Introduction

How did you become an activist? Why Palestine?

These are the types of questions many activists will be asked at one point or another when talking about their life, work, and motivations with a "non-activist" person. While I often want to reverse the question and ask, "Why *aren't* you an activist?," I usually decide, with insight, to try my best in answering this potentially frustrating question.

Why? Because I think it is important to understand where the questions are coming from, and it is as important to look inside yourself, take a step back, relive your journey, pause, and realize that you too, not that long ago, may have asked the same questions of anyone engaged in working toward a better world—where equality, justice, and freedom apply to all, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, country of origin, skin color, political affiliation, or sexual orientation.

How, then, does one become an activist?

The easy answer would be to say that we do not become activists; we simply forget that we are. We are all born with compassion, generosity, and love for others inside us. We are all moved by injustice and discrimination. We are all, inside, concerned human beings. We all want to give more than to receive. We all want to live in a world where solidarity and companionship are more important values than individualism and selfishness. We all want to share beautiful things; experience joy, laughter, love; and experiment, together.

But we have a problem. A big one. We live in a society, and an epoch, where we do not have time to think any longer. We live in a time when

taking a step back and a deep breath have become a luxury that many cannot afford.

We live in a world where the mainstream education system teaches you to obey and listen to authority from the earliest age and does not offer you the chance to think for yourself and express yourself in ways that are outside the proclaimed norm.

We live in a society where the “nothing” (shopping, watching TV) has become a “something” and the “something” (relaxing, meditating, sharing) has become a void in need of being filled. Our minds, our souls, have slowly been corrupted by materialistic nothingness that has been created for us, billboarded in front of our eyes, and printed, tattooed on our cells by advertising, marketing, and vulture capitalism.

The “remote control” of our world only has two buttons, “Play” and “Fast Forward,” while the one we are all looking for is the “Pause.”

I “became” an activist through books.

After having worked since my early twenties in various menial jobs, and like a good citizen doing my nine to five, looking away at the ticking clock, enjoying my life for the reasons I was told were needed to enjoy it, fulfilling the potential that I had been “allowed” to have by society and its “leaders,” I stopped.

I quit my job, moved from the city I had been living in for the last six years, and started studying again. I read loads of books and realized that I wanted this period, which was supposed to be temporary (because of the dread of unemployment and boredom potentially creeping in), to last forever.

Reading and feeling enlightened by those books really played a big part in changing my vision of life and what it was supposed to mean. I started with reading Chomsky and slowly became very interested in anything that

had to do with Israel/Palestine. Reading Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, John Berger, Tanya Reinhart, Ilan Pappé, Norman Finkelstein, Noam Chomsky, Kurt Vonnegut, Arundhati Roy, Naomi Klein . . . all became part of my daily routine.

Books changed me and I think that they are, more than anything else, one of the best tools we can use to learn, reflect on, and truly understand the world we are living in. They are a bridge between languages, continents, and people. A book will accompany you and will stay with you, it will mark you like nothing else. You will go back to it, quote it, argue about it. You will borrow one and lend one. The written word, in my opinion, is therefore more effective and long lasting than the spoken one as a tool for change.

I felt very lucky and privileged, when, in 2008, two of the authors I had read again and again on Palestine, Professors Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé, agreed to work on a book with me. Our long email exchanges became *Gaza in Crisis: Reflections on Israel's War Against the Palestinians*, which found a broad audience and was translated into many languages. After the book, Noam, Ilan, and I continued talking, mostly via emails. One day, during a meeting with Ilan in Brussels, we both came to the conclusion that a follow-up to that book was necessary. One thing that had indeed left me frustrated working on *Gaza in Crisis* was how the email exchanges between Noam and Ilan were not interactive. Noam answered a set of questions, and Ilan did the same. The two authors had no way to respond to or argue with each other.

Ilan and I therefore decided that if another book were produced, it would have to consist of face-to-face conversations. Truly excited by the prospect, I emailed Noam, pretty sure that he was not going to be available due to his extremely busy schedule. To my surprise, Noam responded positively and, a

few months after I sent the email, Ilan and I boarded a plane for Boston to meet Noam in his office at MIT.

