

# An interview with Zaya and Maurizio Benazzo, co-directors of *Where Olive Trees Weep*, filmed on the occupied West Bank: “You cannot imagine the extent of the injustice”

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Suffering humanity will have every right to ask of artists and intellectuals what they said and what they did during the savage Israeli military operation in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and now Iran.

*Where Olive Trees Weep* is a sensitively and movingly made film about the plight of the Palestinian people, filmed in 2022 in the occupied West Bank, directed by Zaya and Maurizio Benazzo. The filmmakers, Bulgarian- and Italian-born, respectively, who live in California, make no secret of their unequivocal sympathy for the Palestinians. The documentary’s objectivity lies in the fact that it presents historical and social truth.

The picture of official Israeli cruelty that the film presents is made all the more poignant by the knowledge that the situation is now infinitely more devastating, with tens of thousands slaughtered in Gaza and hundreds of thousands more, including in the West Bank, forced to survive in the most appalling conditions.

The documentary treats aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian situation in part through the comments of various interviewees, including Palestinian journalist and researcher Ashira Darwish and activist Ahed Tamimi, Hungarian-Canadian physician and Holocaust survivor Dr. Gabor Maté, Israeli journalist Amira Hass and human rights activist Neta Golan, as well as residents of the West Bank.

The footage in *Where Olive Trees Weep* of the menacing, towering West Bank wall, of the endless series of Israeli checkpoints, of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) violence, of Zionist settlers in action, of the land starved of water available to the Palestinians, of the faces of children and others living under oppression, is powerful.

The interviewees discuss certain general questions, the history of the state of Israel, its character as a “settler colonial movement,” its expansionist, aggressive policies. But the emphasis in the film is on the daily toll of Israeli rule.

Darwish, one of the film’s co-producers, is a central figure. She describes, in detail, her awakening to the reality of oppression. *Where Olive Trees Weep* opens on this note, with Darwish describing an early experience:

I think it happened on the way to school. I got slapped at some point by a soldier. So that was a good slap, because that kind of woke me up to the reality of where I really am.

Darwish subsequently describes her various arrests and her abuse at the hands of the Israeli authorities. The repeated beatings finally landed her in a Palestinian hospital in Jerusalem, where

the doctor said that it’s the end, you know, that 70 percent of my spine is gone, and it’s just a matter of the last living cells to die. ... I was so angry that they would get me to the point of being broken and paralyzed.

Darwish explains why Palestinians are driven to extreme actions:

It’s very simple! You push people to that point! There’s nothing more to it! ... There’s a reason behind it. You must have killed, maimed, pained them, their families, to get them to get to that point. So don’t ask me why they want to get to that point, where they would use so much hate and anger and release it in that way. Ask me where the pain came from, and I’ll tell you why people act.

The interviewees describe the process by which Palestinian land in the West Bank is stolen and appropriated by the Israeli regime for the benefit of the rabidly right-wing settlers. One explains that the authorities take control of the land

by all sorts of legal acrobatics. They invent laws and then they say that they’re implementing according to the law. But the laws are basically laws of an occupier, and of a colonialist entity. And then in order to guard the loot, they have to create the myth of security, and they settle Israelis in land not theirs, and they have to protect the Israelis. And then they need more land to protect these Israelis. And from time to time they kill.

And when Palestinians resist, there are wars or what they call operations, military operations. So the security is the explanation for any of their actions, or any of their thoughts. They say, “We build the wall for our own security.” The wall is illegal under

international humanitarian law, and also transferring population to the occupied territories is illegal under international humanitarian law. And they say, “We don’t care about international humanitarian law. We only care about our own security.”

The Israeli commentators and Holocaust survivor Maté debunk the claims that support for the Palestinian cause is synonymous with antisemitism. Different voices observe

And when they want, they use the pretext of the Holocaust. But it’s a pretext. ...

And the truth is, the Palestinians have been oppressed and suppressed and murdered and controlled and dispossessed for decades. That’s just the truth. And I don’t like it, as a human being.

