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How to bring justice for Palestinians

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Abstract

The current conflict in the ancient land of Palestine, with Jerusalem as the revered crown jewel of the three Abrahamic faiths, goes back to the dark years of World War 1 when Britain and France, two colonial powers of Europe, sowed the seeds of injustice in Palestine and the wider Arabian Peninsula. Since then, and with the unconditional moral and material support for Israel from America, the Palestinians have been subjected to incomparable dispossession and ethnic cleansing in their own lands. But there are signs that the winds of change are blowing in the land and across the world in support of a just solution to this conflict. This paper explores the current state of affairs and potentially effective ways of bringing justice for Palestinians.

Counting the cost of the May 2021 war

Once again, the 11-day asymmetric war between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 has exposed the glaringly disproportionate cost on both sides¹. Palestinians suffered over 250 deaths including 65 children. Sanitation facilities and other infrastructure were disabled and more than 1,800 housing units became unfit for living, with 1,000 completely destroyed. Israel counted 13 deaths including two children. It is estimated that some \$100million is needed to rebuild² the damage to industry, power and agriculture in the already impoverished Gaza, which has been under a harsh Israeli blockade for over a decade.

In ominous signs, Israel has not stopped building illegal settlements and the Israeli police has continued their hostile actions towards Muslims in the Al-Aqsa compound despite the ceasefire. During an Israeli Rabbinical Leaders Conference held in May 2021, Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, Israel's Sephardic

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/palestinians-israelis-count-cost-11-day-fight-2021-05-20/>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/21/thousands-of-gazans-return-to-destroyed-homes-after-israel-truce>

Chief Rabbi, reaffirmed the long-standing religious edict³ that prohibits Jews from entering the Temple Mount (Haram al-Sharif). There is little sign in Israel following the respected religious figure's advice.

Sadly, but unsurprisingly, President Biden has continued the long-standing US tradition of unwavering support for Israeli military action, with no urgency for a ceasefire. As the ferocity of the Gaza bombardment escalated and casualties began to mount, he supported the Egyptian brokered ceasefire, whilst promising that his administration would fund the replenishment of Israel's Iron Dome defence and work with the Palestinian Authority (PA) on a two-state solution⁴. Like his predecessors and their administrations, Biden failed to say how he would address the reality of absolute Israeli control over Palestine which has not only turned Gaza into the largest open-air prison, but has also incapacitated the PA and starved them of any authority. With its unparalleled military, economic and diplomatic support of the Israeli settler colonial project, it is difficult to see how the US can be a fair arbiter.


Noticeably, Biden did not discuss how Gaza would be rebuilt. The ruling party, Hamas, who were democratically elected in internationally accepted elections held in 2006, is designated a terrorist⁵ by America and many of her allies and have since been boycotted. Unfortunately, the PA's failure to hold any

³ <https://www.forward-thinking.org/?p=6226>

⁴ <https://news.sky.com/story/joe-biden-says-two-state-solution-only-route-to-peace-as-israel-hamas-ceasefire-holds-12313261>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13331522>

elections after 2006 has weakened the Palestinian leadership. In 2017, Tony Blair, the envoy for the Middle East quartet (made up of the US, EU, UN and Russia), commented that “he and other world leaders were wrong to yield to Israeli pressure to impose an immediate boycott of Hamas⁶.” Former US President Jimmy Carter urged “supine Europe⁷” over a decade ago to break with the US over the Gaza blockade. It is unfortunate that some statesmen only muster the courage to speak for justice when they are no longer in office!



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⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/14/tony-blair-hamas-gaza-boycott-wrong>


⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/26/israelandthepalestinians.usa1>

The seeds of injustice spread by colonial powers

It's worth reminding some readers how the ancient holy lands arrived at this calamitous position. The Jewish presence in Ottoman Palestine was small for centuries, but in the 19th century, when the Ottoman empire was in a flux, Britain, France and Russia were taking advantage of the power balance shift. The imperial hubris of colonial Britain and France during World War 1 (WWI) initiated an incomparable injustice, division and anarchy in the heartlands of the Arab Middle East. The most glaring was in the historic land of the Prophets, Palestine, with Jerusalem at the centre as one of the most revered sites for the three Abrahamic faiths.

