
The heart of it

Messaging for the Palestinian freedom movement

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Introduction

It's simple. Like all people, Palestinians want to be free. For so long, those who back Israel's policies have obscured this reality by dehumanizing Palestinians and complicating what's simple at heart.

But things are changing. People are recognizing reality and seeing their own values reflected in the Palestinian struggle for freedom.

We offer the following messaging guidelines and tips to help us move past the confusing political jargon, effectively address smears, and share our stories.



Like all people, Palestinians want to be free.

Top Messaging Principles

■ 01. Keep it simple

Palestinians want what all people want: the freedom to take care of their families, pursue their dreams, and feel safe and secure in their homes and communities. It's that simple.

- **Use accessible language** so people are able to understand you no matter their exposure to the jargon or the issue.
- **Unpack/define unfamiliar terms.** Most people don't know the meaning of apartheid, occupation, or even settlements. Take time to briefly break terms down or use an alternative (see page 8).
- **Make comparisons to the familiar.** Use examples your audience can relate to.

Examples:

- Palestinians simply want to be free. Like you and me, they want to feel safe in their homes, to be treated equally in their own land, and to give their children and families a brighter future.
- Israel controls nearly every aspect of Palestinian life. Palestinians are denied the basic rights that Jewish Israelis enjoy, including the right to vote for the government that runs their lives, simply because they are a different religion. There's a term for this separate and unequal legal structure - it's called apartheid.

■ 02. Bring people in

Facts and figures are important, but they aren't enough. If we bring people in, people will have an easier time following and remembering what we say. They are also more likely to realize that real people's lives are at stake and that Palestinians have real stories to tell.

- **Tell stories.** Stories stick.
- **Include real life examples.** When you share real examples, people can learn about specific topics in a memorable and engaging way.
- **Ask people to imagine.** Palestinians are forced to endure what most people would not accept for themselves and their families. By asking people to imagine how they would feel in Palestinians' shoes, we make it easier for them to understand.
- **Use active voice, not passive.** Active voice allows people to more easily and accurately understand and identify the actors/policies responsible for the oppression. For example, think about the difference between the

following statements: "Gazans die in protest violence" versus "Israeli snipers kill protestors in Gaza."

- **Give people a role to play.** When people hear about injustice, they sometimes feel powerless. But everyone has a role to play. Help people imagine how they can be a force for change by sharing ideas and examples.

Examples:

- In the middle of the night, Israeli soldiers ripped Palestinian teenager Ahed Tamimi away from her home and family and imprisoned her. Every year, hundreds of Palestinian children are abused like this. Can you imagine armed soldiers banging on your door, terrifying your family and taking your child away? This is why it's critical that we support Congresswoman Betty McCollum's legislation to prevent US tax dollars from being used to abuse and imprison Palestinian children.
- Any day now, Israeli soldiers in bulldozers will destroy the Palestinian village of Khan al-Ahmar to make room for more settlements, or Jewish-only housing, built on stolen Palestinian land. Imagine how you'd feel if your home and everything you'd built was taken away from you so that someone else could live in your place.

■ 03. Lead with shared values

There is a global divide today between those who believe in freedom and equality for all, and those who justify racial and religious supremacy. While every struggle for freedom — from Palestine to the US — is unique, our values bring us together.

- **Share your values.** Let people know what values are important to you and how support for Palestinian freedom fits in.

Examples:

- I believe in a world where all people live with freedom and full rights — where no one faces discrimination or oppression because of their ethnicity or religion. Supporting freedom, justice and equality for all people, including Palestinians, is the right thing to do.
- In the US, especially under Trump, we are fighting for the better world we know we deserve — a world where all people live with the same rights and opportunities. Palestinians, who live under Israel’s right-wing, racist government, have been fighting for the same things for decades. They simply want to live freely, safely, and equally.
- Israel uses our tax dollars to systematically imprison Palestinians without charge or trial. From Israel to the United States, mass incarceration destroys lives and debilitates communities. Everyone deserves a fair trial and a fair shot at life. We should invest in our education and healthcare instead of Israel’s oppression of Palestinians.

■ **04. Describe what you seek, not just what you oppose**

It can be easy to get caught in the reaction trap, but it’s important to remember to talk about what we are working towards, and not just what we are against. In other words, don’t forget the goal!

- **Share emotion and vision.** What vision of the world inspires you to fight for freedom, justice,

and equality? What do you believe in?

- **Focus on Palestinians and their aspirations.** What happens when you shift to Palestinian-centered language? How do you positively describe what Palestinians seek?
- **Focus on outcomes, not process.** How do current policies impact Palestinian life and how will Palestinian lives be different as a result of what we’re advocating for?

