

[Back to Volume Twelve Contents](#)

## The Palestinian Exception in the Age of Zoom: A Bellwether for Academic Freedom

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### Abstract

*This essay argues that restrictions on Palestinian free speech in higher education by both universities and corporations present a warning and opportunity for scholars seeking to expand and protect academic freedom and free speech, particularly in the face of corporate censorship. It uses as case studies Zoom's recent shutdown of a classroom speaking event by Palestinian activist Leila Khaled at San Francisco State University and the first Palestine Writes literature festival recently held online with Zoom support. The essay argues that challenging corporate control over free speech in the university requires resistance to attempts to both privatize and restrict discussions of Palestinian liberation struggle. It also argues that students and faculty should be transgressive in their approach to censorship in order to challenge it.*

In September 2020, the tech giant Zoom shut down a scheduled classroom appearance by Palestinian activist Leila Khaled at San Francisco State University.<sup>1</sup> Khaled was scheduled to speak by Zoom as part of a roundtable titled "Whose Narratives? Gender, Justice, and Resistance."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Samidoun: Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, "Whose Narratives? Gender, Justice and Resistance," September 23, 2020, <https://samidoun.net/event/online-event-whose-narratives-gender-justice-resistance-a-conversation-with-leila-khaled/>.

<sup>2</sup> James Vincent, "Zoom Cancels Talk by Palestinian Hijacker Leila Khaled at San Francisco State University," *Verge*, September 24, 2020,

Weeks later, civil rights activists with the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI) countered the shutdown with a “day of action,” using university Zoom accounts at nearly a dozen campuses to broadcast simultaneously public domain video recordings of Khaled speaking (see figure 1). At the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa, the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, and New York University, Zoom intervened to knock the events offline.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: Publicity for the Day of Action against the Criminalization and Censorship of Campus Political Speech

<https://www.theverge.com/2020/9/24/21453935/zoom-facebook-youtube-cancel-talk-leila-khaled-san-francisco-state-university>.

<sup>3</sup> Alice Speri and Sam Biddle, “Zoom Censorship of Palestine Seminars Sparks Fight over Academic Freedom,” *Intercept*, November 14, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/11/14/zoom-censorship-leila-khaled-palestine/>.

Simultaneous with these happenings, another Zoom-supported event was unfolding: the first-ever Palestine Writes literature festival, a five-day virtual celebration of Palestinian writing in the diaspora (see figure 2). Organized by Palestinian writers, cultural workers in the West Bank, and activists based in Palestine and North America, the festival featured more than eighty speakers.<sup>4</sup>



*Figure 2: Screenshot from Palestine Writes literature festival website.*

Festival sessions at Palestine Writes took place on the Zoom platform, the service provider for vFairs, the online host for the event (the contract between the festival and vFairs was drawn up well before the Khaled incident). And yet, the festival took place without incident: Zoom did not interfere with or threaten to shut down the event, despite the fact that the festival openly endorsed the academic and cultural boycott of Israel, featured former Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Hanan Ashrawi at a special plenary session, and included the reading of a letter from Palestinian political prisoner Khalid Jarrar, smuggled out of an

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<sup>4</sup> Palestine Writes literature festival website, <https://palestinewrites.vfairs.com/>, accessed April 1, 2021.

Israeli prison and written specifically as a message of defiance of Israeli apartheid.<sup>5</sup>

In tandem, these events reveal some of the current limits, and horizons, for Palestinian futures as they relate to the increasingly capitalized, monetized, and privatized realms of academic freedom and public expression. What has come to be known as the “Palestinian exception to free speech” in the United States—the ongoing curtailment of Palestinians’ ability to “speak for themselves” owing to long-standing Zionist and US state support for Israel—has like life itself formally entered the mediated matrix of global technology.

