

By: Andi Shae Napier

You could hear them long before you could see them. Even when stopped in traffic with the windows up I could hear *something*- a rumbling of sorts. After arriving at the light, I could finally see sets of speakers- raised 30 feet tall- lining the edges of Pennsylvania Avenue, two blocks east of the Freedom Plaza in Washington D.C.

The Freedom Plaza is where the *American Muslim Task Force For Palestine* (AMTFFP) was hosting their rally, and later a march, for Palestine. It was the same plaza where Martin Luther King Jr gave his “I Have A Dream” speech, and the march was hosted on his holiday weekend.

There’s no understating that it was an enormous event. Eight Muslim organizations combined to create AMTFFP, who in turn collaborated with National Partner, *Answer: Act Now to Stop War and End Racism* to shut down multiple city blocks and create space for hundreds of thousands to raise their voices against their government’s support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Some context for the history of the Israeli occupation of Palestine: After WW1 ended in 1918, the League of Nations put Britain in control of Palestine because they didn’t view Palestine as a fully independent nation. Britain’s Parliament chose to establish a Jewish national homeland in Palestine, ignoring the wishes of the indigenous people of Palestine even though the Covenant that allowed Britain control required that their opinions be considered.

This took effect in 1923, and the native Palestinians were not asked for permission to pass their land over to the Jews. It was forced on them. Many people have asked me, ‘Why haven’t they fought back?’

They did.

Of course, massive waves of Jewish immigrants fled to their newly created homeland due to Nazi persecution. The Palestinians rebelled in 1937 which was followed by continuous attacks on both sides for years. Britain chose to handle the repeated conflicts in 1947 by partitioning Palestine into two states. Israel latched onto the opportunity to claim the land, but the Palestinians- now joined by Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt- went to war with Israel over being forced to give up more of theirs.

Israel refers to this as the “War of Independence,” and Palestine calls it “Nakba” (“Catastrophe”).

Flash forward to October 7, 2024- the day Hamas attacked Israel, and Israel claimed they hadn’t slowly been overtaking the Palestinians rightful land since 1947.

Many Palestinians refugees sought safety in neighboring countries- and later the United States- during the early days of Israel’s occupation of Palestine. Perhaps the most notable example being American models Gigi and Bella Hadid’s father, Mohamed Anwar Hadid, was born in Palestine and forced to flee to Syria with his parents as a child to evade Israeli occupation.

The AMTFFP had organized busses for people from Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin to be

brought to the march, providing the opportunity to unite in ways previously impossible to many. The impact this cause has on people showed in their dedication to be at the rally. A Muslim woman who offered me directions to a parking garage told me her family drove in the day prior and were staying in a hotel for the weekend.

Naturally, parking was a nightmare. Police cars were blocking off crosswalks and officers were directing drivers amidst confused traffic lights. Despite the chaos, it sent a clear message that this was well planned between the city and AMTFFP. After finding a spot to park, I walked three blocks to the main event through a frigid January wind, notebook in hand.

There wasn't a moment where I was alone on the sidewalk.

*Everyone* was donned in some sort of Palestinian apparel. Some had flags on their backs with zip-ties connecting it together at their necks. Some wore sweatshirts with messages of support for Palestine, and many had apparel that criticized President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu for their involvement.

Young children had on beanies and puffy jackets, sitting on their parents shoulders as they stood up for their beliefs together. Even if people weren't wearing flags, they were waving them. It was like looking at a sea of red, black and green cloth.

There was more black and white keffiyehs (a Palestinian scarf) and other head coverings visible than hair. The cultural garb was silent way for Palestinians to feel unity, but those wearing it at the rally were anything but quiet.

There were two levels to the rally, the first level being the street, and the second being the actual Freedom Plaza which was raised by a flight up stairs. Pennsylvania Avenue was packed by 1:00 P.M., but the Freedom Plaza looked more so. People were waving flags and cheering along with the speakers all along the edges of the risen plaza, creating almost an awning of flags for those standing on the street underneath them.

One man standing on the edge of the plaza shouted for help after his glasses fell down 10 feet from where he stood. I watched as at least 10 people stopped what they were doing to look for his glasses and safely return them.

These people didn't know each other from Adam, and yet they were a community willing to help each other in the most chaotic of settings. Their desire for innocent lives to be spared flawlessly translated into day-to-day acts of kindness.

In terms of the innocent lives they're advocating for, the Palestinian death toll (as of the 100th day since October 7) is approximately 22,703, with nearly 7,000 people missing- most likely dead underneath the ruins and rubble of their homes and neighborhoods. For context, after Russia's 10 month attack on Ukraine in 2022, there were 6,826 injured and 10,796 dead.

I realized I needed to see what was happening on the Freedom Plaza and set off for the stairs. I initially thought the crowd of people on the street was dense, but it was nothing like the surface area of the plaza. The crowd was intensely packed, but I spotted a journalist with a "PRESS" vest on and followed him until I was closer to the front of the plaza.

The massive speakers made up for the lack of visual access. One every 10 minutes I'd catch a glimpse of the screen and see what the speaker looked like, but if I couldn't properly hear the speaker or if they spoke in Arabic, I had to rely on context clues.

From where I stood on the plaza, I saw someone begin clearing an area to my right. About 15 Muslim men came forward from the crowd and stood in the space that had been opened, laying down their signs at their feet. One man even lied a sheet on plastic on the floor and stood behind it.

The speaker, whom was switching back and forth between English and Arabic, was doing a call to prayer for everyone. A few women joined the group too, and an immediate hush fell over the plaza like a blanket as the man at the front of the group began to lead them in prayer.

Everyone on the plaza was silent and I watched as people of all ethnicities and religions bowed their heads and prayed over Gaza. I felt like I was standing on holy ground, watching people pray on their knees and press their foreheads to the floor.

The rally stretched on from roughly 1:00-5:00 P.M. with speeches, songs performed in Arabic, and spoken word performances. Some of speakers at the rally consisted of executive director of the Council of American-Islamic Relations Nihad Awad, physician, activist and Green Party presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein, American-Palestinian Colorado State Rep. Iman Jodeh (D), theologian and political activist Cornel West, and Palestinian singer Anees. Many family members of those killed in Gaza also spoke about the reality their family members were facing every day: inescapable fear of imminent death.

By 5:00 P.M., Pennsylvania Avenue- from the front of the Freedom Plaza, all the way to the Capitol- was bursting at the seams. Thousands upon thousands of people were pouring into the rally with more fervor than what was seen earlier in the afternoon.

The passion I could see in the protestors was clear as day. A few young men climbed traffic lights and waved Palestinian flags, crying out in Arabic. Young muslim women were leading chants, waving flags and holding up homemade signs. Nearly 20 people stood together behind a cloth “Queers for Palestine” banner, with painted words, “There’s no pride in genocide” splattered on a Palestinian flag.

After the last speaker finished their speech, the march for Gaza officially begun. I did not participate in the march, but continued to observe the protestors as they chanted against their government and labeled President Joe Biden as “Genocide Joe.”

Some marched alone, but many were bundled together, arm in arm, bracing the freezing wind as they marched towards the White House to demonstrate their First Amendment rights in front of the most powerful house in the country.

People of all colors, tongues, religions and sexualities stood united with nothing binding them together except their passion to see a free Palestine where children can play on the beach, and families can be together in their homes.

It was the most beautiful picture of unity amongst strangers that I had ever seen, and I knew that with people willing to stand up like this, we will see a free Palestine within our lifetime.