Examples:

- Everyone deserves a decent life — the quality of a person’s life shouldn’t be determined by race, religion, gender or the amount of money they have. That’s what motivates me to care about Palestinian rights.
- Today, every aspect of Palestinian life — from whom they can marry to whether they can get to school or work — is controlled by Israel. For years, politicians have failed them, but that shouldn’t stop us from doing what’s right. One way to support Palestinian freedom is by joining the growing grassroots Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign for Palestinian rights.
- For over a decade, Israel has illegally sealed Gaza’s borders, trapping two million people inside and causing shortages of medicines, food, electricity and clean water. The siege on Gaza must be lifted so people there can travel freely to visit family and pursue their education, have access to life’s basic necessities, and live safely in their homes.

■ **05. Be proactive, not reactive**

When you have an opportunity to communicate, don’t waste it by spending time repeating the

opposition's message. Inaccurate and misleading messaging is sometimes so normalized, we don't even realize we're not speaking on our own terms.

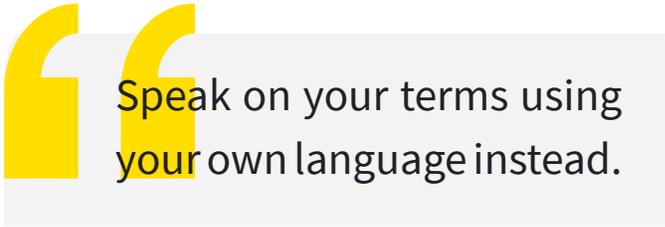
- **Don't repeat opposition language.** The opposition often use smears to attack people who stand up for Palestinian rights. Don't give those words more air time by repeating them.
- **Say what IS, and not what ISN'T.** Your job is to communicate your point to your audience, regardless of what opponents of Palestinian rights throw at you. Even myth-busting and arguing against them can backfire because the association sticks. Speak on your terms using your language instead.

Examples:

- If you hear *"It's complicated"*:
Suggestion: It's simple. Palestinians want to be free just like you and me. At the end of the day, we either believe all people are entitled to rights, or we don't. I'm in the everyone is equal camp. Nothing justifies taking people's rights away.
- If you hear *"BDS is anti-Semitic"* (or any other false charge used to discredit the movement):
Suggestion: Palestinians haven't had a day of freedom. After decades of having their rights denied, Palestinians are asking people to support them by using grassroots, time-honored tactics we all know: boycotts, divestment, and sanctions. BDS is about freedom.

BDS is rooted in anti-racist principles and the belief that all people — regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender or orientation — should be treated equally.

**If you have more time, you may want to bring in examples of other boycotts: boycott of North Carolina over the bathroom bill, boycotts of Trump industries, Montgomery Bus Boycott, boycott of apartheid South Africa.*



Speak on your terms using your own language instead.

■ 06. Know your audience/platform

If you are writing an essay for a politically-oriented academic journal, terms like 'settler colonialism' or 'Zionism' may be appropriate and you'll have space to break things down. However, if you only have a minute to give a radio interview, audiences may tune you out or misunderstand. *Remember:* your core message stays the same; your goal is to simply make sure people understand it.

- **Assess your audience.** Who is my audience? What do they pay attention to? What examples might they understand? What key information can I share with them?
- **Assess your platform.** How much time/space do I have? Given time/space limitations, what is most important for me to convey at this time?

Examples:

The following are examples to give you an idea of how messaging might shift depending on your audience. Where do you notice differences? Similarities?

Sample topic: Settlements and colonization.

■ **Sample Audience 1 - General audience:**

For more than 70 years, Israel has pushed Palestinians out of their homes and off their land so Jewish Israelis can take their place, destroying Palestinian communities and separating their families. We can all play a part in supporting Palestinian freedom.

■ **Sample audience 2 - Activists who work on other issues:**

For more than 70 years, the Israeli military has pushed Palestinians out of their homes and off their land to build illegal Jewish-only settlements. The US funds Israel's mass incarceration and state violence, which separates Palestinian families and destroys their communities. We can support Palestinian liberation by educating and mobilizing at the grassroots.

■ **Sample audience 3 - Academic/policy circles:**

Israel's settler colonial project violates international law and displaces Palestinians, uprooting their communities and splitting their families. Based on a critical examination of both the facts on the ground and our role in shaping them, we urge the US to cut military funding to Israel and to demand an end to the occupation.

■ **Sample audience 4 - Church groups:**

For too long, Palestinians have been pushed out of their homes and off their land. Families are separated and religious communities are under threat and denied freedom of worship so long as Israel is able to keep denying Palestinians their rights. Our faith teaches us that we must stand up to injustice.