Yet the Palestinian exception is also critical to the future of what might be called academic freedom and free speech discourse. Oppressed peoples, after all, are often test cases and trial runs for what states, corporations, and universities are willing to do to restrict freedoms of all kinds. Indeed, the struggle for Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim scholars to have a place of their own in the university is coterminous with the struggle to redefine the hegemony of the Western academy as its own material means of knowledge production and power. It is only in the past ten to fifteen years that the “right” of academics to speak for Palestinian liberation in both the classroom and the public sphere has been widely fought for and won. But these victories have not been without consequence. Steven Salaita’s firing from his position as a tenured associate professor at the University of Illinois in 2014 for tweeting criticism of the Israeli state’s bombing massacre of Gaza reminds us that for many scholars the “right” to free speech on Palestine still exists in the shadows of fear and retribution. Zoom’s cancellation of Leila Khaled and the Palestine Writes festival echoes that moment in attempting to suppress public challenges to orthodoxy and to control over what can be said about Palestine in the United States, and who can say it.

Underscoring the symbolic significance of Palestine for academic freedom and free speech in the United States, criticism of Israel on college

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<sup>5</sup> Khalida Jarrar, “Khalida Jarrar Smuggles a Letter for Palestine Writes,” *Mondoweiss*, December 9, 2020, <https://mondoweiss.net/2020/12/khalida-jarrar-smuggles-a-letter-for-palestine-writes/>.

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campuses has recently been targeted by the US government as punishable “exceptions” to both. In December 2019, the Trump administration issued an executive order threatening to cut off federal funding for universities it accused of failing to address anti-Semitism. In doing so, the order adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Association guidelines, which deem as anti-Semitic criticism of the State of Israel. It also for the first time included Judaism as a “racial” classification protectible under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>6</sup> The order was clearly meant to target groups like Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), whose support for Palestinian human rights often includes criticisms of Israeli state policy toward Palestinians. The executive order clearly was also meant to intimidate supporters of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, which explicitly criticizes Israeli state law. Indeed, the Department of Education under Trump aggressively prosecuted cases at New York University and UCLA in which students complained that SJP student activism, which often supports BDS, was anti-Semitic.<sup>7</sup> Even more recently, students at the University of Minnesota voted to adopt IHRA guidelines for anti-Semitism, supporting a resolution put forward by Minnesota Hillel. In challenging the resolution, opponents argued that the IHRA definition suppresses free speech, a First Amendment right. The lead author of the IHRA working definition, Kenneth Stern, has stated publicly in multiple op-eds and testified in Congress that it was not written to be an official hate speech code and that its use as such by the Trump administration and campus groups “is an attack on academic freedom and free speech, and will harm not only pro-Palestinian advocates, but also Jewish students and faculty, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Laurel Wamsley, “Trump Signs Executive Order against Anti-Semitism at Colleges, Worrying Free Speech Advocates,” National Public Radio, December 11, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/11/787176743/trump-to-sign-order-against-anti-semitism-at-colleges-worrying-free-speech-advoc>.

<sup>7</sup> Kery Murakami, “NYU Settles Antisemitism Case,” *Insider Higher Ed*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/10/02/new-york-university-settles-anti-semitism-case-education-department>; Aaron Bandler, “Department of Education to Investigate Anti-Semitism Complaint against UCLA,” *Jewish News Syndicate*, January 13, 2020.

academy itself." . . . We are concerned about a similar muting of academic discourse at the University of Minnesota. Where the IHRA definition is codified into policy, it discourages students and professors from discussing Israel and Palestine, and from investigating issues of nationalism and world conflict more broadly.<sup>8</sup>

The targeting of political and academic discourse by critics of Israel on college campuses well illustrates Joan Scott's argument that any defense of academic freedom in the name of the "common good" must necessarily mean defending points of view and the production of knowledge that expose relationships of power. As Scott has put it, "To defend academic freedom is to defend the production and transmission of knowledge—the pursuit of truth—as a necessarily critical, open, unending process conducted with a certain discipline and rigor. . . . The common good will not survive—and for that matter neither will individuals survive—without . . . knowledge of how structures of discrimination work at the economic, social, political, and psychic levels to perpetuate inequalities of race, gender, sex, and religion."<sup>9</sup>

In the context of the Trump executive order and events at University of Minnesota, Scott's argument suggests that restricting the academic freedom of scholars and students seeking to criticize the State of Israel implicitly reduces the "production and transmission of knowledge" about inequality produced by Israel's apartheid regime. It makes the Palestinian exception a gateway for foreclosing academic discussion and research into other histories of inequality, oppression, and struggle that might contravene the interests of the US government, government-funded universities, and private contractors beholden to government definitions of political interests and political terms, like *terrorism*.