In terms of antisemitism, that’s just one of the biggest, most pernicious concoctions of modern ideology. I’ve experienced it as an infant, I experienced it as a child, I’ve seen it. It’s got nothing to do with supporting Palestinian rights, nothing.

One of the Israeli women explains, importantly, something about the trauma and tragedy that led to the emigration of Jews to Israel:

My parents were both refugees after the Second World War and the trauma of coming back from the concentration camp and the ghetto, to their respective countries, Yugoslavia and Romania, which they never intended to leave...

But after the war, and after realizing that many of their Jewish friends and family had been murdered, I think they felt such a vacuum or a void, that pushed them out of their countries. And again, they were not Zionist and they never planned to come to Palestine, never before that.

Ahed Tamimi is one of the courageous Palestinians interviewed in *Where Olive Trees Weep*. Tamimi was the teenager arrested and sent to prison for eight months in 2017 for slapping an Israeli soldier who had shot her 15-year-old cousin in the head at close range. Tamimi, along with family members, was rearrested and abused after October 7, 2023.

The sensitive, elegantly done film concentrates, as the filmmakers explain, on the “pain and suffering ... the brutality of occupation.” While it leaves numerous political questions unanswered, the documentary’s logic must lead to opposition to the existing political and economic set-up, which has produced the hell in Gaza and the West Bank.

During the slaughter of World War I, Rosa Luxemburg insisted that only with a social revolution could “hatred between peoples and servitude be uprooted. ... Socialism or descent into barbarism!”

We recently spoke to Zaya and Maurizio Benazzo on a video call.

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**David Walsh (DW):** It’s a very strong, convincing film. It provides an overview of the situation—the history, the mass expulsion in 1948, the ongoing expulsions and thefts of land, the Israeli settlements and the settlers, colonialism, prison, torture, many issues. Could you each perhaps explain why the Palestinian question is important to you and why you decided to make this film?

**Zaya Benazzo (ZB):** One thing that was clear going there. We wanted to make a different kind of documentary that really shares the human story, the individual stories. We wanted to tell the history through the

voices of the people we met there. The Palestinian voices.

We knew that we would not do anything against what a Palestinian person would like. And as a result, the film is loved by the Palestinian community. They really honor this. They have told us many times, written letters to us and said, “We felt seen, we felt heard through the film. We felt like we had a witness that represented us in the right way.”

What brought us there was [Canadian physician] Gabor Maté and the workshop he was doing with Palestinian women, who had been incarcerated and tortured in Israeli prisons. That was the main purpose for going there, and once we were there, we stumbled upon the rest of the stories.

We came upon one story after another. We were there for three weeks, and we barely slept. We went and we filmed every day whatever we encountered. We were introduced to the Tamimi family in Nabi Saleh, and we went there twice to their home.

We filmed whatever reality was shown to us. When we first arrived there, we were intimidated. We felt, who are we to be telling this story? These people have spent their lives on this question. We felt intimidated by the complexities. But after you are there a couple of hours, you see that it is not so complex; it is actually very clear what is happening.

There is an occupation. There is an occupier. There is a checkpoint almost every 20 kilometers that questions you and interrogates Palestinian people, who are often shot at the checkpoints if they don’t give the right answer.

**Maurizio Benazzo (MB):** For me personally, I can vouch for every word you’ve just said. I’ve been involved in the Palestinian issues since the 1970s, in waves, so to speak. I grew up in Italy, where there was a very strong, pro-Palestinian movement.

But when you arrive there, the region, the West Bank, it’s unbelievable, like nothing you can imagine. You cannot imagine the extent of the injustice, in every way, including the most subtle. I knew about the oppression. I was very well aware of it, but until you arrive there, you cannot conceive how bad it is. And this was before October 7. It has been happening for 75 years.

We were discovering this every day. That’s why we didn’t sleep, because we couldn’t. How can you rest in such a situation of injustice? We didn’t even know if we had a movie, but we wanted to understand more. It was so infuriatingly saddening. We were crying every day for one reason or another, because it can’t be possible in this day and age, such blatant injustice and cruelty. And it’s much worse now.

