

Courage My Friends Podcast Series VI – Episode 4
Scholasticide and Solidarity: The Mind and Memory of Gaza

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*. *Needs No Introduction* is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

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[music]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: What happens when states seek to destroy the mind and memory of a people? Is scholasticide, the destruction of educational systems, its teachers and learners, intrinsic to genocide? And what is the role and responsibility of global educational solidarity in standing against it?
I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

For our fourth episode, *Scholasticide and Solidarity, The Mind and Memory of Gaza*, we welcome University of Toronto professor, researcher, and host of the Liberation Pedagogy podcast, Dr. Chandni Desai, and Mount Royal University professor, author, and policy analyst with Al Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Dr. Muhannad Ayyash.

Discussing the months-long Israeli military onslaught waged on Palestinians, we focus on scholasticide, the destruction of Gaza's educational systems, infrastructure,

educators, and students, and the growing and global pro-Palestinian solidarity movement spanning continents, communities, sectors, and university and college campuses around the world, including here in Canada.

Here now is my conversation with Muhannad Ayyash and Chandni Desai. Chandni joins us from the pro-Palestinian encampment at the University of Toronto.

Chandni and Muhannad, welcome, thanks for joining us.

Chandni, you have been traveling to the Occupied Palestinian Territories over the years for your research. So could you tell us a bit about your work?

CHANDNI: Yeah. I am a scholar of Palestine studies. I'm working on a book on the history of the Palestinian revolutions, cultural institutions and Third World internationalism and its formation. And so part of my research means that I have to travel extensively to interview, the generation of the sixties and seventies, and eighties, those that were alive in that period, especially, the cultural, producers of that period.

And so, my research has taken me, specifically to Palestine, but also, the region. So Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and, places in Europe, where many of the PLO's cadres may have been displaced and exiled to. There's a lot more. I teach on settler colonialism, capitalism and race, but I'll leave it at that for this focus of my research and work.

RESH: Lovely, and we'll be getting to some of those themes a little bit later on in the conversation as well.

Muhannad, you are a professor of sociology at Mount Royal University in Calgary, and have also focused a great deal of your work on Palestine. So could you tell us more about your focus?

MUHANNAD: Yeah, thanks for having me and for having this important conversation, first of all.

I was born and raised in Palestine. I grew up the first 14 years of my life under Israeli settler colonial occupation. So it's a lived experience for me. This is not just some research that I do because it's interesting or anything like that. It's my life and the life of everyone around me.

I'm generally a social theorist. I do some work on political violence. Work on sovereignty. What does decolonization mean? What does it look like? I examine social movements for decolonial liberation in Palestine. So that's the, general description of my work and what it involves.

And I do a lot of, public writing, opinion pieces, commentaries, I write for Al Jazeera, Mondoweisse, a couple of pieces for The Breach.

I've talked about anti-Palestinian racism, how we might make sense of, Israeli settler colonialism, and what does decolonization in Palestine look like?

That sort of, captures the general, gist of my work.

RESH: Thank you. Now, we're talking about scholasticide and it makes sense to define the terminology first. So Chandni, what is scholasticide?

CHANDNI: Scholasticide is the systemic destruction of the Palestinian education system, which has been ongoing since the 1948 Nakba. It Intensified in the 1967 June war, and, definitely, has intensified more and more, across the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem.

But in this genocide that we're seeing, what we are witnessing is not just systematic destruction, we are seeing a complete annihilation of the education system in Gaza.

The term scholasticide was first coined by the Oxford professor, Karma Nabulsi. And in it she really tries to talk about the multi- scale layers of the kind of destruction we see. And in the last eight months, specifically as we are witnessing this horrible genocide, scholars against the war and Dr. Abdullah Zaktokriti and myself have brought in the definition to include a lot more than what was included in Professor Nabulsi's definition. And we've created a toolkit, which is on the Scholars Against the War on Palestine's website, which actually describes much more in depth and length about what that definition is.

RESH: Let's get into the specifics. Muhannad, help us to grasp the scale of the scholastic destruction in Gaza over the last eight months.

MUHANNAD: So, number one thing that people should understand is that the destruction is deliberate.

I don't need the International Court of Justice to rule in that way for me to say that. It is clearly a deliberate destruction of Palestinian knowledge, Palestinian knowledge-producing institutions, Palestinian research. Palestinian lives of educators, of students, of administrators. Destruction of buildings. You can see it all.

These are not just collateral damage. This is a deliberate attempt to annihilate Palestinian society. That is what genocide is. It's an attempt to annihilate a people. Not just physically, but to annihilate them as historical beings, as political beings, as cultural beings.

So it's part of the genocidal attack against the Palestinian people that the Palestinian people have been facing for over 75 years in fact.

Prior to the establishment of the Israeli state, Zionist settler colonialism sought to erase Palestinians as a people. And erase them from the land. But erase them from history, from public discourse, from politics.

They don't want something called a Palestinian people claiming the rightful sovereignty over the land.

So that

is a big part of what is happening here. And in this latest genocidal operation, we see the intensification of that structure of genocide.