Examined closer up, the case of Leila Khaled at San Francisco State illustrates this lesson well. Khaled was born in 1944 in Haifa. In 1948, she

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<sup>8</sup> "Oppose Minnesota Hillel's Referendum to Adopt the IHRA's Working Definition of Antisemitism," *Minnesota Daily*, opinion, March 19, 2021, <https://mndaily.com/266599/opinion/opinion-oppose-minnesota-hillels-referendum-to-adopt-the-ihras-working-definition-of-antisemitism/>.

<sup>9</sup> Joan Scott, "Knowledge for the Common Good," *Academe Blog*, June 26, 2019, <https://academeblog.org/2019/06/26/knowledge-for-the-common-good/>.

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and her family fled to Lebanon during the “nakba,” the killing, violent removal, and displacement of more than 750,000 Palestinians by forces supporting the new State of Israel. At fifteen, she joined the Arab Nationalist Movement. After the 1967 Six-Day War, in which Israel annexed the Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, Gaza Strip, and West Bank, she joined the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a group committed to direct action for Palestinian self-determination and ideologically aligned with Marxist anticolonial liberation movements around the world. Indeed, scholar Robin D. G. Kelley has shown that members of the US Black Panther Party studied and trained with PFLP freedom fighters.<sup>10</sup>

In 1969 and 1970, Khaled took part in two plane hijackings to demand the release of Palestinian political prisoners from Israeli jails. In the first hijacking, of a TWA plane from Rome to Damascus, Khaled demanded that the pilot fly over Haifa, which she was prevented from visiting, just so she could see it. During the second hijacking, of an El Al jet from Amsterdam, her comrade, Nicaraguan Sandinista Patrick Argüello, was killed by security forces. Both hijackings ended with the PFLP blowing up empty airplanes. Neither ended in the death of any one besides Argüello.<sup>11</sup> Yet, despite the fact that these events took place more than fifty years ago, the PFLP remains on an official state “terrorist” watch list.<sup>12</sup>

Khaled was invited to speak at the San Francisco State roundtable on gender and justice in part because of her well-known commitment to international feminism. In particular, she has linked the conditions for Palestinian women under occupation to histories of violence against political dissidents. In 2011, in a keynote address delivered by proxy at the International Festival of People’s Rights and Struggles Opening Program at the University of the Philippines Film Institute, Khaled wrote,

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<sup>10</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley at Palestine Writes literature festival, December 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DA6UYLNICus>.

<sup>11</sup> Marlena Hinze, Liberation School, “Leila Khaled: Palestinian Fighter, Marxist, Revolutionary,” April 17, 2007, <https://liberationschool.org/07-04-17-leila-khaled-palestinian-fighte-html/>.

<sup>12</sup> US Department of State Foreign Terrorist Organizations, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

“Today, thousands of women are sole provider for their families because of the death or imprisonment of their husbands. Many women have themselves been imprisoned and tortured; others were killed. Through all this, women have organized themselves in the General Union of Palestinian Women, political parties and other associations to continue the struggle for national liberation, and to help women and children acquire a better life and education.”<sup>13</sup>

Uttered by a non-Palestinian, these sentiments might well pass as a standard declaration of human rights for political prisoners. But the Palestinian exception on recent display in Khaled’s case results from the converging forces of the state, Zionist organizations, university officialdom, and, now, high-tech giants. We can see the lineaments of this conjuncture in responses by universities in both the first and second shutdowns of events featuring Khaled Zoom officially justified shutting down broadcast of Khaled’s classroom appearance because of Khaled’s “reported affiliation or membership in a US-designated foreign terrorist organization, and SFSU’s inability to confirm otherwise.” Her appearance would thus violate “certain limitations contained in our Terms of Service, including those related to user compliance with applicable US export control, sanctions and antiterrorism laws.”<sup>14</sup>

