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“A Nuclear Superpower and a Dispossessed People”

An Anarchist from Jaffa on the Escalation in Palestine and Israeli Repression

CrimethInc.

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October 8, 2023

Retrieved on 31 October 2023 from crimethinc.com/2023/10/08/a-nuclear-superpower-and-a-dispossessed-people-an-anarchist-from-jaffa-on-the-violence-in-palestine-and-israeli-repression

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

October 8, 2023

and illegitimate military court, whose raison d'être is the suppression of resistance, are all illegitimate. The only reasonable response to this indictment, to this reality, is the struggle for liberty and liberation. No voice is louder than the voice of the uprising!

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be presented before a court after 96 hours—four times the period afforded by the Israeli penal code.

This discriminatory policy may indeed be considered legal by the standards of Israeli law, but in essence, at its core, it is a distinct expression of Israel's apartheid regime between the river and the sea.

But law is not justice. South African apartheid was protected by local law at the time, as were French colonialism in Algeria, Rhodesian white supremacy, and countless other defeated colonial regimes that were clearly unjust. Law, in fact, is quite often designed to be the opposite of justice.

So self-evident and undeniable is the injustice of the status quo that even the former head of Israel's notorious Mossad, Tamir Pardo, was forced to recently acknowledge that "In a territory where two people are judged under two legal systems, that is an apartheid state."

This case, despite what a reading of the indictment might lead one to think, does not revolve around rioting or the obstruction and assault of police officers, but rather around the repression and incrimination of the resistance to Israeli colonialism and its apartheid regime. My response to the charges and facts described in the indictment is irrelevant. Since the very manner in which this trial is conducted is an expression of Israeli apartheid, cooperation would be complacency. For over twenty years I have devoted my time to fight Israel's colonial rule, and I am unwilling and unable to cooperate with it now, even if my decision means being put behind bars again.

Therefore, despite having no intention to admit to something I did not do, I will not question the state's witnesses, call any on my behalf or testify myself; I will not challenge the prosecution's so-called evidence, nor will I provide any disproving evidence of my own. Israeli colonialism and its apartheid regime are illegitimate at their core. This court is illegitimate. The proceedings in this case, which supplement other proceedings taking place in the parallel

arrested at demonstrations like the one I was detained in, are tried and sentenced to harsh punishment on scant and often fabricated evidence. Not surprisingly, the prosecution objected to this motion and the court ruled against it. The state prosecutor's poor (and not entirely accurate) reasoning was that my center of life is not in the West Bank. However, Israeli settlers who live and work in the West Bank are also not indicted in military courts, as a matter of policy. Where is their "center of life"? The court's main argument for rejecting my motion was that the offenses I am charged with are not classified as security offenses.

I am no expert in law and do not have the tools—nor do I find it important—to assess the legality of the court's decision. But one thing is beyond doubt: Palestinians, and not only those living directly under the military dictatorship Israel operates in the West Bank, are tried in the thousands in Israel's military courts for identical or similar charges. I am only spared such fate because the state considers me to be both a citizen and a member of the ruling Jewish religion. My friend Tareq Barghouth—a Palestinian resident of Jerusalem and a former member of the Israeli Bar—was tried, convicted, and sentenced by an Israeli soldier in uniform at a military court in the West Bank. Meanwhile, Amiram Ben Uliel, a resident of an Israeli settlement outpost in the West Bank and the murderer of the Dawabsheh family, who was convicted of much more serious terrorism offenses, was tried in a civilian criminal court in Jerusalem.

Just two months ago, Israeli settlers shot Qussai Ma'atan dead in the West Bank village of Burqa. Two settlers were arrested on suspicion of murder. At the same time, some residents of Burqa were also arrested for much lesser suspicions of participating in the confrontations that ensued after the settlers invaded their village. Several hearings took place in the settlers' case, which was presided over in an Israeli civilian criminal court, before even a single hearing took place in the Palestinians' case, which took place in military court. The reason for that is that Palestinians must only

On October 7, Hamas, the ruling party in the Gaza Strip, breached the siege wall surrounding them to carry out a series of attacks. The Israeli government has responded with a full military operation. While both sides have targeted civilians as well as soldiers, these events can only be understood in the context of decades of repression and ethnic cleansing.

