to get you out of this misery, and inflict pain on those who have given you a life of pain, and promised you a future of pain, you're going to have sympathy to that group whether you agree with them or not. I think that the question also has to be asked, what about the Israeli public? Israel holds all of the power in that region, holds all of the power over that territory. Is able to dominate the expansion of its own territory and diminish any Palestinian territory. Is able to place restrictions whenever it wants on Palestinian movement, trying to get to their holy sites or otherwise. Whether it's Masjid al-Aqsa, or the Holy Sepulchre, or the Church of Nativity, right? The majority of the Israeli public, before October 7th, unfortunately, according to all polls, favors a nondemocratic regime, the end of a two-state solution, does not care about the plight of Palestinian people, the majority of the Israeli public. Why is that? And what does that mean for Palestinians, right? Especially now after this genocide, the vast majority of the Israeli public does not favor a ceasefire, right? What are we supposed to do when we see mainstream media coming out of Israel, pop culture, TikTok videos that only speak to a greater desire to eliminate the Palestinian people, right? So anyone that says that they are going to support your plight, whether you agree with their mission or their methods, is going to resonate with that child that has grown up in those desperate circumstances. Bassem Youssef had an interview with Piers Morgan and he was talking about this. He literally gave it a human story. If you're a child that's grown up, you've lost limbs, your parents are dead, your friends are dead. You have been made a refugee two or three times already. You have no future in sight, and then someone comes to you and says, "I'm going to help you and I'm going to fight back on your behalf." of course, it's going to resonate. It's human, right? So I think that it's important for us to see the world through their eyes, rather than try to see the world through our eyes.

Lex Fridman

So as Malcolm X did, you're calling for highlighting the asymmetry in violence and asymmetry in moral reasoning.

Omar Suleiman

Absolutely. It's important. You're not going to be able to solve this problem unless you're able to do that. When Malcolm said that if you stick a knife nine inches into my back and pull it out six inches, that's not progress. Progress is healing the wounds, and you're not even willing to acknowledge that the knife is there yet. Those that don't acknowledge what is determined now by any international human rights organization, even Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem and others, to be apartheid, a state of apartheid and a state of occupation, and now an unfolding genocide, are not partners for peace.

Lex Fridman

It just hurts me to think how long it takes to heal. Even if the healing begins now, with the knife metaphor, it's just going to be generations. Because people don't forget when your father and mother were murdered, or somebody that you know in your family was killed. They don't forget.

Omar Suleiman

Look, I think the point is that we have to come to terms with the fact that the trauma of the past does not justify the murder of the present, and the fear of the future does not justify the murder of the present. The urgency of the world right now should be entirely focused on ending this atrocity that, unfortunately, the world has become so complacent with. Again, prior to October 7th, the status quo was not acceptable, and there was no means in sight in the global arena to rein this in, to make Israel more accountable to stop this. I do believe in the power of healing. I do believe in the power of growth. I do believe that we have seen ugly episodes of history before that have been rectified. I also believe in the heart of my people. I believe that the Palestinian people are people of resistance, they're people of resilience, they're people of courage. They're people of benevolence and magnanimity, and they're people who have been made to grow under the worst of circumstances. I don't see, in the hearts of young Palestinians that have been tormented, I don't see darkness. I see light. I see the ability to still laugh and find joy despite everything that's happened. So I think that the urgency right now just has to be towards ensuring that they have a life, that they're not being killed anymore.

Lex Fridman

I was wondering if you can comment on a idea and notion that comes up often in conversations about this, of why can't other nations in the region take in Palestinian refugees?

Omar Suleiman

I think that we have to tackle what's implied by that at multiple levels, and I actually want to walk back. I was listening to Nikki Haley, when she said in one of her interviews, "Why is it that you think no one wants to take the Palestinians in?" She had this deeply disturbing laugh to it. Or Ben Shapiro, when he said, "Israelis like to build and Arabs like to bomb crap