In responding to Zoom’s shutdown of the event, San Francisco State University president Lynn Mahoney sent an open letter expressing disappointment with, but not a challenge to, Zoom’s decision: “The legal limits of academic freedom and freedom of expression are frequently challenged. We learned late yesterday that Zoom will not allow the virtual class to go forward on its platform because Zoom believes that the event may violate its terms of service with the university and possibly the law. Although we disagree with, and are disappointed by, Zoom’s decision not to allow the event to proceed on its platform, we also recognize that Zoom

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<sup>13</sup> “Leila Khaled’s Keynote Speech,” July 5, 2011, <https://intl womensalliance.org/iwafga/speeches/leila-khaled-s-speech/>.

<sup>14</sup> Colleen Flaherty, “Zoom Draws a Line,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/25/zoom-refuses-stream-university-event-featuring-member-terrorist-organization>.



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is a private company that has the right to set its own terms of service in its contracts with users.”<sup>15</sup>

Mahoney here expresses an innocent resignation to the privatization of academic freedom and free speech. At SFSU, she tacitly admits, the latter have been recalibrated by Zoom’s contractual primacy, necessitating the university’s obeisance to a “rule of property” itself enshrined in state law. But Zoom’s canceling of Khaled was also a tacit acceptance of Palestinian self-determination—including the right to speak for it—as *outside* of and unprotected by both property and law, despite the fact that Khaled has never been convicted of a crime in the United States, or even set foot here. In this instance, if Zoom follows the US government in declaring Khaled a terrorist, it is enough to supersede the rights of faculty, students, or the university itself to adhere to its own avowed conceptions of free speech and academic discourse.

Here, the Palestinian exception means the arbitrary power of corporate capitalist states to determine the right not only to speak but also to access the material means of mental production—not just for Palestinians but for everyone, including students and faculty at San Francisco State University. The full implications of this truth were made more explicit in university responses to the USACBI “day of protest” that protested Khaled’s shutdown. The administrations at NYU and the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa did nothing to challenge Zoom’s shutdown of the events. Indeed, NYU president Andrew Hamilton doubled down on classical tropes of liberal Western imperial hegemony while attempting to reinforce the university’s commitment to free speech: “I would also note that terrorist violence conflicts with academic freedom,” Hamilton said. “It is at odds with values that universities hold dear: reason, dispassion, freedom of speech and inquiry, respect for individuals and individual liberties.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Office of the President, San Francisco State University, “Academic Freedom Debate Continues,” September 23, 2020, <https://president.sfsu.edu/message-president/academic-freedom-debate-continues>.

<sup>16</sup> Speri and Biddle, “Zoom Censorship.”

Hamilton here equates Palestinian speech itself—after all Khaled was only going to speak on prerecorded video—with terrorism. The subaltern cannot only not speak but her words must be banished, à la Hegel's Africa, outside the realm of Western history. The Palestinian exception to free speech, it turns out, is, like slavery or colonialism, an Enlightenment buttress to "civilized" discourse. It is this contrapuntal movement of savagery and civilization, barbarism and sovereignty, a world divided into contrasting spheres projected from the imperial center, that was so central to the conception of "Orientalism" chronicled by Edward Said, himself, of course, a Palestinian. Indeed, because he "spoke for" Palestine as a one-time member of the Palestinian National Council, Said was often described by university opponents as a supporter of terrorism, once had his office at Columbia firebombed, and even had a lecture cancelled by the Freud Society of Vienna because of a single rock he joyfully tossed from Lebanon at an Israeli guardhouse.<sup>17</sup>

Hamilton's rhetoric is also a reminder that the outsourcing of academic freedom to private contractors beholden to state policy on issues like terrorism produces another, less appreciated menace: embedded within the fine print of new remote technology providers is the shadow of US foreign and domestic policy. Cisco Webex, for example, another popular private contracting choice of US universities, also includes in its licensing agreement restrictions on "activity that threatens, exploits, or otherwise harms minors or that facilitates or supports human trafficking or terrorism."<sup>18</sup> Thus far, neither Zoom nor Webex have exercised their "terrorism" clause on any other political matter of discussion within the university—though opportunities abound. The 2001 Patriot Act, for example, codifies a wide-ranging definition of "domestic terrorism" as any act "dangerous to human life" that violates the criminal laws of a state or of the United States, if the act appears to be intended to (1) intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (2) influence the policy of a government