At the time, we were just wrapping up an interview with Jonathan Pollak, an anarchist from Jaffa—a Palestinian town that was majority-Arabic until recently. A longtime participant in Anarchists Against the Wall and other anti-colonial solidarity efforts, Jonathan is currently facing a prison sentence for protest activity earlier this year. In the following interview, he describes how he sees the current escalation. He also describes how the Israeli judicial system structurally oppresses Palestinians, explains how to support Palestinian prisoners, and evaluates the effectiveness of solidarity efforts over the years.

For more background on the situation in Israel and Palestine, you could start with our history of contemporary Israeli anarchism, our report on the uprising in Haifa in 2021, and our coverage of the political conflict within Israeli society earlier this year.

We hope to share the perspectives of anti-authoritarians in Gaza as soon as we succeed in communicating with them. In offering this space to a person who grew up in Israeli society, we don't mean to center the perspective and personhood of Israeli citizens, but rather to show that the situation cannot be reduced to a binary ethnic conflict, just as we have done in publishing the perspectives of Russian anarchists on the invasion of Ukraine.

Escalating Hostilities

On Saturday, October 7, as we were preparing to publish this interview, Hamas carried out a coordinated wave of attacks. The Israeli government has responded with a full mil-

itary assault. How do you see these events from where you are situated?

This is an event of historic proportions in terms of Palestinian resistance to Israeli colonialism, which is still ongoing. It is too early to say what exactly will happen next, so I'd rather speak more to the general context of the situation than give an analysis of a developing affair while the details are still unclear. While it is already clear that some acts that are far outside the boundaries of resistance took place during the attack, anything I could say right now would be outdated in just a few hours.

What is certain beyond any doubt, however, is that horrible days are upon us.

The very short version of this specific story is that Hamas forces managed to break through the siege that Israel brutally imposes on the Gaza Strip, and to enter, or in some cases completely take over, Israeli settlements on the other side of the wall. The death toll on the Israeli side is in the many hundreds, and a lot of the images appearing in the media are gruesome and shocking, especially on social media. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Some of the terms I use in this context might be confusing to people who somewhat follow Palestine, and are used to the term Israeli settlements being reserved to those in the areas Israel occupied in 1967. However, I feel that it is necessary to understand Israel as a whole as a settler-colonial project, and Zionism as a colonial movement for Jewish supremacy. We would be remiss to ignore the long history of Israeli ethnic cleansing, which resulted in the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Israel, known as the Nakba. The Gaza Strip today, a fraction of the pre-1948 Gaza district of Palestine, is home to refugees from 94 villages and towns in the historic district that were completely depopulated. Today, 80% of the Strip's residents are refugees, besieged in the world's largest open-air prison. The towns that were taken or attacked by Palestinians at the beginning of the current fighting are some of the

isn't utopian. In my eyes, every victory, every success, must be immediately perceived as a failure, as a power structure to struggle against and take down. They say perfect is the enemy of good, but that's only because they lack any imagination and good is never good enough. Imperfection is a constant, but we just keep on fighting, turning victory into defeat into struggle at every turn.

Appendix: Jonathan Pollak's Sentencing Statement

Ten demonstrators were shot dead by the Israeli soldiers in the West Bank village of Beita near Nablus since demonstrations there started in May 2021. On January 27 this year, I was arrested by Israeli Border Police officers as I was making my way home after a demonstration in the village against Israeli colonialism and the theft of village lands for the sake of establishing a new Jewish-only settlement. I was then indicted for stone-throwing, and am now standing before this court to enter my plea on these charges. The case is based solely on the false testimonies of three of the Border Police officers who detained me. The police refused to conduct a meaningful investigation beyond the Border Police testimonies, including into my explicit report that I heard the Border Police officers coordinate their testimonies with one another. Unlike the police, which couldn't be bothered, I do have evidence disproving the officers' testimonies, showing how they are riddled with lies. Under normal conditions, this would be a trial I'd be happy to let run its full course.

The circumstances, however, are far from normal. This case, unusually, takes place after the defendant—me—filed for the venue to be changed from an Israeli criminal court to the much more draconian military courts system, where Palestinians are tried for the similar offences. I demanded to be tried in the military courts because it is there that my Palestinian comrades, who are regularly

to sow division, to resist outright. In a time of contention, we must not try to find our way into Israeli society, but away from it and into the struggle against it.

