

Interview | Dr. Zeina Barakat on Palestinian Views of the Holocaust and Reconciliation



BY JENNIFER BARDI | JAN 05, 2024



Dr. Barakat.

Dr. Zeina M. Barakat is a Jerusalem-born Palestinian scholar. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow and the executive director of the European Wasatia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, founded in 2019 at Europa University of Flensburg, in Germany. (“Wasatia” is Arabic for “center” and appears in the Quran to describe justice, moderation and balance.) Funded by the German Ministry for Education, the doctoral program (headed by Prof Ralf Wüstenberg) focuses on conflict resolution in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and contextualizes past conflicts in countries such as Germany, South Africa, Albania and Northern Ireland. Barakat is also a research

fellow at the Von Hügel Institute at the University of Cambridge and the author of several books, including *Sexual Harassment* (2012), one of the few books in Arabic dealing with the topic in Arab society, and *Envisioning Reconciliation: Signs of Hope for the Middle East* (2022).

Where were you on October 7? What has the last two months been like for you?

I was in Flensburg, Germany, on October 7. I woke up in the morning and saw social media filled with what had happened. I vividly remember calling my brother in Jerusalem, inquiring if this was fake news. He responded, “No, it is true.” I was shocked and depressed because I realized that a new cycle of violence had started and that innocent civilians on both sides would suffer. Small wars between Israel and Hamas have taken place in the last two decades, but

never on this scale. It has affected me profoundly; I feel down, stressed and drained of energy watching all the human bloodshed and property devastation.

What is happening in Gaza is heartbreaking and distressing when you see the pain and sorrow in the eyes of older people, women, and children running in the streets without a destination, as well as in the weeping eyes of the Israeli hostage families and the families who lost loved ones on October 7. I hope the world will wake up and take action to transform this conflict into a peaceful and diplomatic solution that will give Israel security and Palestinians recognition as citizens with a democratic constitution.

So many have taken a side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Gaza—those directly affected, of course, but also abroad and certainly here in the

United States. What are the alternatives to taking a side?

There are ways to be there as a human being without taking sides. The alternative is to look for a better future and not get stuck in the present. We must ask ourselves, "What needs to be done to move toward peace?" We need to plant the seeds of compassion, and empathy, and that's what we are doing in our Wasatia Graduate School. The first year focuses on truth and reconciliation. We take students to former concentration camp sites in Germany to learn more about the Holocaust and the suffering of "the other," in order to educate the younger generation to love their neighbors.

In our program, we have Palestinian and Israeli students, and heated discussions regarding the war have occurred during our lectures. We tolerate this since the students need to express their emotions and worries. We are giving them space to speak freely but are also asking them about solutions, since in the future all of them will be carrying a Doctorate of Philosophy in the field of peace and conflict resolution. Violence breeds violence, and this war must come to an end with the two parties coming to the negotiation table to reach a political and diplomatic solution.

In terms of antisemitism, what have you observed in Germany since October 7?

I have observed the German people starting to more actively engage in the search for solutions to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. When encounters of antisemitism come to light, Jews are terrified. This is completely unacceptable in a country like Germany, with its history. Demonstrations have taken place in several cities, some calling to fight against antisemitism and others calling for the end to the war. Some are chanting pro-Palestinian slogans. In my opinion this should not necessarily be interpreted as antisemitism. The average European citizen seems rather horrified by the civilian casualties on both sides, the suffering and the devastation they see on the news channels.

What about in terms of Islamophobia?

There are those radical parties from the far right who are against all foreigners, not only Muslims but all other ethnic groups and nationalities. We saw this in some

demonstrations when they tried with banners and shouting to incite the police and turn them against those who were demonstrating moderately for peace (among them many Muslims).

Are there Palestinians who still deny the Holocaust or equate it with Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories?

The Gaza war puts oil on the fire of Palestinian attitudes toward the Holocaust. While it might strengthen the views of those who deny the Holocaust, the heavy civilian casualties in Gaza will invite comparisons to it. Some Palestinians ask, "How can we not compare the Nazi atrocities in the Holocaust to the mass killings of civilians and children in Gaza? Can such cruelty be justified by the fight against terrorism?" People have been wondering if the aim is to target innocent civilians to force them to leave Gaza, as in the 1948 Nakba.

In our graduate school we argue against such comparisons, which are mainstream in the Arab world and instead stress the difference between the Holocaust and the Nakba. As I mentioned, Holocaust education is a key for our school.

What are you hopeful for? Are we at an inflection point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

I hope that trauma on both sides can heal one day: the trauma of the Israelis having been targeted and living without security; the trauma of those made hostages and their loved ones; and the traumatic experiences the children in Gaza are going through. Trauma will not be healed if war remains repetitive.

I do think we are at an inflection point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. President Biden and other world leaders have stressed the need to end this conflict by adopting the two-state solution. For Palestinians the hope remains for the recognition of the independent State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital as an outcome. And for Israelis, the hope is to bring the security that so many of us wish for. This is the heritage I hope we leave to our children.

Opening image: Dr. Zeina Barakat (center, with red bag) with students and leaders of the European Wasatia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution.