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Good evening everybody and thank you so much for having me; is the sound OK?

I would say I have been an observant Muslim since I was about 13 years old. I am the child of migrants, my father being Palestinian and my mother being Egyptian. Both of them having lived in Australia longer than they have in either of their own homelands. I attended a catholic primary school and an Islamic High School.

I vividly remember the day the first Gulf War broke out because it marked such a profound shift in my life. Until then I had always felt I was somehow on the fringes. I was clearly not part of the dominant Anglo culture. Throughout my Catholic education I was one of the few non-catholic students, who did not eat pork, who had a long un-pronounceable surname who somebody once said graciously advising me sounded like a sneeze.. 'Abdul-Fattah'; and as such stood in the back of church while the other students participated in church services.

I remember one particular day I was in grade 3. I was feeling rather bored and my best friend Monica who was Indian and Hindu was, was sick. And I was alone in the back row while the other students were participating in Church services, and I decided to sneak into line to taste the Eucharist and to make confession. The experiences one doesbegging for forgiveness. The slide opened and I heard a gentle kind voice, 'what is your confession my child?' I was stuffed. The priest would declare me a heretic and my parents would call me a traitor. The priest asked me again, 'what is your confession my child?' 'I'm Muslim' I whispered, and started reciting The Lord's Prayer. I remember at the place that the gentleman is such a dear and he was very very old and he couldn't hear half the time so I'm convinced that's the reason he whispered.

Then I moved onto an Islamic high school Kinpala Islamic College. I learned the same curriculum as other independent schools. In addition we were taught religious education classes. We prayed in congregation at the school mosque. It was a large tent at the time. I was one of the first year seven students so we

were still in our pioneer days. I wore the hijab as part of the school uniform and we fasted in Ramadan. The school was intent on fostering a strong sense of Australian Muslim identity. And I believed that the greatest irony of my strong self, sense of self as an Australian, is that it's due to the efforts of the Muslim and migrant teaching staff of the school and not the Anglo counterparts and certainly not the wider community. They really sort of honed into us the idea that we were Australian and it was because of their efforts to never make us feel that we should have a sense that we were negotiable citizens that we came out even stronger with a more positive idea of our sense of belonging.

But it was the experience of walking out of the school grounds with a scarf on my head during the Gulf War years that made me learn fairly quickly that I would not as a Muslim of Arabic heritage survive the country in which I was born and being raised without choosing how I would define myself. Without demanding the right to self definition, I was a nappy head, a tea towel head, a wog, a terrorist, a camel jockey, a fundamentalist, an oppressed woman, a slave to Muslim men. In response I fixed on myself as a hyphenated identity an Australian-Muslim-Palestinian-Egyptian. It was at Kinpala's summer college that I developed a strong sense of my great fortune at having a wonderfully exciting hyphenated identity, and it was spurred mainly as a reaction to the negative imagery that I saw of Islam and Muslims; that I saw saturating the media literature and Hollywood movies.

Muslims seemed to me to be mainly represented in the language of isms, terrorism, extremism, radicalism, fundamentalism. There always seemed to be a feature article analysing, deconstructing, then reconstructing Islam and Muslims in which my fellow Aussies were offered the chance to make offense of this phenomena called the Muslim. I learnt fairly quickly that I had to live against the perception that I was seen to represent a synonym for terrorism and extremism. I saw the faith I embraced with such conviction defamed because acts that clearly defied Islamic law and teachings were prefixed by the media with the word Islamic. I saw the reasonable peaceful statements of my community leaders largely being ignored and the ignorant ravings of the average Muhammad with the long beard on the corner of the local Mosque being splashed across the headlines.