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<sup>17</sup> Dinitia Smith, "A Stone's Throw Is a Freudian Slip," *New York Times*, March 10, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/10/arts/a-stone-s-throw-is-a-freudian-slip.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Cisco Webex, "Offer Description," [https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/en\\_us/about/doing\\_business/legal/OfferDescriptions/cisco\\_webex\\_offer\\_description.pdf](https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/en_us/about/doing_business/legal/OfferDescriptions/cisco_webex_offer_description.pdf).

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by intimidation or coercion; or (3) affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping. As the American Civil Liberties Union has noted, the Patriot Act definition is “broad enough to encompass the activities of several prominent activist campaigns and organizations. Greenpeace, Operation Rescue, Vieques Island and WTO protesters and the Environmental Liberation Front have all recently engaged in activities that could subject them to being investigated as engaging in domestic terrorism.”<sup>19</sup> Further, since the recent resurrection of the Far Right in the United States, up to and including the January 6, 2021, Capitol “riot,” the clamor and effort to widen legislation against domestic terrorism has only grown. The Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2021 currently awaits review and possible passage by a House of Representatives subcommittee.<sup>20</sup> Passage of the bill would further expand the range of discussions or representations in academic settings that might face a Zoom or Webex shutdown.

The Palestinian exception, then, may be in the age of Zoom a bellwether for manifold political futures, and the right to speak (or ban on speaking) about them in the academy and in the world. It was these political realities, and the technological lacunae currently surrounding them, that were also challenged by the Palestine Writes literature festival. Imagined as an event to celebrate writing and writers in the Palestinian diaspora, Palestine Writes conceived the potential of online technology to create something like a global community of Palestinian voices. In order to build the festival, organizers worked in the face of a long history of threats to Palestinian freedom of expression, including censorship (no Palestinian literature festival had ever taken place in North America before, in part owing to years of difficulty for Palestinian writers trying to get their work published here); limits to academic freedom in discussion of Palestine (academics committed to Palestinian liberation both organized and spoke at the event, but not in their official university

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<sup>19</sup> American Civil Liberties Union, “How the USA Patriot Act Redefines ‘Domestic Terrorism,’” <https://www.aclu.org/other/how-usa-patriot-act-redefines-domestic-terrorism>.

<sup>20</sup> “H.R. 350: Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2021,” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/350>, accessed April 21, 2020.

capacities); and the partitioning of Palestinians from each other by blockades and border checks, visa restrictions, and the denial of entry into and exit from Israel, putting severe restrictions on Palestinian “gatherings” anywhere in the world. As festival organizer and author Susan Muaddi Darraj noted, Palestine Writes could overcome these obstacles: “The virtual platform erases borders and allows people across the Palestinian diaspora to join us and celebrate our literature.”<sup>21</sup>

Here, seizing the “material means of mental production” meant using a Pakistan-based service provider, vFairs, to circumvent US and Israeli state and corporate security apparatuses and ideological norms. The host company, a start-up in the heart of the Muslim world, was thrilled not only to host the festival but also to work with Palestinians across the diaspora. Similarly, writers and readers who might not have been given permission to travel out of Palestine to take place in a “real-time” festival—the event originally had been scheduled for March in New York City but was cancelled due to COVID-19—could freely travel through cyberspace in and out of the festival’s virtual environment. Indeed, for the original, “live” festival in New York, organizers had been advised by writers in Palestine to mute mention or discussion of the festival’s support for the Boycott, Divest, Sanction movement, for fear that the writers would be denied exit from their homeland by Israeli authorities to travel to the event (support for BDS was made a civil crime in Israel by a 2011 Knesset decree; it can also preclude one from entry or reentry into Israel). This was not as much an issue for the virtual event. The virtual platform also enabled enlarged global participation by audience members who were as diasporic as their favorite Palestinian authors. More than three thousand people from seventy-nine countries registered for the festival, many of them from places (Gaza, the West Bank, Hebron) they would not have been able to leave to attend a live festival in the United States. The real and discursive freedom from these coercive controls enabled by the online platform was perhaps best symbolized by the festival’s

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<sup>21</sup> Bill V. Mullen, “‘Palestine Writes’ Returns as Virtual Global Festival,” *Mondoweiss*, November 6, 2020, <https://mondoweiss.net/2020/11/palestine-writes-returns-as-virtual-global-festival/>.