From the outside, the whole region looks like a powder keg ready to explode. What would it take for something positive to develop? What gives you hope?

I would rather not trade in hope, because like all trade, it's a spectacle of deception. I grew up in the animal liberation movement of the mid- and late 1990s, during the original Green Scare. I remember reading a letter that Free (Jeff Luers) sent from prison in some zine, maybe a year or two after his sentencing, which had a lasting impact on me. It's been a long time and I can't track it down now even with the internet supposedly making the rarest of documents available at our fingertips, so I'm sure I'm a bit off, but—sentenced to over twenty years in prison, Free brought up the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion as an example of how hope or the prospect of success isn't a criterion for struggle and resistance. That hit home back then, and still does now.

The future cannot be foretold. A good friend who was involved in the underground resistance to the apartheid regime in South Africa told me that the late 1980s were the darkest time. [President Pieter Willem] Botha was in power, the US was still strongly backing white South Africa as an important anti-Soviet bastion, and the end of apartheid was not even remotely in sight. And then the USSR fell and the geopolitical situation dramatically changed, basically overnight. At first, everyone thought that was the end because the Soviets were the ANC's most important backers. But a less obvious side effect was that South Africa's pro-West apartheid government was no longer very important in the post-Cold War era; the fact that there was a strong movement in place to capitalize on these geopolitical changes was what brought about political change and the (imperfect) fall of apartheid.

The moral of the story is to organize and build movements of resistance even when everything seems lost. My view of anarchism

depopulated towns that some of these refugees were dispossessed of.

In the international corporate media, the story is mostly portrayed either as a bilateral war between Israel and Gaza, or as one-sided, senseless Palestinian aggression devoid of any context. The missing context, of course, is that the Palestinian people have endured ages of colonial subjugation, especially Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

As I said, the images are gruesome and horrifying. It is impossible not to be affected by them. However, they do not stand on their own. Beyond the aforementioned historical context, in the past two decades, Gaza has been reduced to dust time and again by Israeli air raids and military operations. Now, once again, the bombing has already started—and within the mainstream of Israeli society and its media, there is open discussion of carrying out a genocide in Gaza. If this is not prevented, it could indeed take place.

If we ask Palestinians to not turn to violence, we must not forget the reality they confront. When Palestinians in Gaza marched at the Israeli barrier that imprisons them in 2017-18, they were shot dead in the hundreds. The images circulating now are gruesome and shocking. I don't intend to euphemize, justify, or condone—but in the course of struggle, the path to liberation almost always takes grotesque turns. Although it should be clear that there are some acts of violence which could never, under any circumstances, be justified or considered as acts of resistance.

The African National Congress [one of the chief umbrella organizations that fought against apartheid in South Africa] is often ignorantly celebrated as a reference point by those who seek to argue that violence has no role in struggle. But after the establishment of its military wing, the MK [*uMkhonto we Sizwe*, "Spear of the Nation"], the ANC never renounced violence. Nelson Mandela [a member of the ANC and co-founder of the MK] refused to do so even after decades of imprisonment. In 1985, the then president of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, told the Los Angeles Times,

“In the past, we were saying the ANC will not deliberately take innocent life, but now, looking at what is happening in South Africa, it is difficult to say civilians are not going to die.”

The context of struggle here is between a nuclear military superpower and a dispossessed people. Colonialism does not relent. Colonialism will not step back of its own accord, not even if you ask nicely. As outsiders, we must consider that decolonialism is a noble cause, but the path to achieve it is often ugly and tainted by violence. In the absence of any realistic alternative to achieve liberation, people are often pushed into carrying out unjustifiable acts; this is a fundamental reality of the disparity of power. Even if, at some turns, the struggle takes specific turns we cannot condone or will not stand behind, we must always stand in support of liberation. To demand that the oppressed always act in the purest of ways is to demand they remain forever in servitude.

The Court Case

To back up a bit—Jonathan, you’re in the middle of a court case at the hands of the Israeli government, accused of throwing rocks during a protest in the West Bank. Can you explain the context in which you were arrested?

I was arrested in Beita, a town near the city of Nablus in the West Bank.