And I worked at the Islamic Council of Victoria, I'm from Melbourne originally, and I certainly saw that all the time. That when I was the media liaison officer there, and whenever the media used to come to interview people they would always go for the one who looked like the hothead, and sure enough they would love the opportunity to talk to the media and talk about waging Jihad against them. And of course those were the headlines that were splashed across the papers the next day. I also remember having to deal with journalists who insisted every time they wanted to arrange photographs of Muslim women for reports that they were doing and always insisting on having a Muslim woman who wore the burkka and who covered her face. And I would constantly tell them that that does not

represent your average Muslim woman, in some cases they declined to proceed with the interview. In other cases for example, in one case the Herald Sun was running a faces of Australia stamp collection in which readers were invited to send in photographs of average Aussies. And then the idea was that they would have a double page spread of stamps, you know of the faces of Australia. And journalists telephoned me when I was working at the Islamic council and asked if I could arrange for a group of young Muslim women for this collection but could I please make sure that they were the burkka? And I said fine I'll do my best, and I called my mother who was the deputy principal at the Islamic school that I went to. And I said to her I want you to find me a group of girls who do not fit the ridiculous notion of middle eastern appearance so she found me some Lebanese, Turkish and Albanian girls with blue eyes, blonde hair and very fair skin as if this is you know somehow some sort of deviation. Anyway they didn't fit that typical, that typical stereotype of Middle Eastern appearance. And when the journalists and photographer came and saw this group they were pretty annoyed and took the photograph, but then looked at my mum who is Egyptian background olive skin and brown eyes, and asked her if they could take her photograph. And she says she consented just to be polite, but it was her photograph that they put in the newspaper. So it just confirmed and validated to me that there is sometimes there are certain agenda, that there is an agenda in the way the media wishes to portray certain groups.

I realized my faith and community were great topics of talkback radio, rant and raves. I realized that I needed to accept that although atrocities are committed in the names of all religions around the world, it is often Islam that is judged by the actions of those who purport to be its followers. I realized that in many so called Islamic regimes the teachings of Islam were being distorted and downright ignored in order to perpetuate an appalling oppression of women. It was because of the stereotype of Muslims as terrorists or oppressed women that I was invigorated to learn more about my faith. My spirituality and god consciousness really came about from my intellectual appreciation of Islamic teachings. The media and many commentators regularly informed me that as a Muslim female I was subservient to men and had no rights. That was not what I saw in my own family, quite the reverse. But I was compelled to study what the teachings of Islam said and I was overcome by the spirit of equality and equity in the teachings as well as the dynamic and powerful women in our prophet's time. So my faith was initially strengthened because Islam appealed to me as a woman.

I've been interested in the Islamic, the classical Islamic legal tradition particularly as it relates to gender equity or a long time. I suppose because I'm also a lawyer that aspect has been something that I have been very attracted to. As somebody with the passion, the conviction, and commitment related to Islam I immersed myself in the books of the past and am overcome by complexity of doctrines, the diversity of opinions and the enormous amounts of disputations over a wide range of issues. And that's probably something that many Muslims don't realize

themselves, the intolerant and intolerable world of the Taliban or the Wahabis seems to me to bear little resemblance to the Islam that comes to life in the pages of books documenting the prophet's life and message. It is not to Germaine Greer that I look for an association of my rights as a woman there is a clear place and person that a feminist struggle existed in Islamic classical discourse. I am no apologist who claims that there are no oppressed Muslim women, that there are women in the Muslim world who experience appalling oppression in the name of Islam is undeniable and something that angers me very much. On the one hand Islam is clearly corrupted by tribalism and cultural traditions that contradict the ethical principles of justice, reasonableness, compassion and mercy at the heart of Islam's legal system. You just have to look at what is happening for example under the Taliban regime to see how that plays out. In those instances a distinction must be made between culture and Islamic teachings. A female circumcision is a case in point, even non-Muslims practice female circumcision in multi-faith but mono-cultural and ethnic communities, but the practice is often represented in the Muslim media as Islamic and sanctioned.