The aftermath of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement divided the region into spoils after WWI, with Palestine falling under

British occupation. The Balfour Declaration, enshrined in the form of a letter from the British foreign secretary, Arthur James Balfour, in November 1917 to a leader of the Anglo-Jewish community, Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild, promising British support for “the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine was a glaring example of the creation of a settler colonial state. This sealed the fate of Palestine as a battle ground for generations to come. Where Jews had lived in peace and harmony with Muslims in Spain and Ottoman territories for a millennium, they had suddenly become enemies in Palestine, thanks to the colonial ‘divide and rule’ policies, successful Zionist lobbies on both sides of the Atlantic, Christian Zionism and Arab disunity.



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As with other crown dependencies in the dying days of colonialism, Britain regarded the European Zionist settlement in Palestine as a way of creating a loyal dominion in the heart of the Arab world and extending its 'mission civilatrice' over non-white peoples. The abdication of any responsibility for equality and justice soon led to the first of many Palestinian sufferings. The first mass ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 with the expulsion of more than 750,000 Palestinians⁸ filled Palestinian and Muslim hearts with despondency and anger and have only amplified since. Renowned Palestinian-American academic, Edward Said, commented that the Balfour Declaration was "made by a European power ... about a non-European territory ... in a flat disregard of both the presence and wishes of the native majority resident in that territory", eloquently encapsulating the depth of the injustice.

Indigenous Palestinians have faced catastrophe after catastrophe, whether it be under the hammer of Israeli occupation, forced displacement, imprisonment or humiliation in their daily lives through harassment at checkpoints. The failure of the Fatah-dominated PA to obtain the trust of a wide cross-section of Palestinian society has been described by some as a crisis of leadership and legitimacy⁹.

The failure to form a common platform to confront Israel has not helped the Palestinian cause. Hamas has its own challenges

⁸ <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/15208/1948%20Ethnic%20Cleansing%20of%20Palestine.pdf>;

⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/01/05/the-palestinian-leadership-crisis/>

in terms of its image in the West and also its funding sources. Although Gaza suffers from the Israeli scorched-earth policy time and again, Hamas' policy of indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israel is not seen positively by many of its supporters. However, despite all the odds, it has in recent times enhanced its position within the Palestine liberation movement.

The Israeli aggression continues to happen with the unconditional moral and material support from America. Billions of American taxpayers' dollars are given to Israel, mostly as long-term military aid. By purchasing sophisticated military equipment from the US, Israel has developed one of the most advanced militaries in the world, complete with nuclear weapons in its armoury. The result is a completely one-sided conflict that has allowed the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of a people to continue unabated. Over the last few decades, the US has shielded its close ally from any global criticism, vetoing at least 53 UN Security Council resolutions critical of Israel¹⁰.

Britain and France may no longer be superpowers, but as major powers with valued diplomatic capital and economic leverage, they are in a position to redress the balance. Sadly, not only have they chosen to shy away from correcting their past wrongs, in many places they have been following an interventionist foreign policy.

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/19/a-history-of-the-us-blocking-un-resolutions-against-israel>

Israel is increasingly seen as an apartheid state

The international community has been impotent in supporting justice for the Palestinians, particularly the UN where any attempt to redress the conflict faces an American veto for political reasons. However, such flagrant abuse of power is seen to be making America more unpopular in many parts of the world. With our world gradually becoming multipolar, there are signs of changing attitudes.

Many international, including Israeli, human rights organisations not only agree but voice their opinion that the status quo of injustice and occupation is one that clearly meets the definition of apartheid under international law. And these voices are only growing louder and clearer.