**Joanne Laurier (JL):** Where were you filming?

**ZB:** We were only in the West Bank. So, Jericho, Hebron, Ramallah, Nabi Saleh and the Jordan Valley.

**MB:** We were definitely not allowed to be in Gaza. In fact, we’re not even allowed to be in the West Bank either.

**ZB:** Every aspect of Palestinian lives is controlled. Every movement, all access to water and land, of course. We went to refugee camps near Ramallah and also near Bethlehem. The teachers told us that two to three times a week there are raids in the camps. The IDF soldiers come, and they just teargas the children.

**MB:** Can you imagine? These are elementary school children from the age of 6 to 11—two to three times a week the soldiers arrive in a jeep in front of the school and shoot tear gas through the windows? How do you justify that? How do you think this is normal? “Well, the children one day, when they will get older, will throw stones at us. So we shoot them now!”

**ZB:** We have still many more stories there of other women who have been in prison, not only Ashira [Darwish]. But after October 7, it was not safe for us to share and include their stories in the film. Not safe for them, because they would have been arrested. One of the women we interviewed, she’s been in prison, and her husband posted a poem on Facebook on October 9. He’s still in prison to this day. She doesn’t know

what's happening. He just disappeared because he posted a poem on Facebook.

**JL:** What did you learn that was new? How were your preconceptions changed by being there? Or were they changed?

**MB:** Yes, absolutely.

**ZB:** For me, I was brainwashed a little, I think, to fear Arab people, to fear Muslims. But the moment we arrived there, I felt much safer being in the West Bank than in Tel Aviv. We were met with such generosity, such open-heartedness. The people there are the most beautiful people I've ever met. Despite the occupation and the oppression, they always met us with generosity, without even knowing who we were.

**MB:** To give you an example. We were filming next to the Wall, which is illegal to do. They tell you that after seven minutes with a drone, they will shoot it down, because that's how long it takes for them to find it. So we parked the car and quickly flew the drone. Two minutes later, this woman comes out of the house near the car with a tray with coffee. She never asked, who are you? Not a word. Simply, you are parked close to my house, I should give you coffee. We drank the coffee. She left with a smile. We got our drone, we left. Anywhere else in the world, people would say, first, who are you? What are you doing here? And this is one of hundreds of stories. They're so generous.

**JL:** Alright, we've had the events of the last year. Netanyahu has made it clear that from their point of view, this is the "Final Solution" of the Palestinian question. Now, of course, they're going into Lebanon. How do you feel about the present situation, having been there and seeing what the people are like? What conclusions have you drawn from the last year?

**ZB:** Everything that we all feared the most is now the reality. Even Gabor Maté—when we were speaking during the film—would say, it's going to get much worse before we can see any light, and this is what we are seeing. It has gotten so, so dark. So right now, I think the long-term solution is very clear, it is what they call "one state."

There is no other way to equal rights, land, water, human rights for all people there. That's the only sustainable solution there can be long-term. One state. In the short term, we just need to stop the weapons to Israel. The US has to stop arming Israel. Without the US, the Israelis have no power. Our tax money is executing a genocide.

**MB:** My personal opinion is that Israeli society is signing its death sentence with this mass murder, because the people are seeing it all over the world. Everybody's seen the horrible absurdity, the abuse, the disregard for human rights. It's so blatant.

It is a death sentence for the state of Israel and for Zionism. The one-state solution is the only solution. Then the question will be, which kind of "one state"? It's important to discuss that. But the first thing is to stop the violence, before it becomes World War III, which would be the end of the world.

**DW:** We would argue that World War III, in fact, has begun. In the Mideast, in Ukraine, in the preparations for war against China.

**ZB:** It's difficult for me to grapple with what it will take to heal these Palestinian families. First, thousands of families have been completely wiped off the planet. There's not anyone remaining from these family lines. So how would the survivors ever find the power to heal? Forgiveness is out of the question, but the trauma that is passed down generations, no one has a solution for that. It's going to take many, many years ...