Beita has a long tradition of resistance to Israeli colonialism. It was a hub of resistance during the First Intifada (1987-1993). In early 1988, some 20 men from Beita and neighboring Huwara were rounded up by the Israeli army after being identified by the Shin Bet, Israel’s infamous secret police, as being involved in stone-throwing incidents. They were bound with zip-tie handcuffs and had their bones smashed by soldiers using rocks and batons. The soldiers were enacting the direct order of then Minister of

gests, is a loose coalition of radicals participating in the protests. In my understanding, they see themselves more as counter-protesters within the main events.

While I respect the choice to try to mobilize within Israeli society and the effort put into it, I still respectfully believe it is misguided under the current circumstances. The general protest movement is so huge—and so overwhelmingly rooted in the notion that Israel is a democracy needing to be saved—that it will suck in, coopt, or wash out any divergent trends within it. For the reasons explained above, I believe that the current movement is perhaps the greatest threat to the struggle against Israeli colonialism since the Oslo Accords, and that Israel is likely to use it to recover its international standing in a similar way to how the Accords were used to recover from the First Intifada of the early 1990s. At that time, in the end, all that happened was to entrench domination over Palestinians and intensify their dispossession.

Back in the 1990s, the Israeli extreme right, which shortsightedly saw the Oslo Accords as a defeatist compromise, was opposed to them and massively took to the streets. We, too, opposed the Accords—because it was clear, in real time, how they would be used by Israel for its own rehabilitation, and, even worse, to eradicate the Palestinian uprising. At no point, however, did we consider joining the massive right-wing demonstrations aiming to thwart the execution of the Accords. I believe the situation today is somewhat similar. Perhaps a more familiar example would be that many Nazis and fascists oppose globalization. Would anyone even imagine joining hands with them?

However, my discomfort with having any part with the faux-democracy protests runs deeper. I feel that in a settler-colonial situation like the one in Palestine, our role is not, and should not be, that of moderates within the settler society. We must reject this society, its point of view, its internal politics altogether. We must understand that the power disparity means that change cannot come from within Israeli society. Our role is to weaken it, to create splits,

which enjoys near wall-to-wall support within Israeli society, also among so-called liberals.

The specific changes that the current coalition seeks to enforce will probably render the courts weaker and slightly less liberal, but the courts have never been defenders of our rights, let alone Palestinian rights, nor inhibitors of government policies. Not even a little. The Israeli judiciary is and always has been a fundamental cornerstone of Israeli colonialism between the river and the sea; it has been essential in enabling Zionist policies and providing the system around it with a reputable liberal legal guise. Israel depends on its ability to portray and market itself as a so-called vibrant democracy. A weaker judiciary might carry some harm, but I believe the prospect of a perceived victory by the protest movement against it poses an even greater danger to the overall struggle against colonialism and apartheid.

The protest movement is dominated by an amalgamation of military reservists, former senior members of Israel's notorious secret police, the Shin Bet [Israel's internal security service], economic liberals, and various other Zionist and nationalistic groups. There are some more radical elements involved, but their role and influence are abysmal. The Israeli flag is made up of Jewish symbols, and is an emblem of Jewish exclusiveness and supremacy, and it is no coincidence that it is the protest movement's most prominent symbol. These groups are wedded to the idea of Israel being a democracy, and to the idea that Jewish supremacy does not contradict this. By and large, this is also the most prevalent sentiment among the masses participating in the protests. Any victory of that movement will be used to strengthen the misguided and dangerous notion that Israeli democracy has prevailed, wrongly suggesting that there was an Israeli democracy to begin with.

Have anarchists played any role in the protests?

The question of whether to participate in the protests has divided local anarchists. While many feel alienated, some anarchists have been involved in the "Radical Bloc," which, as the name sug-

Defense Itzhak Rabin, who was on public record calling for a policy of "breaking their arms and legs."

Later that year, Beita was the site of one of the Intifada's defining incidents, when a group of Israeli settler youth, led by settler extremist Romam Aldube, raided the town under the guise of holding a Passover field trip through it. After Aldube shot dead a resident of the village in the olive groves surrounding the town, the group continued into Beita itself, where they were met by locals who came out to defend themselves. The settlers were eventually disarmed by the people there, but not before settler gunfire killed two more Palestinians as well as a 13-year-old settler girl, who was mistakenly shot by Aldube himself during the confrontation.