A leading human rights group in Israel, B'Tselem, published a report in early 2021 titled “*A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid*”¹¹. This report broke an unwritten taboo of comparing the Israeli treatment of Palestinians with South Africa’s apartheid system. In a 213-page report published a few months later and titled “*A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*”¹², Human Rights Watch (HRW) examined how the Israeli government has been methodically privileging Jewish Israelis while repressing Palestinians. Israeli authorities, it says, are “committing crimes against humanity including apartheid and persecution.”

This call is being notably echoed from within Israel. Over 500 Israeli Jews signed an open letter demanding international intervention against apartheid¹³. In a compelling article, two former Israeli ambassadors to South Africa, Ilan Baruch and Alon Liel, wrote how “the bantustans of South Africa under the apartheid regime and the map of the occupied Palestinian territories today are predicated on the same idea of concentrating the ‘undesirable’ population in as small an area as possible, in a series of non-contiguous enclaves. By gradually driving these populations from their land and concentrating them into dense and fractured pockets, both South Africa then and Israel today worked to thwart political

¹¹ https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid

¹² <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>

¹³ <https://jfffp.com/as-israeli-jews-we-demand-international-intervention-against-apartheid/>

autonomy and true democracy¹⁴.”

Additionally in 2021, the international criminal court launched an investigation into alleged war crimes in the Palestinian territories¹⁵, including the period covered by the 2014 Gaza war. Whilst Palestinians have welcomed this review, Israel has opposed on the grounds that it may potentially place hundreds of Israelis at risk of prosecution.

These may be positive signs, but small comfort to ordinary Gazans who are living in what has been described by many humanitarian bodies as the world’s largest open-air prison¹⁶, where almost 2 million Palestinians live in abject poverty behind a ruthless Israeli blockade. 70% of Palestinians in Gaza are registered as refugees, with many from families who were forced to leave their villages in 1948 and others who have been displaced since due to the ongoing violence and persecution. In his opening remarks after the Security Council failed to come up with a ceasefire during the 2021 conflict, courtesy of the US veto, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, said “if there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza¹⁷.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

¹⁴ <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/israeli-ambassadors-compare-israel-south-africa/>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/mar/03/icc-open-formal-investigation-war-crimes-palestine>

¹⁶ <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/april/gaza-the-worlds-largest-open-air-prison/>

¹⁷ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/ga12325.doc.html>

International opinions are solidifying for Palestinian justice

The winds of change blowing across the world are becoming stronger. As a result of the steadily swelling global public opinion against racial hatred and human rights abuse, particularly after the callous murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in America, people around the world have become more angry and more resolute against racial prejudice. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has gained momentum and is now energising generations of people from all colours, even in the heartlands of western countries and former colonial powers. There is a groundswell of activism which is shaping race relations in the US and across the world. Activists are gaining more courage in 'calling a spade a spade' and declaring Israel to be an apartheid state, as was seen in the

global resistance against the South African regime for three decades beginning in the 1960s.



The winds of change blowing across the world are becoming stronger

For decades, Israel enjoyed not only military supremacy over Palestine and its Arab neighbours, but also had the upper hand in perception and diplomacy by cynically depicting its victims as the villains. Things are beginning to change. There is now global disquiet and revulsion at the way in which the Israeli military pounded Gaza again in May 2021, leading to a humanitarian catastrophe. Sympathy for the Palestinian plight and anger directed at Israeli oppression has risen.

The voices of public figures are now being heard in the US Congress and British Parliament. British MP Layla Moran, of Palestinian descent, made an impassioned appeal for Britain to play its strongest role and recognise the state of Palestine¹⁸.

¹⁸ <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/palestine-israel-violence-gaza-hamas-b1847656.html>

In Britain, the US and many countries across the world there have been numerous public marches and protests. London alone saw almost 200,000 people marching through central London in solidarity with the Palestinians¹⁹.