So again, the structure of genocide is not new. It's been around for over 75 years, and it appears in different forms. Over the last 7 or so months, we're witnessing it in a very intensified form where we've seen the destruction of pretty much all of the Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip. Where we've seen the murder, deliberate murder of professors, of university presidents and students.

We see it as well in the West Bank, where students at Birzeit University, professors are constantly targeted, arrested, shot. University closures, you name it. So people have to understand that this is part of this larger attack against the Palestinian people by the Zionist settler colonial project.

RESH: And a part of the larger project of epistemicide. The decimation of all knowledge systems of both mind and memory, educational, but also cultural.

Chandni, do you want to add to this in terms of the types of educational, but also cultural destruction that we're seeing.

CHANDNI: Yes, absolutely. I'm gonna go back to a little bit of what Muhannad first said and then move to the cultural question that you're asking.

But as Muhannad has said, every single university in Gaza has been bombed. When we think about the scale of the scholasticide, to think of every single university completely desecrated and gone, what does that mean for the education of Gaza's future youth and children?

So that's, first and foremost.

We've seen the killing and targeted assassinations of university professors, including deans, president of the Islamic University of Gaza. And also the targeted killing of, teachers. We also then see the killing of students, right? And the numbers are over 5, 000 for students, over 100 for professors as Muhannad mentioned, right?

We're also seeing arrests and detentions across the West Bank. So we're seeing that in Gaza already, but we're also seeing that consistently happened on the campuses. The campuses are raided, specifically Birzeit University. And many of its student council leaders have been arrested and held under administrative detention.

And this is deeply concerning because again, what does this mean for the right to education of Palestinian students. Because also when they're in Israeli prisons, they're denied the right to education inside those prisons.

You have the destruction and looting of research and teaching resources including libraries, archives, laboratories, and facilities that support the educational process.

Speaking of archives and libraries, I mean, this really connects to the cultural question that you're asking, right? Because what we have seen in this moment is a desecration of mosques, cultural heritage sites, churches. You see the destruction of major, major, archives that hold immense amounts of Palestinian knowledge; both in terms of Islamic knowledge, but also in terms of the central archives of Gaza, which hold a lot of information on the functioning of Gaza itself, the Municipality Archives.

This destruction of culture, as Muhannad mentioned, it is part of the systematic genocide, right? It's not just the side killing of knowledge or killing of cultural heritage and killing of cultural artifacts. A lot of this destruction is precisely about attacking the Palestinian identity. It's about attacking the Palestinian presence on the land.

And a lot of the cultural artifacts and heritage sites and buildings and libraries and archives, they are really a testament to the long history of Palestinian existence on the land of Palestine. And so, part of the targeting of all of this rich history is to essentially try to say that nothing existed here before.

And we've seen this kind of rhetoric in Israeli discourse around, you know, this was a land without a people, which we know is not true, but certainly erasing Palestinian cultural heritage and historical material and historical sites are part of this ongoing project.

Again, this is not new to this current moment. Of course, it is intensified on a level and scale we've never seen before. But what we certainly have seen, is this in different moments in history.

1948, we saw similar kind of desecration of villages and different kind of landmarks and cultural sites.

We saw that in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon when PLO infrastructure was destroyed and the Palestine Research Center was deliberately attacked and targeted. And the entire PLO's archives were looted and massive amounts of books were stolen.

So when we think about this destruction, we always have to also situate it within the 75 year history that Muhannad mentioned. Because it's an ongoing project of erasure.

There's much more around the scholasticide that also includes the obstruction of creating new educational structures.

So, for example, let's say the genocide were to stop and Palestinians, were to start to rebuild; because of the Israeli occupation, you have this complete, denial of specific kinds of resources that enable Palestinians to build.

Under siege this kind of building is not possible.

And so when this genocide ends, we also need to make sure that the siege of Gaza ends, because there can't be any kind of rebuilding .

The other thing I wanted to mention, in this specific genocide what we also see is the use of schools and libraries and universities as military barracks.

Just this morning I saw footage of Israeli soldiers in the Al Aqsa University walking around the rubble essentially mocking the scholasticide suggesting that you know, there will be no new semester here ever again.

And I, say this because in these institutions you see Israeli occupation forces having their artillery being stored and they continue to use these facilities also to torture and detain Palestinians right now in this genocidal war.

And so we're seeing the scholasticide expand in much more horrific and horrifying ways beyond just the invasion and destruction of educational institutions. But we're also seeing the ways in which institutions are also being used as weapons in this genocidal war.

RESH: As you say, this is a pattern, and Nabulsi had also pointed this out. This is a pattern that goes back to 1948, the time of the original displacement of Palestinians known as the Nakba, the catastrophe, and just to say that this episode will air on May 15th, which is the 76th anniversary, Nakba Day.

And this destruction, I mean, the destruction is horrendous, but you also have , as you said, the delegitimization of knowledge and knowledge systems and also defunding. The early defunding of UNRWA was part of this as well, which is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine.

Muhannad, did you want to speak about the role of UNRWA within Palestinian education?

