

Friends, Fellow Comrades, and Human Rights Defenders in Germany and across the world,

We at the Human Rights Defenders Fund are humbled and filled with gratitude to accept the Aachen Peace Prize here today. We also extend our heartfelt congratulations to the radical and visionary Feminist Anti-war Resistance movement, who demonstrate the kinds of values, convictions, and courage that we as an organization so deeply admire and aspire to.

To the delegates of the Aachen Peace Prize committee who selected our work for recognition, and to Kurve Wustrow, who submitted us and have backed us every step of the way: Thank you. Thank you for seeing us, for believing in the value of this work, and for helping us make it seen globally.

We want to accept this recognition not just for our organization, but also on behalf of the tens of thousands of human rights defenders on the ground fighting fiercely and courageously for justice every day in Palestine and Israel, between the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea. On behalf of those who live lives of total resistance, of those who put themselves on the front lines, risking their own safety and wellbeing every day to reject oppression and state violence. On behalf of those who choose people-power over armies. On behalf of those who defy displacement and expulsion. On behalf of those who dare to demand a better world, a better life, because they know there is no other choice.

At the Human Rights Defenders Fund, we have one mantra that we repeat again and again to remind ourselves of our purpose. “We defend the defenders.” If people are going to put themselves on the front lines and risk themselves, their safety, and their lives for justice, we need them to know – no matter what happens out there, we will have them covered. We see ourselves as the safety net for the changemakers, the peacemakers, the radical visionaries. From the thousands of people who have received legal support and representation from us over the past twelve years since our founding, to the thousands of people who

have been educated by our trainings, we hope that the human rights community from the river to the sea knows that: no matter what, we've got their backs.

Let me tell you about some of these defenders, these visionaries and changemakers, these activists who dare to speak out, to stand up, to hold their heads high, to persist and prevail against oppression and persecution.

There is Nasser Nawajah, a field documenter, who makes it his life mission to film and document every single home demolition, every single property confiscation, every single incident of settler violence and military abuse against Palestinian communities in the South Hebron Hills. Nawajah works for B'Tselem, one of the biggest human rights organizations in the country, and so much of the information that we have about the expulsions and abuses occurring in the south Hebron Hills is directly due to his diligent commitment to documenting human rights violations there.

For this he paid a price... he was targeted by the Israeli military, and prosecuted on sham charges in military court. During the evidence hearing, the officer testifying against him complained that "Nasser is everywhere, he films everything, and every soldier in the South Hebron Hills knows who Nasser is. When residents see that Nasser has come to document a demolition, they begin to resist us..." And yes, indeed, this is exactly the point.

There is Issa Amro, the founder of the "Youth Against Settlements" organization, who leads the campaign to open up so-called "sterilized streets," as the military calls them, in the city center of Hebron – which are free to use by the 800 or so Israeli settlers in the city, but closed to the 32,000 Palestinian residents of the city center (as well as the millions of Palestinians who don't live in Hebron). In the city center of Hebron, called H2, there are more than 20 military checkpoints within a 2-kilometer radius, and up to 900 soldiers deployed on a daily basis, with the sole purpose of "protecting" the 800 settlers who live there and restricting Palestinian freedom of movement in the city. Let that sink in: 900 soldiers to protect 800 settlers, who are there illegally and who often commit acts of unspeakable

violence against the Palestinians living there. 900 soldiers to restrict Palestinian movement so severely that they cannot walk in the very walkways below their homes. *This* is what Issa Amro and the Youth Against Settlements organization opposes.

And, once again, for this Amro paid a price. He, like Nawajah, was targeted by the Israeli military and prosecuted in military courts, to subdue his opposition, to harass and bully and intimidate him into capitulation. But Amro will not be subdued, and since the conclusion of his trial this past June, he continues with his activities.

There is Hafez Huraini, the father in a family of human rights defenders, who raised each of his seven children to be well-versed in the theory, history, and praxis of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. A few years ago, the Huraini family decided to turn a plot of land in their backyard into a community garden, to cultivate a green sanctuary for the community, with the ultimate aim of preventing the theft and expropriation of the private plot of land that is not only common but Israeli state-sanctioned in all of Area C. The garden has been uprooted and destroyed several times by extreme violence from nearby Israeli settlers, and it is the site of many confrontations with the military, who aim to prevent human rights defenders and solidarity activists from cultivating the garden with the Huraini family.