■ **Sample audience 5 - People who are "Progressive Except for Palestine":**

Progressives believe all people deserve to live freely and safely. For decades, Israel has pushed Palestinians off their land and out of their homes, separating families and destroying communities. When we stand up for our values consistently, with no exceptions, we can build a world where all people are equal and free.

You get the idea. Your values don't change. You simply communicate them in an accessible, clear and relatable way. If you're not sure about your audience, going for what's most simple (see sample audience #1) is your best bet.

Exploring Alternative Language

It's helpful to consider whether the language we use clearly and accurately conveys our message. Below, we break down a few of the most common terms and phrases.

■ 01. Pro-Palestine/pro-Israel

Where is the problem?

The above framing is both misleading and vague. It leads people to believe there is a conflict between two competing sides and one just has to pick a team. In reality, we are not asking people to choose between two people or countries, but between justice and injustice.

Try:

- Supporters of Palestinian rights/opponents of Palestinian rights
- Supporters of Palestinian freedom/supporters of oppression
- Supporters of Israel's extreme right-wing government
- Supporters of Israel's government/policies

■ 02. Occupation

Where is the problem?

Most people associate the word "occupation" with what you do for a living and don't understand what living under military occupation is like.

Try:

You can try "military rule," or use the term "military occupation" and paint a picture of what that looks like. Example: Using violence to enforce its rule, the Israeli army controls every aspect of Palestinian life, from whether they can go to school or the doctor, to whether they can farm their own land.

■ 03. Apartheid

Where is the problem?

Again, most people don't really understand what this word means, particularly people under a certain age who don't remember apartheid in South Africa.

Try:

Explain in terms people understand: Israel's racist/discriminatory political system, or the political system that treats Palestinians and Israelis separately and unequally.

If you do use the term apartheid, be sure to break it down. Whenever possible, unpack and provide examples, like the recently passed Nation-State

law, or the separate and unequal legal system and segregated roads Israel has imposed in the West Bank.

■ 04. Checkpoint

Where is the problem?

When decontextualized, this term sounds sterile and is misleading (what are they checking?).

Try:

Armed Israeli soldiers harass Palestinians at checkpoints, preventing them from traveling freely on their own land. Palestinians are forced to wait for hours to get to their jobs, families or even the local hospital, even in cases of emergency or childbirth.

■ 05. Separation wall

Where is the problem?

It is misleading because most people think it means it separates Israelis and Palestinians, when in fact Israel uses the wall to steal Palestinian land and to divide and separate Palestinian communities from one another in order to control them.

Try:

The wall, built illegally by Israel to take more Palestinian land and divide/control Palestinian communities...”

■ 06. Blockade/siege

Where is the problem?

Both terms don't tell the story.

Try:

Unpacking. Example: For over a decade, Israel has placed Gaza under siege, illegally sealing its borders, trapping two million people inside and causing shortages of medicines, food, electricity and clean water.

■ 07. Administrative detention administrative detainees

Where is the problem?

Most people don't know what administrative detention is and this term can be dehumanizing/sterile and may make people forget we're talking about real people.

Try:

Imprisonment without trial or charges/prisoners held without trial or charge

■ 08. Detainees

Where is the problem?

Same as above.

Try:

Prisoners, political prisoners

■ 09. Minors

Where is the problem?

The term is dehumanizing and more about legal classification than communicating the problem.

Try:

Children

■ 10. IDF, security forces

Where is the problem?

These terms are misnomers (occupation is not defensive nor is not about security).

Try:

Israel's military, Israeli military, Israeli soldiers

■ 11. Palestinian government, Palestinian state, Palestinian Authority

Where is the problem?

The Palestinian Authority/State of Palestine are not an independent government but instead operate under the overall control of Israel. In many cases the PA works with the Israeli government.

Try:

Clarifying the reality that Israel rules all of it: The PA, which operates under the control of the Israeli military..." or "The PA, which governs parts of the West Bank under overall Israeli control."

**The same logic applies to terms like Hamas-ruled Gaza or Fatah-controlled West Bank, etc.*

■ 12. Arab minority, Arab Israelis

Where is the problem?

Israel refers to its Palestinian citizens as Arabs in order to erase their Palestinian identity.

Try:

Palestinian citizens of Israel. While not perfect, this term is most clear.



Israel refers to its Palestinian citizens as Arabs in order to erase their Palestinian identity.

■ 13. Gazans

Where is the problem?

These terms make it easier to separate Palestinians in Gaza from other Palestinians. It's also important to note that the majority of Palestinians in Gaza are refugees from villages inside Israel that were destroyed in 1948.

Try:

Palestinians in Gaza.

**The same goes for the terms West Bankers and Jerusalemites.*

■ 14. Settlement

Where is the problem?