**MB:** Generations ...

**ZB:** Generations until the healing can begin.

**DW:** There are no red lines anymore. Genocide is acceptable.

**ZB:** But my hope is that the world is waking up, that more and more people are waking up to the reality.

**JL:** Oh, I think they are.

**ZB:** The veil is gone. We stare at the reality and the truth every day on our phones. There is nothing anymore that can obscure it.

**MB:** This is what the American empire has been doing all over the world since World War II. It's the same operation, only now we have social media and everybody sees it. This has been the colonialist norm, but with social media, it's no longer possible to spin it with PR.

**DW:** Colonialism has always been violent and bloody. Obviously, we've had Algeria and Vietnam, Italian imperialism in Ethiopia in the 1930s. Brutal, brutal episodes. But there is something particularly murderous, homicidal and genocidal about this war, carried out with the complicity and, in fact, direction of the US, that really is only comparable to the Nazis in some ways.

**ZB:** From the trauma perspective, this is what Maté would argue. The trauma that was not healed in Europe was exported to Palestine against people who had nothing to do with the Holocaust, but they received some of the trauma of the Jewish people. They were persecuted. Palestinians are the victims of the Holocaust victims.

That's what they were doing as early as 1946, they were burning Palestinian villages and burning people as had been done to them in Germany and Eastern Europe. It's what's happening now again in Gaza and, in fact, has never stopped.

**JL:** There was nothing socialistic or progressive about Zionism. It developed as a movement directed against socialism and oriented toward the capitalist class in Europe and later America. It was a small movement. The Russian Revolution spoke to the oppressed, including the Jewish people.

**DW:** One of your Israeli interviewees, I can't remember which one, speaks about her parents and the fact that they weren't Zionists. They were not interested in Zionism, but they went back to Romania, Yugoslavia. Their friends were dead or killed. They felt obviously isolated. There was a horrible situation and they were pushed by events to Israel.

Zionism gained momentum because of the Holocaust and also disillusionment with the Soviet Union and Stalinism.

**ZB:** Zionism was a colonial settler movement, and very racist. Because there were a lot of Jews living in Palestine for centuries in harmony with the Muslim and Christian population. They were marrying, intermarrying, and then they experienced the European Zionists coming to the land. They, the Arab Jews, became second class citizens. They were not allowed to speak Arabic any more. They were treated as second-class citizens, by their own people, by the European Jews.

**MB:** The one thing I want to add about the atrocious nature of this war is the presence of AI [artificial intelligence], the use of weapons that are detached completely from humanity. Now there are drones going around automatically shooting anything that moves.

The use of AI has made war even more sterile, which is the historical development of warfare. Originally, it was two people fighting face to face. Then there was the bow and arrow, then guns, cannons. People become more and more separated from the people they are killing. Now, with AI, the separation is complete.

**DW:** But, as you say, the other side of technology is that we can see this too. It cannot be hidden.

**JL:** What's the significance of the village of Nabi Saleh? Is that where the Tamimi family lives?

**ZB:** Yes. So it represents a type of Palestinian resistance, the whole Tamimi family there. They have been fighting peacefully for decades. Every Friday they have a protest where children, parents, everybody comes and chants. Then you have the IDF soldiers who sometimes shoot, sometimes they kill people at these peaceful protests.

Nabi Saleh is on top of a mountain. In front of it is an Israeli settlement that has swimming pools, lush vegetation and everything, because the settlers take all the water. Nabi Saleh doesn't have water. As we said in the film, they have water once a week for 12 hours.

Every house in the village has a demolition order, which means that any

day they can come with a bulldozer and demolish any house in the village. At the bottom of the village is a barrier with a checkpoint, and the Israelis decide when people from the village can leave and when they cannot leave. Sometimes the barrier is lowered and the people cannot leave the village for weeks. And that's not predictable.

**DW:** Of course, it's part of the torture. It's part of the torture and terror.

**MB:** At the airport, we were with our son, who is 21 years old, with dark hair and a Bulgarian first name. The three of us were leaving the country. He has his boarding pass, we have ours. After you go through what seems like seven checkpoints, there are lines to stand in, A, B, C, etc. We are standing in one line, with no one in front of us. So we said, come stand in our line. A soldier starts screaming at him, you can't go there! I said, oh, come on, we are a family, the three of us. What's the big deal? He says, "I know these people, I should shoot him in the knee!"