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homepage—a virtual rendering of an imaginary convention hall in Jerusalem with a Palestinian flag rippling above it in the breeze.<sup>22</sup>

At the festival itself, Palestinian “free speech” also slipped the bonds of carceral, corporate, and state restriction. Words became literally and figuratively fugitive. From the Israeli Damon prison on top of Mount Carmel in Haifa, political prisoner Khalida Jarrar’s smuggled letter described writing and reading as emblems for freedom—a metaphorical kite (the icon of Palestine Writes)—flown above prison walls. “Although physically we are held captive behind fences and bars, our souls remain free and are soaring in the skies of Palestine and the world.” The vehicle for that flight was ironically the power of words themselves to transcend the carceral state of Israeli occupation. Wrote Jarrar,

As for our contribution to this conference, we would like to attempt to bring to you our actual experiences with literature and culture while in Israeli prisons. The most important element in this regard is books. Books constitute the foundation of life in prison. They preserve the psychological and moral balance of the freedom fighters who view their detentions as part of the overall resistance against the colonial occupation of Palestine. Books also play a role in each prisoner’s individual struggle of Will between them and the prisons’ authorities. In other words, the struggle becomes a challenge for Palestinian prisoners as the jailors seek to strip us from our humanity and keep us isolated from the outside world. The challenge for prisoners is to transform our detention into a state of a “cultural revolution” through reading, education and literary discussions.<sup>23</sup>

Like Frantz Fanon, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, and scores of revolutionary writers from the global South, Khalida reminds us that seizing the “material means of mental production” for the dispossessed means fighting to preserve speech and culture themselves in the face of colonial occupation, administration, incarceration, and dispossession. As Palestinian novelist and festival organizer Susan Abulhawa put it in her own remarks about Palestine Writes, “The power of culture is stronger

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<sup>22</sup> Mullen, “‘Palestine Writes’ Returns.”

<sup>23</sup> Jarrar, “Khalida Jarrar Smuggles a Letter for Palestine Writes.”

than the culture of power. . . . As those with extraordinary political, economic and military force shrink the land beneath our feet, we will definitely expand our cultural and intellectual presence in the world.”<sup>24</sup>

As I was completing final revisions of this piece, Zoom released a statement acknowledging the challenges to its recent shutdown of university-sponsored Zoom events. Appearing to affirm its commitment to academic freedom, the statement noted that Zoom “will only act on reports alleging content-related violations of our Community Standards or Terms of Service that come from the meeting host or the account’s owner or administrators.” Exceptions to this policy, it noted, could include cases where Zoom determines there is “legal or regulatory risk to Zoom” if it does not act, a threat to the physical safety of a person, or when the “meeting or webinar is unrelated to the institution’s academics or operations.”<sup>25</sup>

As Hank Reichman noted on the AAUP’s *Academe Blog*, Zoom’s statement is welcome, though it remains unclear whether Zoom will maintain its previously stated policy of shutting down events perceived as providing “material support” to terrorism.<sup>26</sup> Sure enough, just one week after announcing its policy change, Zoom (along with Facebook and Eventbrite) pulled the plug on another scheduled speaking appearance by Khaled at UC Merced. In the meantime, the University of California Academic Senate Committee on Academic Freedom has written a letter to UC president Michael Drake asking the university administration to support a request that the Department of Justice clarify its definition of “material support” for terrorism.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Mullen, “‘Palestine Writes’ Returns.”