The Arab population has so far watched with impotence at the continuous and flagrant Israeli violation of international law and the abject failure of their own rulers to protect the Palestinian people from suffering and humiliation. Israel has outmaneuvered the Arab world time and time again, most recently through the Abraham Accords. However, to the overwhelming Arab population, this agreement from some of the most corrupt and inept regimes is no more than a castle in the sand. The violent storming of Islam's third holiest mosque in the holy month of Ramadan and the forced evictions of families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, which was deemed a "violation of international law" by the UN²⁰, became a tinder box in the Arab world and beyond.

With the world becoming increasingly interconnected, the global outpour of sympathy for the Palestinians has been amplified through both social and mainstream media. Russia and China are also becoming more assertive in playing major roles in the region. Both countries have of course their own agenda to challenge America in the UN, but they seem to be

¹⁹ <https://metro.co.uk/2021/05/22/palestine-protest-almost-200000-people-march-through-central-london-14628158/>

²⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/2/un-forced-expulsion-of-palestinians-from-sh-jarrah-violation>

pursuing a more neutral stance on this conflict²¹. America's military intervention and failure in bringing peace in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya has only created more crises and perpetual instability. With the interventionist US-led global order proving to be fallible and generating ever more anger, new regional and global players are on the rise.

Even western attitudes to the Middle East may be shifting towards a just and long- term solution for Palestine and Israel²². Foresightful and courageous Jewish individuals across academia and media, who have long been raising their voice for justice but often been marginalised or ostracised by the ultra-right Israelis and pro-Israel lobbies, are gathering and becoming more vocal. Some are arguing that if Israel do not do the right thing and end the conflict, it eventually will be branded a pariah state.



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²¹ <https://thediomat.com/2021/05/what-are-china-and-russia-saying-about-the-israel-palestine-conflict/>

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/21/israel-opinion-western-attitudes-middle-east>

Shifting sands in Israel and America

Things also appear to be changing in the US itself, potentially weakening the power house of the Israeli military-political-economic apparatus. There is now a growing voice within the Democratic Party who refuse to support the Israeli oppression against Palestinians. For the first time, over 500 Democratic party staffers penned an open letter to President Biden calling for more to be done to protect Palestinians and hold Israel accountable for its actions²³. Their words could not be clearer: “We remain horrified by the images of Palestinian civilians in Gaza killed or made homeless by Israeli airstrikes. We are outraged by Israel’s efforts to forcibly and illegally expel Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah. We are shocked by Israel’s destruction of a building housing international news organizations... While Israelis had to spend nights hiding in bomb shelters, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip had nowhere to hide. It is critical to acknowledge this power imbalance.”

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/24/joe-biden-israel-palestine-letter-democratic-staffers>

A number of Democratic members of the House of Representatives spoke out against America's military support for Israel and called for the protection of Palestinians' rights. In an emotional speech on the House floor, Rashida Tlaib, of Palestinian descent, criticised President Joe Biden and other top officials for offering statements that she said did not acknowledge "Palestinian humanity²⁴". While this plea is unlikely to result in any immediate change on the ground and may look insignificant in the wider picture *vis a vis* Israel-US relations, it cannot be ignored for long and will only amplify. Some observers see this as a 'tectonic' move with "younger generations considerably more sympathetic to the Palestinians²⁵".

Given the gradual shift and rebalancing of global power and the rekindling passion for establishing the values of equality and justice, the big question is how long will America consider Israel as its strategic asset?

Whilst Israel may be armed to the teeth and appear invincible, especially under the American military-political-economic umbrella, the global power dynamics have changed since the days of post-9/11 unilateral American hubris. There is increased resistance and challenge to America on many fronts. A new global civil alliance is being forged against the Israel-America duopoly. Many conscientious and farsighted

²⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/14/progressive-us-congress-members-speak-up-to-back-palestinians>

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57161929.amp>

individuals and groups now clearly see Israel on the wrong side of history and humanity.