But what we cannot also ignore that in parts of the Muslim world today the ethical principles of peace, justice, reasonableness, compassion, that underpin the Koran and prophet's life, and not displayed by those who hold themselves up as legitimately applying Islamic law. As somebody who is constantly engaging and trying to make sense of the sophisticated and robust and diverse debate that features so predominantly in Islamic legal jurisprudential legacy I feel an enormous pressure. It's a pressure that demands that we have a very theological conversation, in the public domain just doesn't work; people just aren't interested. Because to fairly understand why the contemporary Muslim world is in crisis particularly when it comes to the status of women, you must have more than an elementary Western XXX understanding of Islam. What are the sources of Islam? What is Sharia law? Who can claim authority to represent or interpret the divine will? These basics are often overlooked by non-Muslims and Muslims. I've sat in circles of Muslims and they themselves have no idea what the legitimate sources of Islam are, and they'll say this is halal meaning Muslim or this is haram meaning it is forbidden, and the only basis they have for saying that is that they've heard it at the mosque, or that you know the man at the mosque has told them that. That they have got no appreciation of the huge, rich, diverse legacy that of Islamic jurisprudence, and I think that that really has a huge impact when it comes to the rights of Muslim women. Because culture and tribalism really take precedence unfortunately.

The debate over women's rights and status in the Islamic legal tradition is not a simple one and deserves more respectful treatment and scholarship than the media allows. We still don't appreciate that Islam cannot be reduced to some kind of vending machine culture where you put in a coin for a certain answer and it is simply and instantly delivered. And this is very embarrassing but there is actually something called a Halal hotline in Sydney where you call and you ask a

question about whether something is permissible or forbidden. That's what I mean about religion being dumbed down for the masses, and it's something that now Muslim communities are working on from within, trying to fill their base of qualified Australian Muslim experts in Islamic law. The difficulty is that our internal struggle is in the public eye, and we all know that the public eye does not tolerate that which cannot be trivialized, simplified or processed. My engagement with the texts that provided glimpses into the Prophet's life as well as the principles articulated in the Koran provide me with an educated as well as intuitive sense that the repression of women is an ugly travesty, and seems incompatible with the beliefs, mercy, fairness and justice of Islamic tradition.

But we can't deny that the Islamic faith and Muslims are feared and misunderstood. That whole conversation about theology about jurisprudence it's not something that is played out in the public sphere because people aren't interested in that. At the end of the day they see people being arrested in Melbourne under suspicion of terrorism, they see people like Shaktaj Halili saying things that are really horrible things about Muslim women and that's the picture of Islam that's really at the forefront of people's minds. What happens is that Muslims are viewed as some sort of homogenous mass in which we all think, feel, and act in the same way and we are all lumped under one banner., and particularly as this relates to Muslim women.

I guess there is really two sort of paradigms that Muslims are viewed, its either as terrorists or as oppressed women. That's what motivated me to write my first book I wrote when I was fifteen. It was the first draft of *Does My Head Look Big In This* and it was because I was watching movies like *Not Without My Daughter*, I was seeing the headlines in the midst of the Gulf War that I felt motivated to allow readers to step into the lives of your average Muslim teenager, and I was a teenager then, but I felt perfectly qualified to write about a teenager's life, and to try and see past the headlines. And I sent it off to Penguin publishers and you have to only send the first three chapters, if they like it they'll request the whole manuscript, and they liked the idea and they asked me for the rest of the novel. But then they ultimately rejected it, they said it was too didactic, too preachy, too self conscious, so I gave it up and about 8 or 9 years later I revisited the manuscript and threw it in the bin. I can't even replicate one word of that, it was horrible, it was indeed very preachy, very self conscious, and I had a different strategy this time. I thought when you think about Islam and Muslims the one thing you don't think about is humour, you don't think about laughing, and that's why I thought I wanted to write a very cheeky a very almost sort of subversive look at what it's like to be a Muslim teenager. And hopefully use that as a way to get into peoples hearts and get them to see past the stereotypes and the headlines.

It's something that I also felt motivated to do because I was horrified, and still am, that Muslim women only ever feature as protagonists in stories, in sort of Orientalist type narratives in which women achieve liberation because they are

escaping Islam or they are always victims of oppression, honour killings, domestic violence because of Islam. I'll give you a sort of a sample of titles that you can see when you pass through any bookshop. They are unimaginative...*Beneath the Veil, Under the Veil, Behind the Veil, The Hidden World of Islamic Women, Princess, Dessert Worlds Sold, Forbidden Love, Not Without My Daughter*. You'll always have the required image of a Muslim woman only showing her eyes, looking out, pleading with the reader to rescue her. Indeed when I finished *Does My Head Look Big In This* and I was thinking about how I was going to try get published, I thought the best way to do so would be to get a literary agent. And sure enough you know I sent my manuscript off. And one agent called and had the audacity to say after she'd read the premise of the book and what I was trying to do she said, 'yes, but is there an honour killing in it?'. I enjoyed sending my book to her when it was published. And I also sent it to Bronwyn Bishop after her comments about banning the hijab; I never got a response though.