In preparing the questions and the topics we were going to address, I thought that it was important to start with the past. Some commentators argue that you should always look forward, think about the future, that thinking about the past tends to be a stumbling block that impedes on the negotiations, the peace process. They are, often on purpose, missing the point. The past, as far as Palestine and Palestinians are concerned, is 1948, the *Nakba*, and the ethnic cleansing of two-thirds of the population (yes, two-thirds; try to put this in perspective and do the math with the country you are living in right now) that was expelled from historical Palestine to make space for a new state, Israel. It is a not-so-distant past; we are not talking about centuries ago. It is a very present past, for all Palestinians. Talking about it, analyzing it, is therefore crucial to understanding the current situation. Understanding Zionism is also key and the two professors have slightly different perspectives about the matter.

In discussing the present, we focused on the role of civil society and the impact it can have on radically changing the narrative and actual policies on the ground. The huge growth and the impact of the boycott, divestment, and sanction (BDS) movement cannot be underestimated in putting Palestine back on the map. The BDS movement helped rejuvenate and rebuild the solidarity movement worldwide. It offered a step-by-step guide (with flexibility depending on the different national interests) on how to turn from a defensive stance to an offensive one. The BDS movement asserted: Let’s stop trying to justify our actions, let’s act. This made for very engaging discussions. The BDS movement is a subject of debate between Professor Pappé and Professor Chomsky and both this book and *Gaza in Crisis* allow room for differences between the two. I do think there is something to gain

by enabling this conversation—that it can be constructive and reinforce the struggle for Palestinian rights.

Finally and obviously, we talked about the future—the day-after question. What is actually meant, practically, by a “free Palestine”? What kind of state is possible? Is a state the solution? How will Palestinians and Israelis share the country? What constitution will be drafted?

While it is important to focus on the present, as things on the ground are getting worse every day, having a clear strategy and political vision is crucial if we want people around the globe to see what is possible.

With that, the conversation part was concluded, and, as far as I was concerned, this was good enough. Ilan, however, thought we needed something more. He offered to write what I think is an amazing and incredibly timely and challenging original piece called “The Old and New Conversations.” It is a rallying call to move forward, change gears, and totally rethink the vocabulary we use when it comes to the Palestine question—to use semantics as an educating tool for change.

This piece makes, in my opinion, the book a much better and solid one. It fills in the blanks and opens up the debate to the world.

But something brought us back to the present in a most forceful way: another Israeli aggression in Gaza. Shortly after we submitted this book to the publisher, Israel was at it again. “Mowing the lawn” as they horrifyingly call it. The carpet bombing of an imprisoned population by its occupier, with the support of most Western states, spurred Ilan and Noam to write additional contributions. Working on the book again while Israel was indiscriminately carpet bombing a population of 1.8 million Palestinians was often very difficult. When things are radically wrong, writing does not feel like the most obvious response for an activist. Writing while feeling extremely angry and useless often does not produce the best results. I was

glad to see some of my close friends involved in civil disobedience actions all over the world. It gave me strength and faith. With good people like that around, the struggle, after all, might not be endless. But the writing was essential and I hope that this book will help challenge the narrative of the powerful, the PR of governments, repeated in loop by the corporate media that helps justify the crimes, that allows them to be committed, that paralyzes people.

The Palestine question is emblematic of what is wrong with the world. The role played by Western states, the complicity of corporations and of various institutions make this case a very special one. The fact that Israel actually benefits from violating international law and receives “red carpet” treatment from the West means that we all have a role to play in ending the injustice that the Palestinians are facing. The injustice in Palestine has ramifications throughout the world. From Ferguson to Athens, via Mexico, it is clear that many governments are reproducing the tools that Israel uses to repress and oppress the Palestinians. The replication of those same tactics, methods, and often weapons serves as proof that the Palestinians are now used as guinea pigs for experimentation. And Palestine is a great laboratory. Exploring the Palestine case is therefore crucial for understanding where we stand as human beings and what we stand for. Finding a solution to this question could then open the door to a new vision, to a new world, to new possibilities for all of us.

Palestine is slowly becoming global—a social issue that all movements fighting for social justice need to embrace. The next step is connecting the dots between various struggles around the world and creating a truly united front.

We are many. We will prevail.