Israel may feel invulnerable thanks to the strength of its intelligence agencies, police, military forces and other arms of oppression, but it is weak on moral and lawful grounds. Palestinian suffering may feel unbearable, and most people would struggle to endure the suffering, but their resilience and resistance have proved to be epic and a source of pride for other oppressed groups across the world. The Palestinian will to survive and not lose faith has energised many communities, Muslim or non-Muslim.



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No country on earth is invincible or enjoys permanent power. A country with a record of disregarding the international rule of law cannot be sustained in the long run. Given the shift in political reality on the ground, one seasoned political observer identified a number of fault lines that have emerged in Israel²⁶: it is steadily losing military superiority; its internal disunity and instability is being exposed; the US-Israeli-Emirati plan to take control of the PA leadership has failed.

Israel has also been grappling with a demographic predicament, with many people leaving the country because of factors such as the high cost of living coupled with low salaries, income inequality, political uncertainty and growing social turmoil²⁷. Some young Israelis genuinely feel that there's simply no future in Israel. While many young Palestinians will feel similar or worse frustration, the signs of Israel's internal weaknesses are gradually becoming more apparent.

²⁶ <https://asiatimes.com/2021/05/israel-palestine-conflict-at-crucial-inflection-point/>

²⁷

<https://www.newsweek.com/2018/05/18/israel-brain-drain-technology-startup-nation-religion-palestinians-economy-919477.html>

Forging alliances to build justice

The winds of change in the world, with moral support for the Palestinian cause and Hamas' stronger position in the Palestine liberation movement, seem to be converging towards a comprehensive approach to deal with Israel. To the global majority which is becoming more impatient with the status quo, it is high time Israel joins the negotiating table with the Palestinians. The threshold has not reached yet, but there is a need for assertive roles of influential actors in the field – the human rights bodies, civil society groups and more countries across the world to coordinate their works so that Israel feels the necessity to start genuine dialogue with Palestinians on an equal basis. This should be done under the auspices of the UN and what it was exactly created for: using its moral, legal and political authority to find a just, human and long-term solution.

a) The need for a joined-up approach

There is a well-known saying: “Little drops make the mighty ocean”. Although it is easy to feel hopeless about the situation, change does not come quickly and through disjointed actions. In most countries today there exists multitudes of non-governmental groups and institutions – cultural groups, religious bodies, economic institutions, sports clubs, trade unions, student associations, political lobbying groups, human rights organisations, literary societies and others. Properly organised and led by people of vision and persistent activism, they can provide an institutional foundation that can exert levers of influence with far reaching impact.

With strategic planning and creative activism, they can become both a force for good in their own society and amplify a coordinated voice against persecution, oppression and injustice abroad. In our morally broken world today, these groups have an obligation to join up and cooperate to put pressure on their governments to pursue an ethical foreign policy in the Middle East and across the world. If citizens of major western countries raised a concerted voice in tandem with others, the momentum created cannot be easily ignored.

b) People of faith have an obligation to pursue justice

Jews, Christians and Muslims particularly, have a moral and religious obligation to work for a just and peaceful solution in historic Palestine. The conflict is as old as the formation of the UN itself. It now falls on global citizens to drive forward their governments to empower the UN to find a solution, before a full-blown conflagration engulfs the Middle East.

In Israel and many western countries, many progressive and foresightful Jewish individuals and groups have been expressing their voice for a humane and just solution and their numbers and voices are growing. Will the ultra-right Jews in Israel and their fervent supporters from amongst Christian Zionists in the US come to realise that subjugating or uprooting the indigenous Palestinians by brute military force will never work?