and live in their sewage." Or, "Why is it that no one wants to govern the Palestinians?" suggesting that Palestinians are ungovernable and not fit to bring into your countries, and that's why they're being turned away. You know who else faced that bigotry? Jews trying to escape the Holocaust. 1939, 300,000 Germans applied for refuge here in the United States. I think only about 10,000 were allowed in, and we also turned away ships of Jews that were seeking refuge here in the United States, on what basis? That they were national security threats and could not be trusted. They could not be taken in. That's the same bigotry that's driving this, and I want you to think about it from that perspective. How deeply offensive that is when you have millions of Palestinians in diaspora. Where have Palestinians caused trouble where they've gone? Everywhere Palestinians are, they have overcome significant hurdles to become scientists, and doctors, and to grow themselves, and to grow the places that they're in. Where have Palestinians that have been displaced all over the world caused issues for people, right? It's both racist and factually incorrect. That's not the right question that should be asked. The question that should be asked are, why are these people driven from their homes? Not, why won't other people around them open their homes to them? So I'll just share with you that, even on a personal level, it's really interesting, because sometimes on Twitter or wherever it is, it'll be like, "Go back home." Right? "Why don't you go back home?" And I'm sitting there thinking to myself like, "Sure. My parents were driven from their homes. Yeah, sure. I was born in this country as a consequence of bad policy." Now, I embrace my complicated identity in that regard, and I hope to be productive as an American, but I am a Palestinian. And Palestinians in diaspora that have been fortunate enough to have the ability to build and to overcome circumstances should not be an excuse for eliminating the Palestinians that remain in their homes under that torment. So this bigotry is not new, unfortunately. Its manifestation is ugly, and we have to push back on it whenever it shows itself, no matter who it's being spoken about.

Lex Fridman

How difficult has it been for people in Gaza to flee?

Omar Suleiman

I mean, they're blockaded from all directions. There is nowhere for people in Gaza to go. They cannot get out, and the reality is that they don't want to leave. They do not want to leave. The Palestinian people want to live in their land, in their homes, and to continue to produce an extension of the beautiful culture and legacy that was handed to them. They don't want to leave. In fact, those that have fled for whatever reason, or have been able to get out for medical treatment, or because they have some sort of citizenship in other countries, all they're talking about is going back and rebuilding. You can't bomb Palestine out of our hearts. You cannot starve Palestine out of our hearts. I think that's a critical mistake that Israel is making. It thinks that if it destroys Gaza enough, if it wipes out all the buildings, that people will never want to come back. But we don't want to go anywhere, as a Palestinian people, in a way that would remove us from our homes.

Lex Fridman

The Palestinian people are proud people.

Omar Suleiman

Yeah, you've met a lot of them, right? When you sat with Mohammed El-Kurd, or people in East Jerusalem, what those people have been subjected to, the harassment. Think about the tenacity and the character that it takes to still try to walk back into your home after an intruder has been brought in by the state, that's sitting in your living room, that is pushing you around, and you're saying, "I'm not leaving my home." This is literally what's been happening in East Jerusalem, and we're not going anywhere. I think those of us that are in diaspora, Palestine is not leaving our hearts, and those of us that are still there are not leaving their land. The world has to make the occupier more accountable, not tell the occupied how to cope.

Lex Fridman

Do you ever imagine that if your family did not flee and you were now living, say in Gaza, what you would be doing?

Omar Suleiman

I think about what could've been all the time. I actually mentioned this in the first D.C. protest, that I remember getting a news notification just prior to October, with my name in it. I always get these notifications, right, if my name has been mentioned in an article. So, "Oh, your name has been mentioned in an article." and it was a 16-year-old Omar Suleiman who was murdered in the West Bank. He literally had my name. I held up his picture and I realized that could've been me. So I think of why God chose me to not be there, and hopefully Him choosing all of us that are not there to be for those that are still there, to be their voices. I'm grateful and I'm also in pain. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be able to speak on their behalf, but I'm also guilty that they have to bear the brunt of this evil hatred that unfortunately displaced our parents in the first place.

Lex Fridman

You mentioned that Palestinians invoke the plight of Indigenous people like Native Americans. What works and doesn't work about this analogy?

Omar Suleiman

I think that there's a powerful connection between the Palestinian people and the Indigenous in this land and in other places that have been wronged. We are living here in the United States on stolen lands that is drenched in the blood of the Natives, and that was built upon with the blood, sweat, and labor of enslaved Africans that were brought from overseas. It's a great evil that we have to reckon with constantly, so I think that's the power of solidarity. If you look in Canada and you look in places like Australia, there has been a refocus on the crimes against the Indigenous of those places. I think that what makes the

Palestinian plight deeply painful, and maybe where the analogy even doesn't do justice, is that from the river to the sea is less than 500 times what the United States is in terms of land. It's not that big of a piece of land. The original lie was, "A land without a people for a people without a land." The problem was that there were people on that land that were forcibly removed. So I think that the sheer size, right? We're talking about a tiny piece of land, and a lot of people that were removed forcibly from their land, and that continue to be brutalized under those miserable conditions.