<sup>25</sup> Zoom, “On Academic Freedom for our Higher Education Users,” April 13, 2021, <https://explore.zoom.us/docs/en-us/trust/academic-freedom.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Hank Reichman, “Zoom on Academic Freedom in Higher Education,” *Academe Blog*, April 14, 2021, <https://academeblog.org/2021/04/14/zoom-on-academic-freedom-in-higher-education/>.

<sup>27</sup> Hank Reichman, “U. of California Faculty Call for Action on Academic Freedom and Policing,” *Academe Blog*, May 2, 2021, <https://academeblog.org/2021/05/02/u-of-california-faculty-call-for-action-on-academic-freedom-and-policing/>.

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What do these unfolding events mean for those of us, Palestinian and otherwise, who find ourselves inhabiting the matrix of mediated, monetized, state-sanctioned “free speech,” or what we might call the Land of Zoom? The imperative in both of the instances I have described here—the Khaled censorship battle and the festival of Palestinian writing—is to decolonize the means of mental production. Put another way, the genius of both the USACBI “day of protest” against Zoom’s shutdown and the virtual globality of Palestine Writes was their effort to make public, to nationalize, to decolonize—if only for a few days—technologies that threaten to define and control the hegemonic poles of what can be said about Palestine—and the world—and by whom.

It is this kind of imaginative transgression that will be necessary to reverse *both* the “Palestinian exception to free speech” and the exception that privatized, corporatized, capitalized states and universities increasingly seek to impose on our political and academic freedoms. In addition to the example of the USACBI protest, students and faculty might consider using nonuniversity providers and equipment to host events that they think might be shut down by campuses. They might also, like the organizers at USACBI, organize events considered “at risk” in collaboration across campuses, to reduce the chances of harassment or shutdown, especially if they are using university-provided platforms. Or they could consider working with platforms other than the dominant Western corporate providers, ones that may be better situated vis-à-vis (and less circumscribed by) prevailing ideological currents against dissident voices and voicings. Finally, scholars and students working in areas of social justice—like Palestine—should pay close heed to the way politics, federal legislation on online delivery, and corporate policy converge, and be ready to organize and fight back against them. We live in the era of the Zoom police and must become criminals, pirates, and dissidents in order to survive.

To forge the spirit to do so, we might steal a page from history. As part of his political radicalization in the 1960s, African American revolutionary George Jackson, while incarcerated in Soledad prison, kept in his personal library a copy of *Enemy of the Sun*, a book of poems by the Palestinian writer Samih Al-Qasim. Al-Qasim was a revered Palestinian poet,

Communist, and political dissident, imprisoned by Israel in the 1960s for refusing to serve in the Israeli military. From his cell, Jackson hand-copied two of the poems from Al-Qasim's collection, "Enemy of the Sun" and "I Defy," with the intention of circulating them among fellow inmates at the prison. As scholar Greg Thomas has shown, "Enemy of the Sun" and "I Defy" were in turn published under Jackson's name and circulated in the revolutionary Black press during his incarceration.<sup>28</sup>

More than "prison literature," "Enemy of the Sun" and "I Defy" are examples of the urgent and irrepressible flow of free speech that occurs in direct defiance of the most grueling oppressive conditions and norms. While it may seem exceptional to compare contemporary life under Zoom to life in a maximum security US prison, or Israeli jail, the impulse to defy restrictions on free speech, and the choking off of public life through state control of the means of cultural production, are not dissimilar. Broadcasting the words of Leila Khaled across simultaneous Zoom platforms, or reading Khalid Jarrar's smuggled letter from prison to the world, creates cracks in walls and passageways around borders and checkpoints constructed by corporatized institutions and repressive states that protect private property and the rule of law while maintaining histories of racist, colonialist, imperial rule. As Al-Qasim wrote in "Enemy of the Sun,"

You may take the last strip of my land  
Feed my youth to prison cells  
You may plunder my heritage  
You may burn my books, my poems . . .  
. . . But I shall not compromise  
And to the last pulse in my veins  
I shall resist.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "George Jackson in the Sun of Palestine," Ottoman History Project, July 11, 2018, <https://www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2018/07/george-jackson-in-sun-of-palestine.html>.

<sup>29</sup> "George Jackson in the Sun of Palestine."



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