MUHANNAD: Yeah, they play a very important role, educating Palestinian children. Those schools, are very popular among the Palestinian refugees. And it's important to emphasize that we are talking about Palestinian refugees.

So the overwhelming majority of the Palestinian people inside the Gaza Strip are refugees, the refugees from 1948. And they have been yearning to return to their actual homelands and homes in other parts of Palestine that became Israel in 1948 as a result of Israeli settler colonial conquest. So those refugees are entirely

dependent on UNRWA to, get a good education, to get healthcare and get other social services, that they otherwise would not have access to.

And the Israelis have been wanting to destroy UNRWA for a very long time, for a few reasons:

One, is that they want to destroy the Palestinian right of return. As far as Israelis are concerned, Palestinians do not have the right to return to the lands from which they were expelled in 1948. And the presence of UNRWA is a continuous reminder that the Palestinians have that right.

So, these efforts that we see recently to defund UNRWA are not new. The demonization of UNRWA are not new. This is part of a long-term strategy for the Israeli state to eliminate UNRWA, and most importantly, to eliminate the Palestinian right of return

Now Palestinians, especially Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, are in fact some of the most educated refugee populations in the world.

RESH: Well, I was going to ask about that, because in 2023, they were at 97.7% literacy rate, many holding advanced degrees. And as you said, they're at the same time one of the world's largest refugee populations. So, what does education mean for the Palestinian people?

MUHANNAD: It means a lot. Palestinians take a lot of pride in their education, in seeking higher education. in, building themselves up through their education. It's part of the Palestinian culture, a very important part of Palestinian culture to get a good education. Every parent sees that as their number one job for their children. No matter how poor they are, they see it as integral that they get their kids good education.

There's a cultural societal emphasis on education within Palestinian society. So people take it very seriously and take great pride in their education levels.

And they also see it critically as part of the struggle for liberation. So Palestinians understand very well that education is part of their struggle for liberation. So they see it as part of their duty to the national cause, to their fellow Palestinians, to advance themselves through education and help the collective get a little closer to that moment of liberation.

That's how education is viewed within Palestinian society.

And that's why Israel wants to destroy it. Because they want to destroy the Palestinians will to resist. The Palestinians will to exist as a Palestinian. To insist on the right of Palestinians to exist as political subjects. As a collectivity with sovereign rights to the land.

So you always have to understand these efforts of the Israeli state within that context.

Again, I go back to this and I will continue to stress it. It is part of the Israeli settler colonial project of trying to annihilate the existence of the Palestinian people. That doesn't just happen physically. It happens also culturally, politically, erase Palestinians from history and so on.

So yeah, it's a very critical part of Palestinian culture and it will remain so. These efforts will not ultimately succeed.

Yes, the challenges that Palestinians are going to face and continue to face today are enormous. And they're getting bigger by the day. But Palestinians will insist on their existence. The will to resist will not be broken and education will continue to play a critical role in Palestinian resistance for years to come.

RESH: Indeed. And Chandni, you have, as you said, been writing about Palestinians' culture of resistance. Did you want to add to what Muhannad is saying about the centrality of education to Palestinian identity and resilience?

CHANDNI: I think Muhannad really beautifully captured everything, especially the point on the centrality of education for liberation. Because when a people have lost everything, including the land, and as Muhannad said, much of the Palestinian population have become refugees. And so in the absence of access to the homeland, education has become a really important pillar, not just in terms of preserving a national identity across fragmented borders and fragmented geographies, but also as a central pillar of knowledge that gets passed on in various ways that contribute to the cause for liberation.

I just want to emphasize that point in that the loss of land has meant that education becomes an important pillar in the fight to return to that land. And to have liberatory visions and ideas in ways that enable that to be continued across generations, and not to be stifled.

And during the period of the late 1960s, 70s, and 80s, you had a really strong use of education in the struggle for liberation and it continues today as well. But in that period, you had all kinds of different forms of knowledge production that came from the Palestinian revolution that was imparted both to children, to young adults and was infused in much of the curricula of Palestinian education.

Today we do see in the post-Oslo period much shifts. around what is possible and what isn't. You always have Israel that is trying to intervene in what can be taught and what is possible. But ultimately for Palestinians, whether that education is happening in a formal classroom or it's happening in the home, liberation has been a central aspect of education.

And I just want to add one last piece and emphasize again what Muhannad has said around the attack on UNRWA. It is precisely to eliminate the Palestinian Right of Return.

Creating this kind of frenzy around false allegations that UNRWA was somehow involved in October 7th, the Al Aqsa operation. One of the aspects around delegitimization has been to try to defund the Right of Return. Because ultimately this right belongs to not just the Palestinians that are residing currently in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, but it is to the millions of Palestinians that have been forcefully dispossessed and are waiting to return home.

And so part of this attack on UNRWA, Israel thought that by defunding it would mean that the Palestinians would lose this Right of Return. And clearly we've seen funding being restored from many places in the world. Of course, the United States is still not going to engage in that refunding process, but at the same time, we see that funding has been restored in other spaces.