For turning the garden into a site of political resistance... Hafez paid a price. In September 2022, Hafez Huraini was attacked inside this garden on his private land by six armed Israeli settlers, who ended up breaking both of his arms during the attack. In the end, it was Hafez who was arrested for attempted murder – and not one of the six attacking settlers was arrested or charged. Hafez's case shows us how ubiquitous settler violence is, and how land theft by violent settlers is so comfortably sanctioned and encourage by a state governed by the logic of ethnic supremacy. It also shows us how separate and unequal legal systems enables discrimination and keeps people unequal... while the Israeli attackers got away with their crime under Israeli law, Hafez, held under the Israeli military law, was

arrested for a crime that he himself was the victim of. Ultimately, we were able to secure his release... but this is an exception to the norm. As for the garden: Sameeha (one of Hafez's daughters) reports that it is blooming, after Palestinian, Israeli, and international solidarity activists spent the entire summer replanting it, following six different attempts by settlers to uproot it.

Then there is Sami Huraini, the eldest son of Hafez Huraini, who co-founded the grassroots organization Youth of Sumud with his sister Sameeha, a group whose activities include escorting Palestinian children in Masafer Yatta to school so they are more protected from Israeli settler violence, restoring caves and dwellings in the area from which Palestinian residents have been expelled, tending to the garden behind the Huraini home, organizing protests against military abuse and state violence, and mobilizing the youth of the area around the principles and practice of civil disobedience. In 2021, Sami participated in a peaceful demonstration, protesting the Israeli army shooting of a Masafer Yatta-resident named Haroun Abu Aram after he tried to prevent soldiers from confiscating an electricity generator from his neighbor.

And for this, Sami Huraini paid a price. He was arrested from his home in the middle of the night the day after the protest, and indicted on the charges of assaulting a soldier. And just a mere one week ago, Sami was convicted... despite nearly 120 videos in evidence that document every single second of the demonstration and prove, without a shadow of a doubt, that Sami did not commit the crime that he was charged with. So why was he convicted? Because to acquit him would be to concede that the soldiers who testified against Sami were not truthful, it would be to acknowledge the persecution enabled by the military regime itself... and the military courts that are the lifeblood of the occupation regime are not prepared to do this. In the words of Sami Huraini, writing after the verdict hearing: "I will be punished for crimes I never committed. This is an unjust and unfair trial, in a court run by the Israeli occupation and operated by Israeli settlers... The Israeli murderer of Haroun is free and will never be held accountable by Israel. On the other hand, as a human rights defender, I am being punished for defending my people's human rights."

These are only some of the stories of human rights defenders who work every day to fight Israeli state and state-sanctioned violence, to dismantle systems like occupation and apartheid, and are targeted, criminalized, and persecuted relentlessly because of it. But it's important to remember that the persecution of these human rights defenders is hardly the end-all-be-all goal here. **The persecution of these human rights defenders is only a means to an end.**

The Israeli army Major General Amos Gilead was once quoted saying: "We're not good at dealing with Ghandis," in a leaked 2010 cable of a meeting between Israeli generals and American government officials. These generals were trying to justify the use of more brute force on peaceful demonstrations against settler violence and land theft that were occurring weekly in the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh. Just as it was in 2010, just as it's been for decades, and just as it still is today, the logic that undergirds that statements is this: in order to enable all of the processes that the Israeli state wants to enable like the depopulation of Area C, forcible transfer, and total Israeli takeover of the West Bank... they first need to get rid of these "so-called Ghandis", these human rights defenders, who organize entire communities around the principles and methods of peaceful resistance to prevent these aims. And so, the state criminalizes them, and prosecutes them, and imprisons them, so that it can reach its end goal that much more quickly. It is the exact same logic that lies beneath this current judicial coup: the destruction of an independent judiciary is only the tip of a much bigger iceberg, a means to an end, one crucial step in the path to *de jure* annexation of the West Bank and complete ethnic cleansing of Area C.

The Human Rights Defenders Fund supports hundreds of people every year who make it their life's mission to prevent the state from reaching these end goals, who do their best to safeguard against the human rights violations that are legitimized by and embedded in the very fabric of the Israeli state. But none of us can fight this fight without you – the international community.

We cannot put the kind of pressure necessary on the Israeli government to respect human rights for all people, to recognize Palestinian rights to freedom and to life, to cease its brutal criminalization of human rights defenders, **if there is no political will among the international community.** You, as members of the international community, have the power to leverage your resources, leverage your funds, and leverage your diplomacy, so that the Israeli state takes these calls to respect human rights seriously. You cannot try to hold other countries to the principles enshrined in the Fourth Geneva Convention if you conveniently ignore those same principles when it comes to Israel's accountability to them. If applied only when it is convenient, those principles lose all meaning. We implore you: take these calls seriously. To say you stand in solidarity is one thing. To actually mobilize the political will to put this solidarity into action... well that is something we need a lot more of.

We are truly humbled and honored that the international community and the Aachen Peace Prize committee has recognized the urgency of our work.

As we carry this honor back to the frontlines of the struggle, we hope you will continue to stand with us, and with all human rights defenders including those in Germany, to ensure a future in which peace, justice, and freedom are not just words on a paper, but are the reality for all people.

Thank you.

