

Speech by Mohammed Al-Kurd before the UN General Assembly

When I was 11, I came home from school and saw my furniture scattered across the length of my street in Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood in occupied Jerusalem. The street overflowed with soldiers, police, and settlers. My neighbors were screaming and protesting. Settlers had invaded our home and taken over half of it. They said it was theirs by divine decree, as if God is a real estate agent.

Now, more than a decade later, they're coming to finish what they started.

Billionaire-backed settler organizations, protected by the Israeli occupation forces, will likely throw my family out of our home forever. Not only my family, but thousands of Palestinians in my neighbourhood and other communities, like Silwan and Issawiyah. This fate of dispossession looms over much of my neighborhood. Our lives are consumed by the anxiety of living on the brink of homelessness.

The UN has called this a war crime. More importantly, I call this theft.

My community, like most Palestinian communities, is no stranger to dispossession. My grandmother was expelled from Haifa in 1948 when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced in the Nakba. She found refuge in Jerusalem in 1956 after the United Nations (you guys) and Jordan built a housing project in Sheikh Jarrah, promising that the 28 refugee families would receive legal title to their properties. Then the 1967 war happened.

After Israeli forces illegally annexed Jerusalem, several settler organizations, some of which are headquartered in the United States, have relentlessly attempted to take over the neighborhood.

2) We have obviously tried to fight this forced expulsion in court. But, as my grandmother used to say, if the judge is your enemy, to whom do you complain? Israeli land-grabbing has been rubber-coated with legislation, making it almost impossible to challenge. Even so, the battle over Sheikh Jarrah is not legal in its essence—it's political. It is part of the larger systematic effort to Israelize the entirety of Jerusalem.

My family and our neighbors understand this. We know from firsthand experience that the Israeli judicial system is created by and for those who benefit endlessly from the Israeli settler-colonial regime.

As I speak to you, our family lawyer is attempting to persuade a settler judge to rule against settlements.

The word apartheid comes to mind, but saying there is asymmetry and injustice in the Israeli judicial system is a gross understatement. What we have on our hands is a colonialist, ideologically driven system, built by and for colonizers, working exactly as it was intended to. These unjust laws are not only preferential — serving the demographic and political goals of the Zionist project — they are concealed behind a cloak of quasi-democratic, seemingly disputable legislation.

3) This summer we took our struggle to the streets. Our efforts to resist this takeover were joined by Palestinians across Jerusalem, Palestine, and the world, in what became known as the Unity Uprising. The situation rapidly escalated into attacks on besieged Gaza. Palestinians mobilised and resisted, and around the world people demonstrated in support of the Palestinian right to liberation and decolonisation. But months later, the world's attention has moved away. The reality for Palestinians, however, has not changed.

Our neighbourhood was put under a blockade for three months, maintained by Israeli forces, with continuing restrictions intended to suffocate the lives of the hundreds of Palestinians who live there. And yet, meanwhile, armed Jewish settlers, who have already occupied some of our homes, roam freely on the streets.

On any given night, a dozen gun-wielding fanatics patrol my street with arrogant impunity. They are protected – even supported – by the troops blockading our community.

I have to take a minute to acknowledge my neighbour, Murad Attieh, an elementary school teacher who was robbed from his family and put into prison, slapped with trumped up and fabricated charges only because he dared say no to ethnic cleansing.

4) You know, I have to ask. What is it that I can say today that has not been said before? How many Palestinians have stood on this platform for decades and decried the same broken promises and unfulfilled UN resolutions? How many of us have tried to articulate the atrocities that everyone at this institution knows very well and still ignores.

At a certain point in every Palestinian's life, we realize that the Nakba is far from over. It continues every time Israel revokes Jerusalem residencies. It blares in street signs stripped of Arabic. It punctures us in constant campaigns of dehumanization. If you're not evicted from your home, it's demolished; if you're not imprisoned, you're shot in the street; if you're not shot in the street, there's a drone in your sky in the Gaza Strip; if it's not a bomb, it's exile.

I am tired of reporting the same brutality every day, of thinking of new ways to describe the obvious. The situation in Sheikh Jarrah is not hard to understand: it is a perfect illustration of settler colonialism, a microcosm of the reality for Palestinians across 73 years of Zionist rule. This vocabulary is not theoretical. It is evident in the attempts to throw us out of our homes so that settlers can occupy them – with the backing of the regime, whose forces and policies provide violent support for the transfer of one population to install another.

I do not care whom this terminology offends. Colonial is the correct way of referring to a state whose forces collude in the violence of settlers; whose government works with settler organisations; whose judicial system uses expansionist laws to claim our homes; whose nation-state law enshrines "Jewish settlement" as a "national value ... to encourage and promote". The appetite for Palestinian lands – without Palestinians – has not abated for over seven decades. I know because I live it.

I have no faith in the Israeli judicial system; it is a part of the settler-colonial state, built by settlers for settlers. Nor do I expect any of the international governments who have been deeply complicit in Israel's colonial enterprise to intervene on our behalf.

But I do have faith in those people around the world who protest and pressure their governments to end what is essentially unconditional support for Israeli policies.

5) The problem is not ignorance, it is inaction. Impunity and war crimes will not be stopped by statements of condemnation and raised eyebrows. We Palestinians have repeatedly articulated what kind of transformative political measures must be taken – such as civil society boycotts and state-level sanctions. The problem is not ignorance, it is inaction.

The U.S. has vetoed more than 53 Security Council resolutions critical of Israel. In fact, more than half of vetoes that the U.S. casted were in favor of Israel.

6) History invites moral clarity. When we reflect on history's most horrible, inhumane atrocities, we think of them with so much moral clarity. We tend to forget that when such atrocities were happening they were perfectly legal. At the time, they were all once controversial, contested. They were too complex.

We all think that had it been us there, at that point of time, we would have been at the right side of history. But we have that opportunity now. The question of Palestine cannot be resolved but with a free Palestine.

I know that the Occupation will one day end. Like all injustices, it will end. It must. All empires will fall. The Palestinian cause will be a victorious one. People will look back at the reality we live through today with so much moral clarity. One day, there will be museums honoring us, memorials in our remembrance, and statues built in our names. People will stand atop our lands and acknowledge them. I just hope that such recognition, such recourse, such reparations, happen while Palestinians are still here. We deserve justice and liberation within our lifetime.