And so, again, going back to this, if we end the genocide, as the first step, we can address some of these other issues that Israel is trying to attack in terms of the Palestinian right to life.

RESH: And again, the statistics are just incredible, right? So over 80% of all schools in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed. This includes the destruction, as you say, of all 12 of its universities. Most schools are out of operations as well as study abroad scholarships and programs. More than, 5,400 students, 261 teachers, over 100 professors killed, not to mention the many education workers and admin. And then, of course, the many thousands more who are injured on top of that.

Muhannad, could you speak a bit more in terms of what happens when you destroy the intellectual centers and heritage of a people? What is this doing to the Palestinian people?

MUHANNAD: The destruction is quite significant. It is quite enormous. Often, as social scientists, we tend to think about it just in the sense of social sciences, and that's devastating enough, but it's not. We have to understand this is happening across all forms of knowledge.

You have, for example, medical professionals, who've spent 15, 20 years on top of their initial training to specialize in a particular area of medicine. Many of those have been killed in big numbers. So there are areas of medicine, for example, already where the number of years that it would take to retrain a new generation to take over, those who have been deliberately assassinated, is too long. It's not possible to do it within the next few years. Like it's gonna take 30, 40 years to retrain and to train people to get back to the level that the Palestinian medical field was at.

Same in some of the other sciences where, you know, it takes years of collecting data to conduct your research. Sometimes much longer than it does in the social sciences, right?

So the setbacks are significant. The destruction is significant. It's going to take many years to rejuvenate. I have all the faith in the world in the Palestinian will and determination to rejuvenate all of these research projects and knowledge base and so on. But it's going to take many years, like I said, and it's going to take a lot of support.

So we do need help from people across the world, from institutions across the world. It's important to emphasize that the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people is not just being done by the Israelis, it's being done with the active participation of the Americans of the Germans and other Western European countries, of Canada.

And just like it takes a big, large collective effort to destroy, it's going to take a big, large collective effort to rebuild.

So I don't want to downplay the enormous challenges that lie ahead. But I do want people to know that the Palestinians will be ready to take on the challenge. I hope that people are ready to step up and support that effort to rebuild.

The example that I've used before and I'll use again here, to just let people wrap their head around it.

During COVID, I know a lot of parents that sort of thought it was the end of their kid's future because they missed two months or so of schooling. Well, take that feeling and times it by a hundred. And you might get a glimpse of what it's like for Palestinian children right now, who not only have lost 2 months, they've lost the full year. But moreover, they've lost their schools. Their schools have been destroyed. The teachers have been killed. Their classmates have been killed. Their principles have been killed. So that should give people a glimpse of the challenges ahead and the amount of support that will be needed for Palestinians to rebuild. It's quite enormous. But of course, first step right now is to stop the genocide and end the siege on Gaza. And then for this worldwide collective commitment to rebuild Palestinian life, not just in Gaza, but across all of Palestine.

RESH: Absolutely. And as you said at the beginning of this, you are Palestinian because we also have the diaspora as well. You're also of course an academic.

Do you want to say a little bit about how this is impacting you? You're not physically there, but in every other way you are. So how is this impacting you?

MUHANNAD: These have been some of the most difficult times of any Palestinian's life, whether they're in the diaspora or whether they're in Jerusalem or in the West Bank, and obviously it is the hardest on the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.

It is the hardest in ways that I cannot fathom or understand fully and never will in fact understand it fully because I didn't experience it. But of course we're all feeling it in a very deep way. Palestinians everywhere are struggling. There's no other way to say that. It's been difficult emotionally, physically.

But for me, speaking from a personal standpoint, always front of my mind is that whatever it is that I'm experiencing, it is nothing compared to what the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are experiencing.

And so now is not the time to sulk over my wounded self. Now is the time to act and do whatever it is that I can to support Palestinians that are experiencing a horror that the overwhelming majority of people around the world have never experienced and will never fully understand.

As much as you follow the news, as much as you watch videos, as much as you read testimonies, you still don't understand. When I meet someone from Gaza, that's when I am reminded of how little I actually understand the enormity of the horrors that they're experiencing at this moment and still experiencing as we speak.

RESH: Indeed, Now, the situation is horrific. It's also undeniable. Just last month, United Nations human rights experts spoke of their deep concerns over scholasticide in Gaza. Earlier this month, the organization Canadians for Peace and Justice in the Middle East put out a public letter to the Canadian government calling for an end to scholasticide in Gaza, support for Palestinian academics, and an academic boycott of Israel.

Chandni, are these types of measures having or likely to have an impact?

CHANDNI: Well, first, I want to highlight the importance around centering also Gaza's universities and Gaza's academics and , as Muhannad was saying, we have to really think about in the ongoing genocide and also in the aftermath of this, when this, InshaAllah, it stops.

One of the things that we have to think about is the centrality of the Palestinian educational institutions, specifically Gaza's educational institutions. And the reason I say that is that we are seeing all kinds of efforts now to rebuild Gaza's universities and It's a severe concern because many of those initiatives are going to come from major governments. And specifically also Israel.