There were no role models for me as a young Muslim woman in the chichong, nor were there any accurate representations of the dynamic educated Muslim women, who I knew, who were independent not in spite of Islam but because of it. I've always felt very deeply about religious identity for young people. Perhaps because my mother is a principle of a school and I've grown up in an environment where education for young people has been such a strong focus, it saddened me that the book and media publishers had no interest in the cumulative effects that stereotyping has on Muslim teenagers' sense of self in the country in which they were very often born, and in which they are being raised, and the prejudices and perceptions of the wider community about their fellow Muslims.

It's a very unnatural state to live from a position of resistance, and I think that that's what a lot of Muslims or indeed people that do have an identity crisis do; you're constantly living on the defensive, on the edge, in resistance to people's prejudices. And not only is it unnatural, it's exhausting, because, especially if you're wearing the hijab, which I have, I wore it for four years throughout my teenage years. Everywhere you go there is always people's eyes, and people's stares, and people's unspoken prejudices and judgements. And then there are the people who have no problem expressing those prejudices. And then there are those who will ask questions, and it's to their credit because I always, I know with my friends, always prefer people who ask, who want to engage in some sort of dialogue who want to overcome their own ignorance about the hijab to understand your point of view. But again it becomes exhausting because you are always on parade. And I like to sort of, the way I think of it is you sort of feel like you're in a zoo, you're sort of locked in the cage of other people's prejudices and judgements, people are always staring at you and that can be exhausting. And when you are already a teenager exploring you're identity coming to terms with the world and the larger issue of who am I, it is made even more difficult when you throw other people's stereotypes into the mix. And that's really what I

wanted to do with *Does My Head Look Big In This* to show what this young girl Amal, what her life was like, that she was a normal everyday teenager growing up with the same issues, teenage crush, fighting with her parents, the whole friendship, body image issues, everything that teenagers go through. But then she has this added hurdle of walking as a living headline as a walking headline and that creates a huge pressure and burden on people.

I wrote my second novel *10 Things I Hate About Me*, it was again primarily for a young adult audience, this time addressing the demonization of people of Lebanese origin. And I wrote it again from the perspective of a young girl; she's Lebanese growing up in Western Sydney. I had moved from Melbourne and I had noticed that there was a very different dynamic between Melbourne and Sydney when it came to being Lebanese; it seemed to be a dirty word in Sydney. And I wanted to write a story that really gave again some insight into what it felt like to live with that sort of pressure. But also looked at the opposite end of the spectrum. So in *Does My Head Look Big In This*, Amal is an extremely confident positive girl. She knows who she is, she knows what she wants in terms of her religious faith and commitment, she's not afraid to express that, and she makes this courageous decision to wear the hijab whilst attending a snotty private school in Melbourne. So she's very confident, when people ask her questions she has no problem responding.

Whereas Janila in *10 Things I Hate About Me* is painfully, painfully shy about who she is, and her heritage. She is ashamed of the fact that she struggles between her Lebanese and Australian Identities. And her way of coping, her sort of coping mechanism is to retreat. It's what I call withdrawing to the safety of anonymity so that Janila becomes Janie when she's at school, she dyes her hair blond, she wears blue contact lenses. And I wasn't making this up, I was basing this on friends that I had grown up with, who couldn't stand the fact that people thought they were from the Middle East. And they thought the only way they could fit in as Aussies was to have blond hair. So they'd walk around with this horrible bleached hair, and these ridiculous blue contact lenses. And every time their parents would walk in the room they'd have to take their contact lenses out because they'd get in trouble, and then they'd have to put them back in when they would go out. They were really living two lives. And the whole issue of author anglicising their names so that people, they could fit in when they were amongst their Aussie friends. In the end they had no identity; they weren't ever truly accepted because most people can recognise how fake that is. And that's what I wanted to do with *10 Things I Hate About Me*, show that if you don't have self respect you'll never gain your respect from others. And that's a painful journey for Janila. You know I wrote *10 Things I Hate About Me* I submitted the draft for editing and then the Cronulla riots occurred. And I thought that validates to me that this is a book that needs to be told, that I'm not actually just making this up, not making this stuff up. These are real issues that we need to deal with.