Muslim and other faith and non-faith communities have a religious, moral or ethical responsibility to stand against the injustice carried out by the ruling class of Israel. Together, in this informal broad alliance, there needs to be better organised and coordinated efforts to win the hearts and minds of ordinary bystanders to bring about justice. There should also

be strict measures and clampdowns to marginalise hotheads and agent provocateurs whose main aim is to target Jewish people as a whole or tarnish the pro-Palestine camp.

c) The media as a vehicle for justice

Portraying victims of oppression as the villains is nothing new in history, but this has become an art by far-right ideologues in the modern era. When victims are continuously depicted as bigots, extremists or terrorists and when they do not have the ability or skill to counter, the narrative often sticks. Supporters of justice can also face similar depictions if they are not well prepared. The famous civil rights activist, Malcolm X, once said “the media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses.”



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Through the pejorative reporting about Palestinians in editorials, news reports, comments and opinion pieces, the powerful rightwing media portrays Israel as a victim, offering the justification that Israel has the right of “self-defense” against “Palestinian terror”. The UK media’s skewed and problematic coverage of the events in May 2021 conflict and the massive Israeli retaliation against Gazan people has been well researched and documented in a report by MCB’s Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM)²⁸. Fortunately, this narrative is gradually being debunked and many in the developed world are no longer falling for the anti-Palestine rhetoric anymore. Palestinian online campaigns have also become stronger in challenging inaccurate information and distorted facts by sharing their first-hand reality of suffering through photos, videos and witness statements on the ground. Pro-Palestinian voices are now better able to counter pro-Israel propaganda particularly through social media.

The mastery of media and communications is vital to creating and sustaining public opinion towards worthy causes of justice and human rights. Humanitarians and other rights movements should thus invest in media resources to improve their capabilities and ensure that the message of justice does not get lost.

²⁸ <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MediaReportingOnPalestine-Report-and-Toolkit-Final.pdf>

d) Effectively using BDS to dismantle apartheid

The Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel²⁹ to end international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians and pressure the country to comply with international law has so far made limited progress. However, with leading human rights bodies inside and outside Israel as well as prominent individuals now calling Israel an apartheid state, the movement has the potential to gain new impetus. Support for Palestinian rights is now coming from the general public as well as from celebrities and cultural icons of the world.

Lessons can be learned from the experience of the first successful global action taken against the South African apartheid regime. BDS was employed effectively and helped to bring a peaceful political resolution. Unsurprisingly, Israel and its allies, including the UK government, are firmly opposed to the BDS movement against Israel. In response to a petition requesting sanctions against Israel and signed by nearly 400,000 British citizens, the UK government responded by saying “While we do not hesitate to express disagreement with Israel whenever we feel it necessary, we are firmly opposed to boycotts or sanctions³⁰.” These empty

²⁹

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/14/bds-boycott-divestment-sanctions-movement-transformed-israeli-palestinian-deb>

³⁰ https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/585314?reveal_response=yes

words have neither changed the UK's policy toward Israel nor has brought an iota of change in Israel's dealings with the Palestinians.

If ordinary citizens, civil society activists, human rights supporters and peace campaigners - in their millions – can proactively and peacefully work to politically isolate Israel, then governments and the reactionary media will not be able to withstand the immense public pressure. With proper planning and coordination, people power will be the ultimate winner in bringing justice.



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Conclusion

Our world is not perfect, but exploitation, injustice and oppression are always seen as evils in human history and unaccepted by all religions and cultures, particularly in all three Abrahamic faiths. In Islam, the words of God in the Quran and the messages of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) make this absolutely clear: “God commands justice and fair dealing ...”(Quran, 16:90)

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) said, “Allah Almighty said: O My servants, I have forbidden injustice for Myself and I have forbidden it among you, so do not oppress one another. ...”(Hadith Qudsi, Sahih Muslim)



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As stewards of God on earth, human beings must be fair and just with themselves, with others and with our planet. Those who hold authority over others are duty-bound to work and stand firm against injustice, irrespective of who the perpetrators are. This task to keep our world safe, just and peaceful falls to all of us.

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