In the aftermath of the incident, there were widespread calls within Israeli society to "wipe Beita off the map." In retaliation, and despite the details of the incident already being clear to the military through operational debriefings, the Israeli army destroyed fifteen houses in the village and arrested all male residents, later deporting six of them to Jordan.

In recent years, Beita has been the site of constant contention with the Israeli army and settlers trying to establish settlements on stolen land belonging to the town. The protest I was arrested at, on January 27, was part of a local uprising that began in May 2021, following the establishment of an Israeli colony in the Jabel (Mount) Sabih area on the outskirts of the town. During these demonstrations, eleven people have been killed by Israeli fire, some of them by sniper fire. Thousands have been seriously injured and hundreds have been arrested. The uprising has managed to force an evacuation of the settlers, but only temporarily and with a promise from the government that they will be allowed to return at some point. After the settlers' removal, the place was used as a military base; recently, settlers returned to occupy the houses erected there with government support.

I was arrested when an Israeli Border Police force (a paramilitary unit of the Israeli police) raided the village after a demonstra-

tion. At the police station, I heard two of the officers who arrested me coordinating their statements; they then charged me with aggravated assault of police officers (stone throwing), obstruction of police officers, and rioting. I was held in jail for three weeks, then released into house arrest on account of deteriorated health.

You've demanded to be tried in a military rather than civilian court, the way that Palestinians are. Can you explain the significance of this demand?

I am obviously not a fan of the state, any state. But in so-called democracies, the notion of the legitimacy of state violence—which is the foundation of the legal and law enforcement systems—stems from a false ethos of justice and from the misguided notion that these systems represent the collective interests of those who are subject to its authority.

A unique mechanism of Israeli apartheid, one that didn't exist even in South Africa's apartheid system, is that in the West Bank, there are two parallel legal systems in place: one for Palestinians and one for Jewish settlers. When accused of identical offenses—even if they took place in exactly the same location, at the same time, and under the same exact circumstances—I will be prosecuted and tried in Israel's criminal legal system, while my Palestinian comrades will face the Israeli state's system of military law, which reflects the reality of a full-on military dictatorship. To apprehend Palestinians, the government will send its armed forces, which will often detain them in the middle of the night, violently, at gunpoint. It will take up to 96 hours before they see a judge (24 hours for me), and even when they finally do, that judge will be a soldier in uniform, just like the prosecutor. They will be tried according to Israel's draconian military law, likely be denied bail, and their sentence will be handed down after conviction in a system in which not even one person out of 400 is acquitted.

This dual legal system is often referred to as one of the prime examples of the Israeli brand of apartheid. It is such a glaring manifestation of apartheid that even some soft Zionists can't ignore it,

ing Palestinian popular resistance in the West Bank in those days, which meant that, over time, people joined the group who shared some of the basic principles but weren't necessarily completely consistent with the original political direction. In retrospect, starting out as a small, homogenous, "action first" group, we did not have the tools or the perspective to handle what was about to come.

I'm pretty certain that a strict party line isn't the answer, but I do see the differences that arose on issues like militancy and an Israeli vs. anti-Israeli perspective as the main catalyst for my personal departure from the group. Perhaps it is a lesson on organizing in general, showing how the age-old anarchist affinity group structure is the best way to allow larger-scale organizing while retaining autonomy and diversity without forcing a stifling political compromise. Obviously, there is no silver bullet, and some of the issues AAtW faced after I left were unrelated, but I do feel this might be a relevant lesson to learn.

How has the new government shifted the context in Israeli society and Palestine as a whole? How can the new legislation limiting the Supreme Court's powers affect the situation, both for you personally and for political activists in general? [Note that this question and the following answer were both composed before the events of October 7.]