Lex Fridman

Why is Palestine a special place, a holy land?

Omar Suleiman

It's the land of prophets. It is a land that holds deep significance, obviously to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It's the land of Abraham, peace be upon him. It is the land that has such a rich history to it that connects multiple peoples in multiple ways. It's precious. I think that history, while it tells the story of tragedy and struggle over that piece of land, also tells a beautiful story of sanctity.

Lex Fridman

You mention Abraham, prophets. Prophet Muhammad is deeply venerated in Islam, obviously, but other prophets are as well, Jesus being one of them. What are the similarities and differences in the teachings from these two prophets?

Omar Suleiman

Well, Islam refers to this idea of submission to one God and attaining peace in the process. And refers to the way of life that prophets have all come with, which is this idea of monotheism, and serving that one God in the way that he commands you to serve him. So to us, as it says in the Quran that we do not distinguish between the prophets, all of the prophets came with one message, one mission. There's a coherence in the creed. There is a beauty in the foundation of what would become the legislation of each of those prophets, and we see them all as siblings in prophethood. So we say, "Abraham, peace be upon him." We say, "Jesus, peace be upon him." We say, "Moses, peace be upon him." We say, "Muhammad, peace be upon him." We believe that Moses came to confirm what came from Abraham. Jesus came to confirm what came from Moses. Muhammad came to confirm what came from Jesus. They upheld the same message. God did not change over time, nor did the centrality of his message of monotheism change over time, and so to us, it's one beautiful house. There's a saying from the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, where he describes the house of prophethood, each prophet being a brick, and him simply being the last brick of a beautiful house. And so we love the prophets of God and we believe that they—And so we love the prophets of God and we believe that they each came with the legislation that was necessary for the time, but with the same message.

Lex Fridman

So the message is fundamentally the same. Is there a difference in emphasis, for example, the emphasis on love with Jesus?

Omar Suleiman

Yeah. It's like when you talk about MLK and Malcolm to an extent, except there was actually some difference, right, between MLK and Malcolm. I just think that the difference is exaggerated between them. But I don't think that Moses didn't emphasize love, but Jesus emphasized love. And then Muhammad didn't emphasize love, peace be upon them all. I think that they each emphasized the same attributes and names of God and ways of knowing God. But there were, of course, changes within legislation, changes within the divine law, but the divine spirit remained the same. And so I don't see them as being counter to each other, nor do I see that any prophet betrayed the message that came before them. I think they're all part of the same beautiful message that we have to be at harmony with our creator and that we turn towards him for our guidance, and that when we do so, we establish a greater existence here on earth. And so I think that that's something that's consistent throughout the message of all the prophets.

Lex Fridman

You have been longtime friends with and had amazing conversations with people of other faiths, Christian, Jewish. How has the events of October 7th and the days after affected this in the United States? Your ability to have interfaith conversations, connections, relationships, friendships.

Omar Suleiman

Complicated. Very complicated. And it's not just Muslims and Jews, it's also Christian Zionists. Christian Zionism is at the root of the problem, in my opinion, especially when we talk about what drives America's unshakable, unconditional commitment to Israel. It's devastating, I think, to Palestinian Christians in particular when Israel can bomb some of the oldest churches of Christianity in Gaza and kill Palestinian Christians, and Palestinian Christians are barred from going to the Holy Sepulcher or to their places of worship in Bethlehem or Jerusalem, and Christians here in the United States turn their back on them. I think that it is particularly outrageous. So it's complicated. Look, I expect more from people in the face of a genocide. We don't have to agree on all the particulars, but we can agree that what is happening is morally outrageous. And so I think that I've had a few people that have reached out and said, "I want to say something, but I can't." And I've had to respond with, that's not good enough. So I think that we have a problem, and instead of focusing on that problem, I'd like to focus on the more morally consistent voices across faiths that have risen to the moment rather than those that have failed.

Lex Fridman

So you wish more rabbis would be able to have a conversation like we're having today and also not allow it to be seen as them turning their back on their religion?

Omar Suleiman

Rabbis, pastors, again, it's not just Jewish leadership; it's also Christian leadership. I think that it's important for those that have claimed to be allies in the fight against Islamophobia, to see that you cannot be opposed to Islamophobia while also extending anti-Palestinian bigotry.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, one of the things since we last spoke, I've gotten to meet a lot of Palestinian Christians, including in West Bank, and that was fascinating. And those are beautiful people.