Before I talk about my third book about Palestine, I'll just lead into my fourth book which I've just finished the first draft of. I don't have a title yet but I wanted to do something very different. So I sort of looked at my hype. So I did the whole Muslim thing, I've done the Palestine thing with my third book, and the second book was sort of my Aussie identity, and then I thought what am I going to do next? People are probably expecting that I'm going to do another Muslim story or Arab story. And it was a real sort of tension for me and I spoke a lot with my agent, because I thought on the one hand I don't want to be boxed as the Muslim writer. It's a ridiculous title because you never hear Anglo writer, just because all the characters happen to be of Anglo background, but as soon as you have an ethnic identity background, if you write about characters who deviate from what we like to think of as the Anglo yardstick of Aussie identity, you are suddenly boxed in as a Muslim writer. And indeed one reviewer once wrote an article about Melina Machetta and my books, and was praising our books but then at the end said she hoped that we would start to write about real Aussies, about normal Aussies. And it confirmed to us that people were still thinking of these stories as deviations from the norm, that they are not Australian stories. And I wanted to, you know I had hoped with my books I could start challenging people's ideas and definitions of what it means to be an Australian and say these are equally valid stories and narratives.

So I thought well I could write a story again, the central character was of Anglo background, and you know people would then say 'oh now she can write all sorts of books, and you know now she can write about the ethnic books and the real stories'. But that really annoyed me that I was going to cop out like that. And what I wanted to do was use my legal background and write a legal thriller for teenagers. I had to write, I wanted to write from the point of view of a male this time because a lot of my readers had written and said stop writing about girls and write about boys and get rid of the pink on your covers. So I thought I think I'll give this a go, I'll write from a boys perspective. And I tell you what it was a lot easier, it was a lot less complicated. And then I thought you know I'm writing a comedy legal thriller, you this fifteen year old, this fifteen year old boy, but I wanted to do something which is try to get people to challenge their idea of what mainstream popular literature is about. And so there are a couple of references in the book to the fact that Noah the protagonist, his father is Egyptian of Egyptian background, but it doesn't go any further than that they're just casual references. And what I wanted to do hopefully was to get readers to stop looking at ethnicity as a noun but more as an adjective, so that it doesn't define the characters as that. Just because they are Egyptian background, there are certain expectations and assumptions about what that personality character is like. Hopefully to get people to start thinking that these are adjectives, they colour a person's identity and who they are, but you don't have to implant your own prejudices, and assumptions, and expectations about those people. So that's my fourth book.

With my third novel *Where the Streets Had a Name* I wanted to really open my readers' minds about Israel's brutal and illegal occupation of Palestinian land. And challenge readers to walk in the eyes, walk in the shoes of a Palestinian child and see the military occupation through her eyes. Just briefly its about a young girl Hiat who is 13 years old growing up in occupied Bethlehem. And she is living in a very small apartment, her family loose their land in Bejala when it is confiscated to make a bypass road, an 'Israeli-only by- pass road to a settlement. So they loose their land and they are forced into this apartment in Bethlehem. And because of the cramped living conditions, she shares a room with her brother, and sister, and grandmother.