The current government is one of Israel's worst and most dangerous ever—and that's a high bar to meet. It is flagrantly expressing and executing policies of ethnic cleansing. The threats it poses are vast indeed, but the most significant threat is perhaps the least unique to it: the fact that this government is an authentic representation of *all* Israeli politics' persistent race further and further into the extreme right. The central point of contention within Israeli society, and the one getting most attention internationally, is the government's assault on the judiciary—but that is an aesthetic rift, veiled as a struggle for democracy. In truth, this is an internal dispute over how to best manage and maintain Jewish supremacy,

From this vantage point, what can you say that Anarchists Against the Wall accomplished? What lessons—or at least hypotheses—would you pass on to anarchists elsewhere on the basis of your experiences?

I think that because of the relatively high exposure AAtW received, people tend to make more of it than it actually was. In the early days, it was not much more than a small group of very dedicated people, an extended affinity group really. It eventually grew a bit bigger, with a few dozen people composing its core activist base and perhaps a couple hundred more gravitating around it sporadically.

In my eyes, AAtW's most important trait was the shedding of false national allegiances and even identities, in favor of crossing sides to directly join the struggle of Palestinians fighting Israeli colonialism. In a cohesive and militaristic society like Israel, that was no small departure from common left-wing traditions. Not groundbreaking perhaps, but extraordinary. Our goal was to recognize our place of privilege, use it, and turn it on its head in our relationship with Palestinian resistance. Not to come in as white saviors, but rather, as a resource. The principle of joining the Palestinian struggle and following Palestinian guidance was entrenched in every aspect of the group's activity.

I think that viewing ourselves as allies participating in the struggle rather than as supporters from within the context of Israeli society was AAtW's most important contribution and had the most long-lasting effect, also outside its immediate circle.

As an initially small and tight-knit group, it was not necessary to articulate many issues in the beginning. Certain things were very clear to most people involved, while they were very much taboo in Israeli politics, even within its more radical fringes—for example, our attitude towards violence, our place in the struggle, our antagonist position vis-à-vis Israeli society. This became more diluted and maybe confused as the group grew. AAtW was, so to speak, the only act in town when it came to directly support-

yet they don't recognize it as something fundamental to Zionism as a settler-colonial movement, as they focus only on the 1967 occupation and Israel's control over the West Bank and Gaza. You often hear people say the system is bad, but isn't racist; that the distinction is made based on citizenship. That claim is false. There is a 20% Palestinian minority of Palestinians who live in the areas that were occupied by Israel in 1948 and have Israeli citizenship (unlike Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, who live under Israeli control as subjects without citizenship). A scarcely-known fact about the military courts is that even the Palestinians who do have Israeli citizenship are sometimes tried in West Bank military courts. The truth of the matter is simple: I was indicted before the magistrates' court because the state considers me Jewish. Had I been a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship, I'd likely stand trial in front of a military court. The system operates on ethnic and religious lines.

The laws themselves are also different, and military law is in fact not legislation but rather an assortment of decrees issued by the military commander of the area. One such decree, Order 101, forbids any assembly of ten or more people that is of political nature (for example, a group lunch at which politics is discussed), even when people assemble on private property. This is an offense punishable by up to ten years in prison. Similarly, any political organizing and association can be outlawed, and frequently is.

I see anarchism as an ideology—or rather, a movement—of struggle. I generally believe that activism shouldn't be moralistic (as in, self-indulgent and paternalistic), but rather geared towards effecting change. In and of itself, there's nothing positive about wasting time in jail instead of trying to do useful stuff on the outside. The guiding principle behind my demand to move my trial to a military court was to shine light on a system very few are aware of, and, at the same time, to attempt to undermine it. We made a pretty strong legal argument, considering the confines of Israeli law, but the court just ignored it based on a made-up technicality—it was some pretty impressive legal juggling. My

decision to refuse to recognize the court's legitimacy after my motion was denied was also part of my strategy.

There's also a more fundamental reason why I refuse to cooperate with the court and comply with the proceedings, which stems from my understanding of power and my own personal experience with both the legal and prison systems. These systems are rigged so that one is always pleading, always waiting, always at the mercy of power, devoid of any real agency.

Noncooperation turns this entire system of control on its head. It enables you to reclaim power and agency in a situation in which you're not meant to have any. There's certainly a price to pay, and that must be considered every time, according to the circumstances. I'm not advocating this as a general strategy when dealing with the legal system, but I've found it to be extremely empowering.

My chances of being acquitted and avoiding a prison sentence were nonexistent to begin with, so there wasn't much to lose.