Omar Suleiman

I think people should watch Reverend Munther Isaac's sermon on Christmas, Jesus in the Rubble. It was deeply profound. I had a chance to speak to Mitri Raheb from the Lutheran Church there as well. No, they're devastated. It was eyeopening to many people here when Justin Amash, who was a Republican congressman, right, Palestinian Christian, Republican congressman, posted about his own family dying in one of the church bombings. So it's strange, strange times. And I think that it shows that the philosophy of hate that drives this terrible policy is secular at its root and not religious.

Lex Fridman

One of the criticisms of Islam points to specific verses of the Quran and the criticism being that it is not a religion of peace. Can you speak to that?

Omar Suleiman

So objectively speaking, if you were to take the verses of the Quran about violence and compare them just from a purely percentage-based comparison to the New Testament and the Old Testament, you would find less verses about war in the Quran than the Old Testament or the New Testament. And there are plenty of studies to speak to that. Deeper than that, contextualizing the birth of Islam, the revelation of the Quran, which was over 23 years in response to deep persecution of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, makes it very clear that none of those verses are what they've been made out to be. If Muslims believed that they had to kill people wherever they are, mankind would not exist. There are two billion of us, right? If we believe that we were called by the Quran to hurt people and to kill people simply for being non-believers, right, it would not make for a sustainable world. So Islam is not violent. And I think that the history of Muslims also bears witness to that. The history of Islam is a history of contribution, is a history of building, is a history of medicine, and science, and math. And of course, Muslims have sometimes fallen short of Islamic standards in the past and in the present. But if you look at the overall

history of Islam and the history of the Muslim community, that's not the case. And when you look at the present Muslim community around the world, Muslims do not account for a greater proportion of violence than other faith communities. And again, the word terrorist is a functionless and meaningless word, because, to me, it's no less violent if it's commanded by a head of state or by a government than by a non-state actor. So Muslims do not account for a greater portion of violence now, nor have they accounted for a greater portion of violence in the past.

Lex Fridman

Why do you think these narratives have taken hold in present discourse, at least in the United States?

Omar Suleiman

Because they allow for greater violence against the Muslim community domestically and abroad. The United States has launched wars against primarily Muslim countries, right? And has a particularly violent foreign policy towards the Muslim world. And the Muslim community here in the United States has dealt with, unfortunately, multiple aggressive iterations of programs of suppression and surveillance under Republican and Democratic administrations. And so there's a convenience to that Islamophobia. There's a convenience to that framing of the Muslim community that also distracts from other forms of violence that are deeply pervasive and present, including the ones that are committed by the government itself.

Lex Fridman

If it's okay, you've mentioned al-Aqsa Mosque a couple of times. I would love it if you can describe why it is such an important place, a holy place for Muslims in general, but also for this particular crisis that we have been speaking about today.

Omar Suleiman

So Muslims honor the history of all of the prophets. So all of the prophets that have walked in that place, all of the prophets that have worshiped in that place, all of that makes it sacred. So it's not separated from Muslims, from post-Muhammad, peace be upon him, versus prior to Muhammad, peace be upon him, in terms of the sanctity of that place. So we honor it. And Masjid al-Aqsa in particular is the place where the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, leads the other prophets in prayer in the night of what's known as Al-Isra' wal-Mi'raj, the night journey of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and then he ascends to the heavens and back. And it's also the first Qibla, which is the first place of direction of prayer for us. So before Muslims faced Mecca and prayer, for the first half of Islam, they actually faced towards Jerusalem in their prayer. It was our direction of prayer, and it remained a fundamental part of our faith, fundamental holy sanctuary. There are three sanctuaries in Islam, Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, and Masjid al-Aqsa is precious to us. And so you can imagine then the pain of watching innocent Palestinian worshipers being stomped on by

Israeli soldiers or skunk water being sprayed on people as they're trying to walk in, or tear gassing taking place in the nights of Ramadan in that place. The restrictions on people that live right next to it and that cannot pray in it due to the certain classification of Palestinian that they've been given or the age, because, generally speaking, if you're younger, you're not allowed to go to Masjid al- Aqsa, even if you live within the occupied territories. So it's tough to watch such a sacred place with such an ugly occupation. But I'll also say this, that the sanctity of a human being, the sanctity of just one person is greater than the sanctity of any place of worship to us. So the sanctity of one individual in Gaza or one individual in Jerusalem is greater to us than the sanctity of a place of worship. But it is all certainly interconnected.

Lex Fridman

That's a really powerful idea. The value of a human being is greater than even the al-Aqsa Mosque. That's a foundational idea for Islam.