And she often wakes up having nightmares because she suffered an encounter with the Israeli army which has led her to be scarred and she suffers nightmares all the time about that. And so she wakes up and she often finds her grandmother sitting on her bed holding the skeleton, iron skeleton key to her Jerusalem home. And she talks to her grandmother about 1948 and what happened. And a lot of her interaction with her grandmother is based on my own interaction with my late grandmother and all the things that she taught me when I spoke to her about 1948 and about my family's dispossession. And it's during those stories she realises how much her grandmother yearns to go back to her home, her village in Jerusalem, which is only about 6 to 10 km away and yet illegal for her to return to. And it's the irony of being a refugee in your own home. And then her grandmother falls sick, and she comes up with this idea that if she could just get to Jerusalem the village bring back some soil in an empty jar of humus and let her grandmother touch that soil again then maybe it would restore her grandmother to health. And it was an idea that first sort of stored away in my mind when I heard it in some documentary that I once watched in which a young boy goes with his grandmother back to her village and she's touching the soil, and you know just that spiritual connection that she had with the soil really made an impression on me.

And then I also had a family friend in Melbourne who was dispossessed, unable to return back to his homeland but had a jar of soil on the mantle piece in his house from his village. And on his deathbed he requested that it be sprinkled on his grave. And so all these things, little stories were stored away in my mind, and that's sort of what led to me coming up with this idea. And so she goes with her best friend Sammy, who's a Palestinian Christian in Bethlehem, because I also wanted to in this book emphasise this isn't a Muslim/Jewish conflict because the Christian experience is so often ignored in the media. And it really, it gets played out as a conflict between Muslims and Jews, which I think gets hijacked into the larger issue of Islam versus the West. And forgets the idea that really it's about an indigenous population (Muslim, Christian, atheist even), that there's an indigenous Palestinian population who are suffering this occupation and this dispossession. So it was very important for me to have the two central characters Muslim and Christian. And so they go on this illegal journey.

And it's really, I hoped, a book that would allow readers to open their eyes to the Palestinian narrative and give the Palestinian narrative a chance. It was heavily based on what I had read, sort of in my activism, in my work with The Coalition for Peace and Justice in Palestine here in Sydney. I'm a member of it, and you know all the stories I've heard who they've brought to talk to us, because even though I'm Palestinian and I've heard the stories from my father, it wasn't only really ever till I visited Palestine that I saw first hand, that I witnessed first hand his dispossession. He used to tell me that his earliest memory was of sitting on his mother's lap at the age of four while she fed him soup. It was comfort food after he was clobbered on the head by the neighbour hood bully. When my family travelled to Palestine in January 2000 and we visited my father's village of Bulkah near the west bank town of Nablis my father rushed to show us the spot in the front yard of his house where he had sat eating soup with my grandmother all those years ago. We spent the afternoon getting to know the house my father was born in, with him navigating us through his vivid childhood memories. I remember he would say this is where a science experiment I was conducting at the age of 9 exploded in my forehead. And he knew the exact spot. And then he go on this porch we sat during summer nights eating oranges and cooking karnafra. Here's the room where my father passed away. He really was in a frenzy describing his memories as we moved through his house.

Bulkah had the most amazing view, it was nestled you know in the gently rolling hills of Nablis. But atop the surrounding mountains were the Israeli settlements, closely set concrete box apartments, tall water towers and barbed wire fences, it just seemed such an obscene contrast. We were under strict orders from my family in Jordan, where they live, to bring lots of photographs and video footage because they weren't allowed to return back to Palestine. Because in fact what happened was that my grandmother in 1992, she had lived alone in the village of Bulkah, because all my family had been outside of Palestine in 1967 and therefore were no longer allowed to return. She had been living alone but was getting incredibly frail and sick, so my uncle and my aunts sort of tricked her into visiting Jordan, which she did quite frequently, but they didn't let her return because they knew if she passed away or if she fell sick, no-one would be allowed to return to bury her.

To me the irony was that as an Australian I lived closer to Palestine than my family in next door Jordan, so I was able to enter but they weren't. So we were under strict orders to take photographs to witness and to record their history and their heritage. She was 90 years old when she went to Jordan and she hadn't seen her home in 10 years. I didn't want to tell her the reality of what it looked like because what had happened was Israeli soldiers had suspected that a man they wanted was in the village and they had been ransacking all the houses. They didn't find the man, but what they did was damage the house. When we went there, there were torn packets of sugar on the floor, my father's schoolbooks were thrown all over the floor, furniture was turned upside down, a

chest of drawers was vandalised and my aunt's wedding dress was tossed onto the floor and ripped and stepped on. So we didn't take photographs of that.