And I think here we really have to remember that just because the universities have been desecrated, it does not mean that Gaza's universities, in terms of the infrastructure has been destroyed, but the remaining people are still there. You know, the ones that have not been killed are still there. And those institutions exist within those that still exist.

And so it's really important and imperative, first and foremost, when those initiatives do begin, that Palestinian institutions are supported on the ground, right? That is first and foremost a priority. And I'm saying this. In conversation with many, many scholars from Gaza, as well as scholars in Palestine that are all discussing sort of the difficulties around opposing the kind of neoliberal onslaught that will come in terms of who will try to rebuild these institutions or who will try to produce a brain drain in terms of trying to take the academics out of there so they don't have to restore that system.

Now, in the meantime, while Gaza's being rebuilt when the genocide stops. Of course, it's because of this sheer level of destruction that has taken place. Yes, students are going to have to get scholarships outside. They may have to get some kind of training that is outside Gaza for a period of time.

But ultimately when we hear a lot of students and faculty speaking that are still alive, they're saying that these should be temporary measures. They should not replace Palestinian education or Palestinian educational systems and institutions in any shape or form.

And so I just want to begin by emphasizing that, in terms of, any kinds of programs or any kinds of rebuilding efforts, this is going to have to be front and center is the support of Palestinian institutions, specifically Gaza's institutions. And centering those that have not been killed and working with those intellectuals and academics and folks to be able to think about what the next steps will look like.

Now when it comes to Israeli universities, I also want to highlight Israeli universities are complicit in this genocide. So yes, they have been complicit in the apartheid system, they're complicit in the occupation. But what is really important to remember is Israeli universities, as we speak, are designing weapons systems to destroy Gaza and Palestine. They have designed military strategies and doctrines for the Israeli military forces. They have designed strategies and material that would help the Israeli occupation forces in their destruction.

And if we extend it to the West Bank, we see all kinds of technologies of apartheid that have been designed in Israeli universities to uphold the checkpoint system, to keep the wall up and to maintain the wall system, and to maintain heavy, heavy surveillance of Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and elsewhere.

So one thing that is important to remember is Israeli institutions are at the center of the creation of the apartheid system. They're at the center of also abetting and aiding this genocide.

And also Israeli soldiers are being provided scholarships and different kinds of benefits by Israeli institutions for serving in the military and serving specifically in Gaza, enacting this genocide.

And so absolutely at this moment in time, it should be clear to everybody that what we need is a boycott of Israeli universities because Israeli universities are complicit in massive war crimes, crimes against humanity, and now the crime of genocide.

And so these efforts are not just rhetoric. They're not just things that we can debate. And arbitrarily put out there. But rather we need to take seriously what are the ties that you know, Canadian universities or European universities or universities around the world.. What are the ties that they have to Israeli universities? What do those partnerships look like? And let's investigate what those are. Let's expose them. And let's also then think about pressuring our universities - students and faculty, alumni, staff, to pressure our institutions to sever ties with Israeli universities.

One of the things I just want to highlight is right now we're seeing encampments, student encampments, they're called different things, People's University of Palestine, Popular University of Palestine, the Popular University of Gaza. You're seeing the People's Circle of Palestine here at the University of Toronto. Liberated zones in different parts of the world.

But these encampments that have been emerging in various sites across the world, now probably in 135 locations or more, what students are asking for is the disclosure of universities investments.

They're asking for universities to reveal what it is that they're invested in as the number one.

The second, they're asking for is divestment, to divest from institutional complicity in investing pension funds, endowments and different kinds of capital pools into weapons manufacturers, specifically Israeli weapons manufacturers.

And third, is the academic boycott of Israel and so to terminate partnerships with Israeli universities that are complicit in this genocide.

So I would say that what we're seeing is that while over the years the Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions movement has been well, alive and active and we've seen many victories, specifically in the context of South Africa, for example. What we have not seen is this level of consciousness, and especially student consciousness around boycott and divestment and then putting it into practice. Occupying university spaces. Demanding that their institutions listen.

Now, in some contexts, what we've seen is police crackdowns and repression. But in other spaces, we're actually seeing university administrators trying to review, and potentially meet the students demands around really thinking about what it would mean to end institutional ties with Israeli apartheid, occupation, settler colonialism, and now this genocide.

RESH: And Chandini, right now, you are there, right, at the University of Toronto student encampment?

CHANDNI: Yeah, I'm at the People's Circle for Palestine as we speak. And our students are on Day 12 of their encampment. They've been going strong. And the one thing that I see at the space is really another world that is possible.

You see a space with teach-ins, with a library for Palestine, the Watermelon Library. Art builds where people are designing and making art. You're seeing community support, community members and different organizations and movements come through the city. On May Day, the May Day rally came through the campus.

On Red Dress Day, you saw Indigenous, women's organizations that were engaging in a march stop by the encampment.

And so this is a vibrant space of learning, of different possibilities. Students are in discussion and dialogue about what's going on in Palestine.

It's also a spiritual space where prayers and different kinds of faiths are acting and engaged in their spiritual practices.

We saw Shabbat last Friday and the Friday before where Jewish students, faculty and community members joined together to do Shabbat prayer on Friday night.