Omar Suleiman

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, says to the Ka'bah itself that the value of a believer's dignity and honor is greater than the value of the structure itself. And so when I see a person in Gaza aggressed upon - when I see Wael Al-Dahdouh - when I see one child - that's greater to me than even al-Aqsa. But al-Aqsa is at the heart of who we are as well. And it's certainly at the heart of the Palestinian cause. It's a place of prophets, and it's a place that should be treated prophetically.

Lex Fridman

You mentioned to me that since October 7th, a lot of young people in the United States and in general have been showing interest in Islam. First of all, can you explain what you've been seeing and experiencing in terms of that trend?

Omar Suleiman

Yeah, we have Quran TikTok trends where you had a few people that went on camera and said, "I'm reading the Quran for the first time." And I think that that's the beauty of the faith of the people of Gaza, the beauty of their resilience. When you're looking at these people living what's hell on earth, but they're seeking paradise outside, and they're able to still be inspired towards words of faith, and determination, and certainty, you're like, what is their secret? What are they reading? What are they on that allows them to still face this brutality with such grace, right? I mean, they're not shouting profanities. They're not shouting words of emptiness or despair, but rather they are pouring out their hearts that are full of faith for the world to see. And I think that a lot of people have seen that and said, what is that? And so we've had multiple people come to the mosque. I've never seen more people become Muslim in my life, but not just that, but gain an appreciation for Islam. Like, what type of an engineering is there that allows for people to have that type of faith? So people are opening

the Quran for the first time. People are asking questions about Islam in a way that shows that they're inspired, even though they're heartbroken by what they're seeing.

Lex Fridman

What's a good way to get introduced to Islam, the faith, the spiritual experience of it?

Omar Suleiman

Well, I think, look, you go to our websites, you go to whyislam.org, you come to Yaqeen's website, yaqeeninstitute.org, you go to multiple Islamic websites to get those questions answered. But there's nothing like going to a mosque. There's nothing like actually going to a mosque, and meeting Muslims, and asking questions. And I tell people, you have to step out of your comfort zone and go there and let your world be complicated a bit, experience it, listen to the sermon, meet people from different backgrounds, and ask questions. Muslims love to be asked, by the way, about their faith because they're so sick of hearing other people talk about it. So Muslims love to be asked about their faith. Palestinians love to be asked about Palestine because they're so sick of other people talking about it. So ask questions, and you will have them answered. But there's nothing like a physical connection. There's nothing like a human connection. So definitely try to reach out to your local Islamic organizations and meet people.

Lex Fridman

How difficult is it to convert to Islam?

Omar Suleiman

It takes 20 seconds, man.

Lex Fridman

Okay. Simple enough.

Omar Suleiman

There's no pool, there's no baptism. I often joke with people, I'm like, all right, we got the pool in the back. We're going to do the baptism now. It's literally testifying to the oneness of God and testifying that Muhammad is his final messenger. And so that's called the Shahada. And when you testify to the oneness of God and to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, being his final prophet, you are accepting what's known as the six articles of faith. Six articles of faith are belief in one God, belief in the angels, belief in the messengers. So you can't be a Muslim without believing in Jesus, or Moses, or Abraham, or Muhammad to believe in the messages that God has spoken to humanity through divine revelation. The Quran being the last revelation to believe in the day of Judgment and to believe in divine decree and predestination. So those are six articles of faith. So when you testify to the oneness of God and to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, being the final messenger. That's called the Shahada. You embrace the package of those articles of faith.

That's the implication. Then you learn the prayers, learn to fast in Ramadan. You give what's known as Zakat, the mandatory charity, 2.5% of your retained earnings, and Hajj, which is the pilgrimage to Mecca, if you can. So that's the growth part, the journey. Once a person takes the testimony, they then grow. It's really interesting because we always have those people that convert to Islam, like a week before Ramadan or even a day before Ramadan. So you're Muslim and you got to fast the next day, and that's always a challenging experience for people, but a fulfilling experience for many people when they embrace Islam at that point. And again, I mean, it's simple. And I think that the beauty of Islam to many people is in its simplicity, one God, one humanity, one body of prophets, and one community.

Lex Fridman

Because for you as a Palestinian-American this year, the Ramadan perhaps would be especially difficult spiritually. What are you anticipating? What do you think is the difference this year?