What? You shoot somebody in the knee because he wants to stay with his family going through a checkpoint. In this "democratic airport" in the most "democratic country" in the world, managed by the "most moral army" in the world. Can you imagine that?

**DW:** Unfortunately, yes.

**ZB:** One more thing in terms of the Tamimi family. So Ahed was arrested last year. I don't know if you're aware, but on October 20 [2023], a hacker on Instagram posted something on a false account using her name that sounded off against Jews. On this pretext, they put her in prison. She was tortured way worse than the last time she was in prison, she was really brutally tortured.

The same with her father, who stayed eight months in prison. He was released at the beginning of June. He was unrecognizable. This was his tenth time in prison and he said it is unimaginable what they are doing right now. Of course, we have heard the stories, these reports of what's going on there.

**JL:** They are brutalizing young people all over the world who protest the genocide. The universities are introducing measures to make it illegal to protest. It's a global question. The Palestinians have been persecuted for decades, but now there is an immense crisis of the capitalist system, which is why they are driving toward World War III. So the entire global population, in a sense, faces a similar situation.

So they're not going to be isolated forever. I did like the transformation that Ashira makes, she talks about her mother's non-violence and protests where everyone sang, and so forth. I can't imagine how she survived what is basically a broken spine, thanks to her mistreatment. But, in any case, she says she no longer believes in non-violence.

**MB:** Absolutely. As we said, this is the litmus test for humanity. What is happening is really out in the open. As you said, there are no more red lines. "Anybody" can do anything they want with impunity. Any government, as long as they have enough power behind them. And it's appalling. It's happening there, it's happening here, it's happening everywhere.

This the last gasp of the capitalist society because clearly the American empire is failing.

**ZB:** A year after the beginning of the genocide, you still see the mainstream media completely brainwashed by the Israeli propaganda, the way they report on what's happening there to this day.

**JL:** They take the side of imperialism. US imperialism must reorganize the Middle East. It has to reorganize Asia. It is a bankrupt power whose survival depends on its military. Your son has grown up not knowing anything but the United States being at war in the Middle East and elsewhere.

**MB:** And by the way, they lost them all apparently.

**DW:** Yes. Each one has been a disaster. Every disaster leads to a bigger disaster. And now they're proposing to make war in Iran with 100 million people? There is an element of madness, but obviously it's very dangerous madness.

**MB:** And, on the other hand, somebody showed us the stock market figures. Lockheed Martin shares went up 625 percent over the last 12 months, since October 6.

**DW:** Let me ask you a question about trauma. Obviously, as the woman says in your film, it's not "post-traumatic" because it's still going on. What is your sense of the consequences of mass trauma, particularly its impact on young people?

**ZB:** There was a study done in Gaza, 10 years ago or so. Ninety-five percent of the children were then diagnosed with some kind of traumatic response. So now, with what these people are going through, what these children are witnessing, it is beyond any measurement of trauma we can imagine. When you see the faces and bodies of these young children in Gaza shaking, they cannot cope with the permanent stress, so their bodies are trying to release it, but it's impossible because there is not a moment of safety.

So this is beyond anything any Western psychotherapy or psychology has seen or can understand. We are doing three things with any revenue that comes from the film. We are planting olive trees in the West Bank. So far we have planted 1,500 trees and also Ashira is doing workshops with children and mothers in the West Bank with people from Gaza who got stuck there.

As well, we are doing workshops for children and mothers in Egypt, those that were able to escape from Gaza. So there is that, the support that can be offered through coming together, having different therapeutic modalities, and learning how to regulate basically the nervous system. This is the little we could do.

**MB:** So, in 2015, 95 percent of kids in Gaza were traumatized. Ten years later, guess who crossed the border on October 7? How can you expect to bring peace to such an area? It's appalling. What do you expect from a young kid today with no hope to work, study, travel, no food—and everybody has been killed in his family? What do you think he is going to do next time?



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