It's not the first time you are facing a prison sentence, right?

Nope... I think it's maybe the sixth, but I'm not a hundred percent sure. However, my Palestinian comrades go in and out of prison all the time, and it's very hard to imagine a life without the threat of imprisonment, given the circumstances we live in. If anything, I am lucky (or privileged) in how little time I've done over the past twenty-something years of activism. This, too, is an expression of Israeli apartheid.

You mentioned that you were released from jail earlier this year because of ill health. Can you describe the conditions in the various facilities you have done time in?

Like the legal system, incarceration is also segregated. There are distinct wards and prisons for Palestinian political prisoners (Israel calls them "security prisoners") and everyone else. The conditions are much harsher for political prisoners, with much more limited visits, no access to phones, and other restrictions. However, there is a lot more organizing and a sense of solidarity, even resistance

tinian resistance and doing direct action. Things gained momentum and coalesced, but we never "founded" a group. Even the name wasn't really an intentional choice. We used to send press releases under a different name every time. It was pure chance that this was the name we used on the day the army shot one of us with live ammunition. In the media frenzy that followed, we made use of our notoriety and stuck with the name.

Twenty years later, the AAtW project is defunct, but I think there are lessons to be learned from it, both negative and positive. Akin to the way it came about, AAtW didn't disappear at a particular moment; it withered away. Anarchists live within the society they are fighting against and are not immune to its ailments. Power dynamics always make for an uphill battle, and I think, towards the end, the water was just too muddied. We are talking about a fairly small group of people whose political bond was largely forged over personal kinship and trust. Another important component I can point to in the disbanding of AAtW was the decline in Palestinian popular resistance in the late 2010s.

After I had already left, the group collapsed over fundamental disagreements on issues of violence and nonviolence. The history of contemporary anarchism in Israel published by CrimethInc. in 2013 tells that side of the story pretty well in my opinion, though I am in disagreement with some of the other issues addressed in the text.

Anarchists are still involved in resisting Zionism and Israeli colonialism. True to its "origins," the anarchist movement in Israel also remains very entrenched in animal rights. People in the movement are involved in supporting refugees and undocumented people, cultural and countercultural efforts, radical education, and so on.

However, while anarchists are a presence whenever radical activism arises, my sense is that a distinct anarchist movement does not exist at the moment—perhaps due to the lack of a strong anarchist tradition here.

due process in 2021 based on “secret evidence.” They are doing crucial work in support of Palestinian political prisoners in both Israeli and Palestinian Authority detention and it is vital to support them.

Samidoun is an international network of organizers and activists working to build solidarity with Palestinian prisoners in their struggle for freedom. They work to raise awareness and provide resources about Palestinian political prisoners, their conditions, their demands, and their struggles for freedom for themselves, their fellow prisoners, and their homeland. Samidoun also works to organize local and international campaigns to make political change and advocate for Palestinian prisoners’ rights and freedoms.

You can follow updates on my case here thanks to my local support group. It is probably still a few months away, but once I’m back in prison, it would be nice to receive letters. The easiest way to do that would be by sending an email to the email address that was used the last time I was in jail, support.jonathan@proton.me, and it’ll be passed on to me. I’ll do my best to reply, though my best is pretty limited, as postal stamps are in short supply. As always when writing to prisoners, it’s important to remember that all correspondence is monitored.

The Background

You helped found Anarchists Against the Wall, a group that received quite a bit of international recognition in the early 2000s. What has come of that project? And what does the anarchist movement in Israel look like today?

I don’t really like presenting it as “helping to found” AAtW, mostly because I feel it is a mischaracterization of how that group—indeed most direct-action groups—began. There wasn’t a particular moment. At the beginning of the millennium, the Second Intifada was at its height, and we were a small group of people joining Pales-

at times. Despite the fact that I’m being tried on political charges for which Palestinians are classified as “security prisoners,” and despite having asked to be held with my comrades, I’ve always been classified as a “regular” inmate.

There are three distinct legal stages of incarceration in the Israeli system: arrest prior to being indicted, arrest following an indictment, and imprisonment following a conviction. Arrest prior to being indicted is the stage with the worst conditions, in which access to the outside world is most limited. At that stage, phone communication and access to TV or radio are forbidden, as well as purchasing items in the commissary. No books or reading material are allowed either, other than the Bible or the Quran. Legally, you are entitled to at least an hour of yard time a day, but it’s rare that you get even a few minutes. Some of these things gradually get better once you’re indicted or convicted, depending on which jail or prison you find yourself in, which ward.