And so, this space that we're seeing is really remarkable.

And what the media for the first week was reporting was just this is an anti-semitic space and trying to criminalize and trying to paint this encampment and many encampments around the city and the country as being anti-semitic or as hateful. And that's actually quite contrary to what we're seeing.

We're seeing community. We're seeing mutual aid here. We're seeing a politics of care and a politics of support.

And most of all, we're seeing students staying steadfast in their demands because they're centering Palestine, they're centering Gaza, and they're centering the liberation of a people that have been occupied and oppressed for over 76 years now, as we're going on to the Nakba.

The Nakba Day rally here in Toronto happened this weekend. And the rally also moved through the city and came by to the encampment. And one of the things that all of this does is it shows a growing movement that is supporting, not just boycotts, divestments and sanctions of Israel, but it is really supporting the liberation of the Palestinian people,

RESH: And Muhannad, I want to get your take on this as well, as well as on the institutional response to these protests. Quite a few of them have also been involving the police, and you had a bit of direct experience with this as well. So could you talk about the institutional response, even the chilling of expressions of pro-Palestinian solidarity, and what you have been seeing in terms of the growing solidarity as well?

MUHANNAD: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the institutional response is very predictable.

Canadian institutions are colonial and racist at their bottom and their foundation. And it's not a surprise that that's exactly what they're showing in this moment.

They are never serious when they say that they promote anti-racism. They are never serious when they say they promote decolonization. I mean, that's an absolute joke. They never have and they never will in their current form.

So, to me the institutional response has been very predictable. And in fact, it doesn't surprise me that it also brings in police to help the university deal with what it views as a crisis.

And of course, the crisis has nothing to do with anti-semitism. This is all for public discourse and the concealment of the reality of what is actually happening.

The crisis for the university is that students are actually attacking the university right where it really hurts, which is its economic place in the state.

The university foundationally is a very conservative social institution that does not really challenge the state. And does not challenge the economic structures in which it exists within that state.

Obviously, the university is not a major economic institution, but it serves the big economic industries within a state. And more or less maintains the status quo within the state. And for that it is rewarded.

It is rewarded with funds. It's rewarded with grants. It's rewarded with prestige. It's executive administrators are paid handsomely. That is all part of the structure, of the general state structure in which the university plays a specific role.

Now, these students are finally saying to the university, actually, we're going to demand that you go against your role within the state. We're asking you to take a position that will actually have material consequences, economic material consequences on the imperial structure in which these universities exist. And that's why they respond with violence.

They respond with violence because that is how they protect what is a violent structure, a violent imperial and settler colonial structure.

And I understand that not every university has done that, but some have. And those who haven't, believe me, they are tempted.

I'm sure they've had these conversations and it was probably student pressure and public pressure that has so far prevented them from taking on these policing actions that we've seen at the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta. And of course, all across the United States.

So, the students are actually doing the one thing that is real. I'm going to say it, real activism.

Because it is only when you demand material changes in the system, that you really see the system's true colors.

And the students when they ask for divestment, they are saying basically enough is enough. We want you to actually become involved in a material way on this issue and stop a genocidal structure within this larger imperial structure.

So I applaud and support these students. That is the only path to stopping the genocide. You either do it through war or you do it through economic and political material isolation of that state. There's no third way. You're deluding yourself if you think that there's a third way in between those two.

So, the students understand this on some intuitive level and they're pushing the economic and political isolation, material, political and economic isolation of the Israeli state path. And that is the path that I wholeheartedly support. And I think every person should be supporting.

And we might not get the results we want right away, but the students need to continue and the public needs to continue and we need to all continuously collectively put pressure on our institutions to cut all ties with the Israeli state. That is the only way you can stop a genocide.

Not just the current genocidal operation, but the structure of genocide, which underpins the Israeli state, and will keep going even after this particular operation is over.

So this pressure has to be continuous. It has to be built. It has to develop. And it can lead to results at the end of the day when we do have a material isolation.

And to go back to the beginning of your question, yes Toronto police did show up at my academic lecture at York University back in early February.

And of course I got the run-around, the police say this and then, you know, everybody's just kind of passing the buck onto someone else as to who called the police. We still don't know who called the police. It's not even clear that someone did call the police. Where it was left off was that the police's own intelligence or investigative unit decided that this was an event that needed to be monitored and checked out by Toronto police.

But I mean, that incident is a perfect illustration of what happens on university campuses all the time. The censorship and marginalization and erasure of Palestinian narratives, of Palestinian explanatory paradigms. That's the most critical one. You know, explanatory paradigms that make sense of the nature of the Israeli state and illuminate the aspiration of Palestinian liberation.

Those kinds of paradigms are not welcome at Canadian universities. So guess what? We have to tell them, well, welcome or not, I'm not asking for your permission to say these things, I'm going to say them anyway.

We can't just keep skirting around this issue. We know that universities are not interested in Palestinian liberation, much like they are not interested in real decolonization or really transforming the Canadian structures of settler colonization.