She craved her homeland but her yearning for it probably didn't change the fact that she must have known that she would never touch the soil again. And indeed she didn't, and was buried in Jordan in April 2008. Her death at the age of 98 didn't come as a surprise, but I felt a great tragedy in her passing I had just finished *Where the Streets Had a Name* and the character was based on my grandmother. I had hoped she would see the book. But even more unsettling was the fact that a month before her death the western world celebrated Israel's 60th anniversary. On 12 March 2008 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd moved a bi-partisan motion that we all must know to congratulate Israel on its independence. I was not the only person to wonder whether it crossed the minds of those who passed the motion, that it is on the destruction of Palestinian lives and homes and the continued illegal occupation of their land that Israel celebrates its independence. It was because of the creation of the state of Israel and the ongoing occupation that my family and so many others were displaced. And that my grandmother could not live her last years in the village that she spent 81 years of her life in, that she couldn't be buried alongside her husband and ancestors. In celebrating the creation of Israel, there was scant regard for our narrative and what the anniversary meant for Palestinians.

And I think that what compounds our grief as Palestinians is not so much that much of the western world is apathetic, I think that apathy or cursory support would be preferable to what is actually happening, which is that a western affiliated regime is allowed to act with impunity and deny self determination and human rights to developing people. And I know that many people have hailed President Obama's election as a promising, as something that is promising for the Palestinians, but really despite all the lip service for example about easing the sanctions on Gaza the US continues to support that criminal blockade of the Gaza strip. And like the Bush administration Obama has never criticized Israel's attack on Gaza. Despite the evidence of atrocities and war crimes it continues to funnel arms and money to Fattah controlled militias, encouraging them to attack Hamas on the West Bank sabotaging any chance intra-Palestinian reconciliation. And it still rejects talks with Hamas, despite Hamas's electoral mandate, repeated offers of a reciprocal ceasefire, and an acceptance of a two state solution. So there is still a lot to despair about when it comes to the western world's support of Israel. I think one despairs because the Palestinians, the victims of 1948, and the subsequent occupation are denied legitimacy, they are denied their history, their experience of ethnic cleansing, displacement, discrimination, oppression, and occupation, their very victimhood is questioned.

I don't believe that peace can ever be achieved so long as the state of Israel refuses to acknowledge the 'nacbah', the catastrophe of 1948. A two or one state solution, the occupation, the apartied separation wall, Jerusalem, the right of return, I think these are technicalities. I believe very strongly that a just peace

can never be achieved until Israel approaches the negotiating table with an admission of its guilt that it owes its existence to the eviction and displacement of the Palestinian people from their land. The majority of Palestinians have long accepted Israel's existence on 78% of historic Palestine; they have been craving for their own state on that small 22% that is left for them. They are waiting now for an apology, for a recognition of their existence as a distinct people with national individual rights holding legitimate claims to the country. They are waiting for Israel to say sorry for the villages depopulated the massacres committed and the refugees created. I'm a firm supporter of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement which has rapidly gained support for Palestinians from academic institutions, church groups, and other grass root bodies worldwide. I think so many people have said that such sanctions were a vital tool in the struggle to abolish apartheid in South Africa and rehabilitate that state as part of the family of nations. I think without effective sanctions the main value of the boycott movement is to remind Israel that its actions bring it to global disrepute.

We often hear and I'm quite sick of hearing politicians proclaim the complexity of this conflict and ask, and it's been asked of me many times: why can't they just get along, the Palestinians and Israelis? As if the problems of an illegal occupation, the refugees, and the ever shrinking territory on which Palestinians are expected to build their state are swept under the carpet. Illegal settlements continue to be built and the ubiquitous security wall snakes its way through the towns and villages of the occupied West Bank making a contiguous Palestinian state impossible. Either, Israel and the international community act to make an independent Palestinian state a possibility or they accept a solution where the Jewish and Arabic inhabitants of the land live side by side as equal citizens.

Thankyou.