

# Palestine Unbound

Published each issue, this section strives to capture the tenor and content of popular conversations related to the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict, which are held on dynamic platforms unbound by traditional media. Therefore, items presented in this section are from a variety of sources and have been selected because they either have gone viral or represent a significant cultural moment or trend. Stories from this quarter (16 November 2019–15 February 2020) cover the world's reaction to U.S. president Donald Trump's proposed Middle East "peace plan"; solidarity gestures for Palestinian photojournalist Muath Amarneh, who was shot by Israeli forces while documenting a protest; and a story on the insidious normalization of Israeli occupation as it manifested in the U.S. gameshow *Jeopardy!* Trending hashtags this quarter are #PeaceSham and #EyeOfTruth.

## *This Quarter's Topics*

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## #EyeOfTruth

On 15 November, a day before the start of the quarter, Israeli forces fired a rubber bullet that struck the face of Palestinian photojournalist Muath Amarneh as he covered a protest against Israeli confiscation of land in the West Bank village of Surif, northwest of Hebron. Amarneh, who lost vision in his left eye as a result, had been wearing an identifying blue flak jacket clearly marked "Press" and stood, by his own account, at a safe distance from the protesters, leading him and others to conclude that he was not hit by a stray bullet but was instead deliberately targeted.

Photos and video of the injured Amarneh, his eye streaming blood, circulated widely on social media platforms. The striking if gruesome image quickly galvanized a solidarity campaign from Palestinian journalists that eventually garnered international support from members of the press in the United States, Malaysia, Indonesia, and elsewhere.

The online campaign was initially limited to the press corps, but organizer and Raya FM radio anchor Mahmoud Hrebat told *Al-Monitor* that it quickly gained traction among artists and university students internationally. In addition to the popular #EyeOfTruth hashtag, supporters on Twitter also used the hashtags #MuathEye, or simply #MuathAmarneh.

News anchors from Palestine TV's studios in Jerusalem to Kuala Lumpur's TV *AlHijrah* bandaged their left eyes in symbolic solidarity with Amarneh. On 20 November, three days after the public



Al Jazeera shares of a photo of a journalist wearing an eye patch in solidarity with Israeli-blinded photojournalist Muath Amarneh. The eye patch is also a photo of Amarneh. (18 November, Twitter)

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gesture on screen, Israel’s Ministry of Security raided and shut down Palestine TV’s headquarters, citing as their rationale the broadcasting of content “intended to incite viewers against Israel,” according to the Middle East Monitor.



TV AlHijrah anchor Hanan Said shares a photo of herself broadcasting live in Malaysia while wearing a solidarity eye patch. (20 November, Twitter)



Hanan Ashrawi participates in solidarity messaging on Twitter on 17 November. (18 November, Middleeastmonitor.com)



A still from a video produced by In the Now media agency shows a collage of participation in the viral solidarity trend. (19 November, Twitter)

In Tulkarm and Gaza City, journalists demonstrating for their right to free speech held up posters bearing images of Amarneh’s face and injured eye, as well as signs reading “The eyes of truth will never be blinded.” In Bethlehem, near Dheisheh refugee camp where Amarneh grew up, Israeli forces fired sound bombs and tear gas at Palestinian journalists participating in a sit-in.

Israeli soldiers and security forces fired on sixty Palestinian journalists in the year leading up to the incident, according to statistics maintained by the Union of Palestinian Journalists.

Israeli border police who were present at the 15 November Surif protest where Amarneh lost

his eye insist they used strictly “nonlethal” means of controlling the protesters—a euphemism for so-called rubber bullets, which, to be accurate, are steel projectiles with a minimal one- to two-milimeter rubber coating that can be used to lethal effect. Though his left eye was removed on 19 November, Amarneh, along with his fellow journalists and all of their supporters in Palestine and abroad, insist on the resilience of the #EyeOfTruth.

## “What Is Normalization?”

“I buzzed in with what I knew to be the correct answer,” said *Jeopardy!* contestant Katie Needle in a conversation with the *Journal*.

“Where’s that church?” was the category in the 10 January 2020 episode of the U.S. television gameshow in which the answer has to be given in the form of a question. The clue was: “Built in the 300s A.D., the Church of the Nativity.”

“What is Palestine?” Needle answered.

Seconds later, competitor Jack McGuire buzzed in with “What is Israel?” after host Alex Trebek refused Needle’s answer, spurring a storm of criticism on social media.

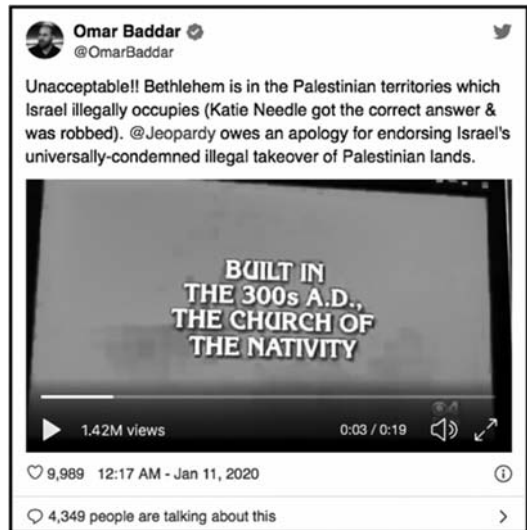
The Church of the Nativity, a United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site since 2012, is located in the Israeli-occupied West Bank town of Bethlehem in *Palestine*, as listed on UNESCO’s website.