So we have to keep continuing to call them out on that and to continue to put pressure on universities to transform through actions like the students are undertaking today.

RESH: So I just want to go back to this term genocide. On January 26th of this year, the UN's international Court of Justice ruled that there is a plausible case that Israel is committing genocide and ordered Israel to prevent all acts of genocide.

You have both throughout this conversation been speaking of scholasticide as an intrinsic part of genocide. And I know that both of you have also drawn comparisons in your work between Canada's history of settler colonialism and the plight of Palestinians. And Chandni, could you speak to some of the parallels between scholasticide in Gaza and Indigenous people's history in Canada?

CHANDNI: So, yes, there are parallels. The structure of genocide has been a central feature of settler colonial states, right?

So in the formation of the Canadian state and its settler project, one of the most important aspects of that was to eliminate the native out of the native. And many scholars have said this, that the idea is to remove the Indian out of the Indian. And residential schools were designed deliberately to basically remove Indigenous children out of their homes, to strip them away from their families and to strip them from their language and their culture and their cultural practices and rituals. And to Christianize them. To, bring them into Euro-Christian schools and to basically provide them with the values, the culture, the religious ideology of the settlers. And we know that the residential school system went on for decades.

And essentially, that is when we look at the UN definition of what the residential schools have been described as; the Governor General of Canada stated that this is cultural genocide.

Removing children from their homes forcefully and stripping them of their culture and their heritage and their language is a form of cultural genocide.

Now, that's as far as the Attorney General went during the Truth and Reconciliation process around the inquiry on the residential schools.

However, if you actually look at the definition of genocide in the convention, the forcible transfer of children is one very central pillar of genocide. And so, when we think about the schooling system in terms of the ways in which Indigenous people were removed out of their homes and centers of learning that were Indigenous and they were placed in church-run residential schools, that is a really important way to

make the parallel around the destruction of Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Is it the same in the sense of the institutions? No. So that's where I wouldn't make a parallel and I would outline a difference. Because in the context of Palestine, you actually have specific institutions that have been developed. And those institutions are relatively new, they've not been around for 100 years. I mean, in 1948 when, Palestinian universities were proposed, it was denied.

So the point I want to make here is that there is a distinction in that the colonization of Canada is far longer in terms of 500 years of colonization.

You can make a lot of parallels in the way settler colonialism operates on these lands and across settler colonies and the intimacies between the settler states. But where especially on the question of scholasticide, is that one of the differences would be that in the context of Indigenous people, of course, there were so many Indigenous children that were killed. And we see mass graves that have been found across, Canada that shows you evidence of, annihilation of Indigenous people and the systemic killing of Indigenous people.

On the other hand, what you also have is Indigenous people were assimilated into the Canadian state. And that's not to say that Indigenous people have not resisted settler colonial structures and how they've been folded into them. Nor is that to say that Indigenous people have not also resisted the ways in which Indigenous people have been termed by the state or has given them citizenship. Of course, Indigenous people have been resisting this ugly colonial state and its apparatus for decades, centuries.

But the distinction is also that in this context, because the project has been so long, assimilation to some degree has been successful. And of course that's resisted and there are many, many, methods of resistance and cultural resurgence that has taken place and ways in which Indigenous people have been refusing and resisting this colonial erasure of their culture, of their identity. And there are many resistance practices and reclamation practices that are in place today.

But I would say that in the context of Palestine that assimilation project has not yet been achieved. And the hope is that even though they try within the Israeli school system to do that with Palestinian students, I want to highlight that, in terms of a comparison of what is happening in Gaza to what is happening here, I would enter that with a bit of caution.

What I would say is of course there are similarities in the entire structure of the settler colonial apparatus and how Indigenous people have been oppressed, murdered, killed, exploited, and the lands being taken. But what I would caution is a complete comparison of the scholasticide aspect because there are major distinctions.

RESH: Okay. And Muhannad, your thoughts.

MUHANNAD: So obviously no two systems of power are the same. That's why we have comparative analysis of different systems of power. And that includes comparative analysis of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism will look different in the context of the settler colony of Canada versus the settler colony of Israel versus the settler colony of South Africa. And so on and so forth. So there are, of course, differences.

But ultimately, there are some major similarities, that are really critical to point out.

One is a mode of racialization that is unique to colonial modernity.

In the era of colonial modernity, from 1500s onwards, you have the emergence of a form of racialization that divides human populations into these so-called distinct, discrete races that defy intermixture. So there's the notion of the purity of blood. And the idea that certain races are superior to others and have this ability to reach a level of civilization that no other races can reach.

That way of dividing human difference into races is very much a modern phenomenon. You don't see ancient empires or empires in the classic age or any other age prior to colonial modernity with these kinds of ideas.

And that form of racialization not only underpins settler colonialism here in Canada, but that's precisely what underpins the Zionist project. And that's what makes the Zionist project part and parcel of colonial modernity. And it is that that it shares with all other colonial projects, not just the settler colonization of Canada, but the settler colonization of other places. And as well, colonial and imperial projects across the world.