Most people don't know what settlements are and the term either has a neutral or positive association (think divorce settlement, end to negotiations, etc.).

Try:

Providing more description. For example, "Jewish-only settlements on stolen Palestinian land" makes things more clear.

**Tip: Bring to life the impact of settlements on Palestinian lives (see sample messaging under principle # 2).*

■ 15. Settler colonialism

Where is the problem?

Unless you're speaking to an academic or similarly-minded activist audience, this term could be confusing and alienating.

Try:

Painting a picture of what settler colonialism looks like without using the term.

Examples:

- Israel pushes Palestinians out of their homes and off their land to make way for Jewish-only settlements.
- From day one, Israel has destroyed Palestinian communities, families and ways of life — erasing Palestinians and replacing them with Jewish Israelis.

■ 16. Settler/settlers

Where is the problem?

This term is similarly unclear.

Try:

Contextualizing. For example, you might try: Israeli settlers live illegally on stolen Palestinian land, seizing farmland and precious water resources.

■ 17. Zionism/Zionist/anti-Zionist

Where is the problem?

People don't know what these words mean and many people still falsely conflate Zionism, a political ideology, with the religion of Judaism.

Try:

Using other terms (see examples under #1). If the context makes it necessary to use the word Zionism, break it down. Example: "Zionism, a political ideology that results in the privileging of Jews over non-Jews..."

■ 18. Non-violence/non-violent, non-violent movement/protest

Where is the problem?

Since Palestinians are unfairly demonized, it can be tempting to use the word nonviolent at every opportunity without examining whether it's really needed. For example, boycotts are typically non-violent. It may not be necessary to say "non-violent boycotts."

Try:

Only if needed, the following words convey non-violence: peaceful, unarmed, grassroots.

■ 19. Palestinian violence, eruption of violence

Where is the problem?

Without the right context, people may be quick to discount power dynamics, paint Palestinians with a broad brush, or ignore Israel's everyday violence against Palestinians.

Try:

Make clear that Palestinians endure violence every day under Israel's oppressive rule, and that in every case of oppression across the world, some people have responded violently. Remind people of the root cause.

■ 20. BDS

Where is the problem?

Most people have no clue what what the acronym BDS stands for, much less what it's all about. Even spelling it out — Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions — doesn't solve the problem.

Try:

When possible, try to focus on each aspect of the campaign separately. For example, if you're just talking about boycotts, no need to bring in other aspects of BDS. When talking about divestment, focus on divestment.

■ 21. Anti-BDS legislation

Where is the problem?

If people don't know what BDS is, they certainly don't know what anti-BDS legislation is.

Try:

Unconstitutional legislation, anti-free speech legislation, legislation that strips us of free speech rights, repressive legislation.

■ 22. BDS movement

Where is the problem?

BDS is one tactic within a larger movement for Palestinian freedom.

Try:

BDS tactics, BDS campaign for Palestinian rights/freedom, BDS efforts

If you are speaking about BDS as a collective

campaign and need to refer to it, be sure to spell it out and tell people what it's purpose is. Example: "The boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign for Palestinian freedom."

■ 23. Boycott Israel

Where is the problem?

This phrase doesn't make clear why people are boycotting. A more specific phrase may be more effective.

Try:

Boycott Israeli apartheid/oppression, boycott Israel until Palestinians are free

■ 24. Peace process

Where is the problem?

This term is misleading because for decades Israel has used the negotiations process to cement its control over Palestinians and their land, making peace more difficult to achieve. In reality, it has been all process, and no peace.

Try:

When talking about the Trump plan for Palestine/Israel: The Trump-Netanyahu apartheid plan. When talking about previous diplomatic efforts refer to the "Oslo process" or the "negotiations process."

■ 25. Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Where is the problem?

It is misleading and confusing because it suggests that there are two more or less equal

sides or countries in conflict, while ignoring the root cause of the problem and massive power imbalance.

Try:

When possible, get to the root of the problem to avoid the false binary. Refer to “Israel’s oppression of Palestinians.” Instead of saying “ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” say “ending Israel’s brutal, half-century-old military rule and denial of Palestinian freedom.”

Principles into Practice

Whether you’re giving a media interview or answering questions in a conversation, remember — you can tell your story and deliver your messages no matter what you’re asked. Below are tips to help you redirect to your message:

■ Flagging

If you find yourself getting off-track, use “flags” to signal something the audience should hear/remember with phrases like:

- “The key issue is ...”
- “The important thing to remember is...”

■ Bridging

If a question diverts you from your message, use the question as a bridge to what you want to say. Example bridging statements can include:

- “The question we should be asking is...”
- “The real problem is...”
- “It would be more accurate to say...”
- “Let me emphasize again...”