Following the episode’s airing, the gameshow released a convoluted statement on 13 January claiming the question had been stricken during filming and that the wrong footage had aired due to “human error.” This strategy—apologizing for a logistical error instead of the fundamental flaw inherent to the question—left many *Jeopardy!* fans furious.

*Jeopardy!* watchers posted tweets of support for Needle using hashtags like #WhatIsPalestine? and #KatieWasRight.

Needle agrees: “I wasn’t attempting to make a political statement; it honestly hadn’t even occurred to me that Israel was the answer they would be looking for.”

Months before her appearance on the show, Needle had visited her good friend Jeannette Greven (whose article appeared in the *Journal*’s Autumn 2019 issue\*) in Palestine. While there, she toured Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity, so her answer was borne of direct experience.



Political analyst Omar Baddar shoots off an angry tweet at *Jeopardy!* (11 January, Twitter)



The @PalRootsTees account uses trending hashtags to show support for Katy Needle. (12 January, Twitter)

\* See Jeannette Greven, “U.S. Security Coordination and the ‘Global War on Terror,’” *JPS* 49, no. 1, pp. 25–46.

Needle told *JPS* that while she received some hateful messages, those voices were largely muffled by the “flood of messages on social media from people all over the world thanking me for my support. I was especially moved by the messages I received from people in Gaza.”

Ultimately, the points on the scoreboard were zeroed out after a commercial break. Needle got her lost points back, and McGuire’s score returned to his pre-“Israel” answer.

So what’s the big deal? Why nitpick a “trivial” error, some have asked? Needle even went on to win the game!

While we agree she deserved her win, that’s not the point. The point is that Israel’s illegal occupation of the West Bank is so acceptable in U.S. culture that even a platform as seemingly inconsequential and benign as a popular gameshow can become a tool of propagation for the normalization of the settler-colonial state.

## #PeaceSham

The June 2019 Bahrain conference, spearheaded by U.S. president Donald Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and attended by Western and other investors and venture capitalists, sparked fear that the Trump administration’s so-called peace plan would hew closer to a Ponzi scheme than a solution to the question of Palestine.<sup>†</sup> The 28 January unveiling of the plan confirmed such fears.

The White House press conference around what was billed as the “deal of the century” featured Trump alongside a very enthusiastic Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Palestinian representatives were not invited.

*JPS* coeditor Rashid Khalidi provided a concise summary of the plan in a 31 January article for *Time Magazine*:

According to Trump’s plan, Israel annexes over a third of the West Bank including all illegal settlements and gets complete security control over a Swiss cheese Palestinian “state” with no sovereignty, no contiguity, and no control over its borders; Israel gets all of Jerusalem, including the holy places; Palestinian refugees are denied return, not only to Israel, but to the Palestinian “state”



Katie Needle promotes Jeannette Greven’s Autumn 2019 *JPS* article. (11 January, Twitter)



U.S. journalist Brian Karem tweets at Donald Trump. (28 January, Twitter)

<sup>†</sup> See Khaled Elgindy, “Trump’s Dangerous Vision for Palestine,” *JPS* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2019): pp. 103–12.

unless Israel approves, so most will be forced to remain where they are; and every other wish of the Israeli hard right is fulfilled.

The plan solicited mixed but predictable reactions internationally: condemnation from the United Nations, the Catholic Church, the British Labour Party, Turkey, Iran, and of course Palestine, among others; and praise from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Conservative Party in the UK, and France.



Iranian foreign affairs minister Javad Zarif presents a more truthfully labeled version of the White House's "Vision of Peace" conceptual map. (28 January, Twitter)



Policy analyst Debra Shushan uses the #PeaceSham hashtag. (1 February, Twitter)

The Palestinian reaction was swift and thunderous, with thousands of protestors marching through the streets of Gaza and the West Bank holding signs reading "Palestine is not for sale." In addition to demonstrations in Rafah and al-Bureij refugee camps, as well as in Ramallah and Baka al-Gharibiya, a general strike was declared both in Bethlehem and Gaza City—a rare instance of apparent unity between the Palestinian factions. Further afield, thousands of protesters rallied in solidarity with the Palestinians in Morocco and Tunisia.

Protest on social media raged in parallel, with Twitter users employing the StepFeed-endorsed hashtag #PeaceSham to denounce the Trump administration's scheme. The hashtags #StealOfTheCentury, #ApartheidPlan, and #SlapOfTheCentury—a reference to PA president Mahmoud Abbas who, in a play on words, described the deal (*safqa*, in Arabic) as a slap (*safa*)—were also deployed to mobilize international protest.



A Twitter user deploys the trending #StealOfTheCentury hashtag. (28 January, Twitter)