Omar Suleiman

I hope and pray that we have a ceasefire before Ramadan. I hope that at that point we're rebuilding Gaza, talking about rebuilding Gaza, and helping people that have been damaged in so many different ways. I hope that Ramadan is turning a corner. Every Ramadan, the aggression against the Palestinian people seems to grow. So we're usually dealing with last the 10 nights of Ramadan, and then the incursions on Masjid al-Aqsa, really sour it for the entire Muslim world because you're watching worshipers being assaulted in one of the holiest places in the world. And at the same time, you're trying to find your deep connection, your own deep, holy connection in Ramadan. This time we're going in, and if this is still ongoing, we are dealing with a continued genocide. So I think that the mood has been somber in the community. The mood has been different from anything I've ever seen before. So I anticipate this Ramadan would be different from anything we've ever seen before. I think the focus will continue to be on Gaza, and on either stopping the aggression on Gaza, or beginning the rebuilding of Gaza.

Lex Fridman

So a general heaviness permeates just your prayers and your thoughts throughout this?

Omar Suleiman

Yeah, I mean, look, every sermon I've given since October 7th has had to have some inclusion of this because it's what's on everyone's hearts and minds. We also have people in our communities that have lost 20, 30, 40 people in our midst. It's not the same. If we start to have refugees or people that escape for medical treatment or that are able to get out through Egypt and join their families. It's becoming more real, right? It's becoming more personal for people. So I think that Ramadan will surround both in terms of messaging as well as community, the pain of the moment with a prayer for hope and healing.

Lex Fridman

Not to put you on the spot, but in your sermons, in your private life, what is the passage in the Quran that is one you find yourself returning to often?

Omar Suleiman

The part of the Quran, I get asked this question, that resonates with me most usually has to do with what is heaviest for me at the moment. There is a verse in the chapter of Mary - a part of the verse: وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ نَسِيًّا. Your Lord does not forget. Your Lord does not forget. And so, as you see what's transpiring right now, our hope is not in creation. Our hope is in our Creator. And our hope is not in this life. Our hope is in the afterlife. And so, that verse deeply resonates because I think that many of us often wonder how are they going to build? How are they going to get past this? And we know that God has a way of restoring everything. God will restore everything, if not in this life, then in the next.

Lex Fridman

So there's an eternal flame of hope that burns there.

Omar Suleiman

Yeah, and the people of Gaza have it. The people of Gaza have it. You can be more easily deluded by this material world if you're hostage to it. But the people of Gaza have never been deluded by the material world because they never really had it. They've always been attached to a greater idea, to a greater place. And so it is part of the secret ingredient that they have, that they believe in something greater than this. And so you can't survive hell on earth unless you believe in paradise outside of it.

Lex Fridman

When you look far into the future, 20, 30, 40 years from now, we're doing another podcast, and 80s and 90-years-old, what do you hope to see in the Middle East? What do you hope to see change in the Middle East and the United States as a people, as a set of policies, cultures, nations?

Omar Suleiman

I think that the nation-state model and nationalism are becoming so unsustainable just with the growth of refugee populations, desperate refugee populations. The rise of, unfortunately, fanaticism and fascism in different parts of the world, climate, and all that that presents to us in terms of displacement. We're going to have to figure out how to function as a world rather than as nations and states. We're going to have to figure out how to not see everyone outside of our borders as threats and people that are different from us within our borders as threats. We're going to have to start seeing people as people. And so my hope would be that we would have made people uncomfortable enough to transcend some of the barriers in their hearts and some of the barriers that we have in the world that

don't allow us to see other people as people. And then that drives horrific policies towards people that are so distant from us.

Lex Fridman

You have been fearless in walking through the fire. What gives you strength psychologically to keep going, to speak out, but just also maintain an optimism and a hope for the future?

Omar Suleiman

I don't believe that anyone gives me success or causes me failure without the permission of God. I don't seek fuel from anyone else. I don't seek hope from anyone else. I believe in a creator that has a greater plan, and I want to be a greater part of that plan. And I'm inspired by the resilience of the people of Gaza. I'm inspired by the resilience of my parents, and our grandparents, and Palestinians around the world that have refused to succumb to their erasure, that have refused to give up. And so we have both the energy that we need and we have the examples that we need. The energy is from above. The examples are all around us.

Lex Fridman

Well, Omar Imam, this is a huge honor to once again speak with you. And I just want to say thank you, not just for this, but for many private notes you have sent me of kindness, and support, and love through some of the low points, as silly as they are for me personally. So it's just great to be able to call you a friend and to be able to have you in my corner. I'm forever grateful to you for that.

Omar Suleiman

I appreciate it. Thank you so much, man.