So, when you really examine Zionism, you do start to see that it cannot function without this mode of racialization. And that's what makes it similar to the Canadian experience of settler colonization in Canada.

To bring it from the philosophical level to the everyday level, this is, in fact, how I've personally connected with many Indigenous activists and scholars.

We share an experience of racism that we understand each other on in a way that others don't really understand us. Because that mode of racialization will be experienced in a bit of a different way in a settler colonial context than in an imperial one. So I have a very easy experience communicating with Indigenous activists when it comes to that form of dehumanizing racialization, because we both experienced it, like I said, in a settler colonial context, that is quite unique to it.

Now, how it then manifests in institutions and the techniques of power and, etc., etc., all these things of course, you're going to find differences. But that fundamental ground is very similar, if not exactly the same.

RESH: Indeed.

So you, as you mentioned, Chandni, are both part of the Transnational Coalition of over 60, 000 Scholars Against the War on Palestine, or SAWP. And they did release a Toolkit for International Actions Against Scholasticide, which we'll be posting in the show notes to this episode.

The toolkit closes with the final poem by poet and academic Refaat Alareer one of the many, too many artists, academics, knowledge keepers killed along with their families under Israeli bombs. The poem, If I Must Die, begins, "If I must die, you must live to tell my story." Chandini, could you give us a final thought on the importance and responsibility of academic solidarity with Gaza?

CHANDNI: I mean, it's an important sector. The academic sector is a powerful sector. It's an important sector. It is not the only sector, but our colleagues have been killed. Students are being murdered. And it's unbearable to witness this unprecedented level of killing and horror.

It is not just our ethical responsibility, but it's a moral responsibility.

All academics should be speaking out. We are seeing many, many people silent. And in institutions where people are talking about equity and diversity and decolonization and all kinds of liberal buzzwords around radical practices like decolonization, it's a shame when we don't see people stand up in solidarity with Palestine and speak up against the sheer violence not just happening there, but has extended also in these other colonies that we are inhabiting or settling in. And I think that it is an utmost responsibility that we speak up, and that we contribute to the efforts, that are being asked for from our colleagues.

But most importantly, it's imperative for the academic sector to heed the call that has come from the Palestinian academic campaign for the academic and cultural boycott of Israel, PACBI. PACBI put out a call in 2004. It is time for academics to renew that call and to be able to exercise their moral and ethical responsibilities through supporting boycott, divestments, and sanctions.

And so, not only do we remember our colleagues like Refaat Alareer, and in ways repeat and recite the tale that needs to be told, but we have to materially put our words into action. We can't say things like we believe in justice and decolonization and make it about one issue. Or be progressive on things except for Palestine.

There is a genocide being live-streamed. It is imperative now more than ever that every sector speaks up, including the academic sector.

RESH: And Chandni, thank you so much for that. And I know you have to go. So thank you.

CHANDNI: Thank you.

RESH: And Muhannad your final thoughts on this?

MUHANNAD: The struggle for Palestinian liberation is not just the struggle against Israeli settler colonialism. It is not just the struggle against the Zionist ideology.

It is a struggle against colonial modernity. It is a struggle against American imperialism. It is a struggle against a form of dehumanizing racialization that has plagued the lives of millions of people for far too long.

One of the reasons that the Palestinian struggle speaks to so many people around the world, why we see so many people going on their streets in all corners of the globe, speaking up for Palestine, sharing in the Palestinian aspiration for freedom and liberation. It's precisely because the Palestinian struggle makes clear- in ways that other struggles don't- the universal aspect of the struggle. And that is a yearning for a liberation from the age of colonial modernity that has brought far too much death and destruction for too many around the world like I said, for too long.

So, I think , in this moment, the Palestinian struggle is becoming a political consciousness. By that I mean, it's becoming a way for people to make sense of their own systems of oppression. System of oppression that oppress and repress their own aspirations for freedom in their own context.

And I hope that it contributes to the building of a people movement around the world, that tries to radically revisit some of the foundational question of how we organize social, political and economic life. Because that is what is necessary for us to see an end to these horrific structures of genocide, to these horrific genocidal operations that we're witnessing not just in Palestine, but in other places around the world today.

So, on that note, I encourage everyone to continue to go on the streets, to continue to engage in collective forms of action. To continue to put pressure on institutions, whether that's political institutions, universities, media, you name it, they all need pressure. They all are complicit in these structures of violence. And only pressure from below can change them. There's no other way.

So get involved in your local community. Get involved in groups that are mobilizing for justice for Palestine. Join the global movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. And please understand that without BDS without boycott, divestment and sanctions, we will never see an end to this.

So keep pushing for that. And Inshallah one day we will all celebrate liberation from these horrific structures of colonial modernity.

RESH: And Muhannad with that, I want to thank you so much for this conversation. It has been a pleasure.

MUHANNAD: My pleasure. Thank you so much.

RESH: That was Dr. Muhannad Ayyash, Mount Royal University professor, author, and policy analyst with Al Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network. And Dr. Chandni Desai, University of Toronto professor, researcher, and host of the Liberation Pedagogy podcast. And this is the Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

Thanks for listening.

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