Physical conditions vary a lot. The number of people in a cell can be anywhere between two and twenty; I have done time on both ends of this scale. I generally prefer having as much privacy as possible, but that really depends on who your cellmates are. Being stuck in a cell with only one other person can be a pretty heavy social burden, especially for someone like me who isn’t the best at making conversation.

Drugs and addiction are also an issue, and there are a lot of them going around. Painkillers, opiates, opioid agonists, street drugs, you name it. But they are never in steady supply or enough, so you are often stuck in a cell with a bunch of addicts who go back and forth between forcibly kicking a habit without treatment and scoring and getting high. There are always fights over the little there is. Non-smoking inmates are technically entitled to be held in non-smoking cells, but that’s only in theory. In reality, the only smoke-free cell I have ever been held in was a solitary cell. I wasn’t even allowed a smoke-free cell when I came down with acute bronchitis.

The most prevalent forms of inmate violence other than beatings are shivving (cigarette filters that have been burnt and pressed are widespread and readily available) and the splashing of boiling water mixed with sugar.

I've been vegan for almost 30 years now. I have type 1 diabetes as well as gluten intolerance (celiac disease); I also have epilepsy caused by being shot in the head with a tear gas projectile at a demo. That makes food a constant struggle in jail, as I basically can't eat anything that was prepared in the prison's kitchen. It usually takes between a week or two until some food is available and even longer to get everything that I need and am entitled to. In that meantime, my diet basically consists of cucumbers and, when lucky, some carrots.

During my latest stint in jail, I lost about 12 kilograms (26 pounds) in three weeks—about 15 percent of my body weight. I came down with acute bronchitis that caused my blood glucose to climb to life-threatening levels.

I was lucky to be bailed into house arrest, mostly due to my health. That's a luck that Palestinians don't have. It was an experience that left me with some self-doubt about how to manage the legal-political strategy of the case, and maybe even a bit broken. It took me a while to recuperate physically, but even longer to get back to myself mentally and emotionally. I had to make decisions about how to handle the case; none of the options were good, and I wasn't in a good place to make them. In the end, I realized that I was facing a binary choice: either I would have to renege on the deal I made with myself as a teenager when I discovered the mirror world of veganarchism, realizing how skewed and fucked up this world is, or I would have to make good on it, and... you know, carry on. And really, that's a pretty easy choice, right? Almost no choice at all.

Are you facing any other charges?

Besides the aforementioned charges, there are also a few open cases—accusations that I haven't yet been indicted for yet, but still

might be. Most notably, “incitement to violence and terror” due to an article I published when I was imprisoned in 2020, calling on people to support and join Palestinian resistance to Israeli colonialism.

Are you receiving support from groups in Israeli society, in Palestine, internationally? What can people do to support you and others organizing there?

I have my support circles within the anarchist community and among Palestinians. I think the most valuable thing for people to do at the moment is to support campaigns promoting boycotts, divestment, and sanctions on Israel. There's quite a lot of it going around, its relatively effective and should be fairly easy to get involved in.

As for supporting me, I feel that supporting the struggle and Palestinian prisoners in general is the best way to also support me personally.

There are currently over 5000 Palestinian detainees in Israeli jails and prisons. About a quarter of those held in Israeli prisons are what Israel calls “administrative detainees,” who can be held indefinitely with no charge or trial, and on “secret evidence.”

It is estimated the one of every five Palestinian men living under Israeli military rule had been incarcerated by Israel at least once.

The organization that best supports Palestinian prisoners is the Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association¹: a Palestinian non-governmental civil institution that works to support Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli and Palestinian prisons. Established in 1991 by a group of activists interested in human rights, the center offers free legal aid to political prisoners, advocates their rights at the national and international level, and works to end torture and other violations of prisoners' rights through monitoring, legal procedures, and solidarity campaigns.

Addameer is one of six prominent Palestinian civil society organizations that Israel designated as terrorist organizations without

¹ Addameer is Arabic for conscience.