

Their voices reverberated all across downtown Ann Arbor for about three and a half hours in the afternoon, and anyone in the vicinity could hear them clearly.

“Free, free Palestine.”

On May 22, hundreds of protestors chanted those words repeatedly. They carried, waved and cloaked themselves in the Palestinian flag, marching in unison as organizers spearheaded the path, talking through a loudspeaker on a large, army-green Ford truck.

With signs referring to the conflict as an “apartheid,” “genocide” and a “holocaust,” the protestors demanded change — change for the approximately 250 people who passed away due to the fighting over the course of 11 days in the Gaza strip between Israel and the Hamas (a Palestinian militant group).

On May 21 both groups reached a ceasefire agreement.

This is the latest event in the decades long and tragic history between Israel and Palestine.

Former Huron student and current junior at Washtenaw Technical Middle College (WTMC), Adam Kasham, joined the protests with his mother Naela, his cousins and three younger siblings — Isra, Malic and Tarik.

“I went to the protests because I think it's a very important issue,” Adam said. “There's many people out there with really wrong interpretations of what's going on. It's important that I, as a Palestinian, get my point across because I'm also a second generation American. Both my grandparents who are here today lived in Palestine. They know exactly what's going on firsthand.”

Adam's grandparents, Fatheih and Jamil Kasham, moved from Palestine to the U.S. in 1962.

“They came because they wanted an opportunity, and they took advantage of it,” Adam said. “When they came, they didn't really have much, and they had to provide for people that were back in Palestine. Now it's like everything that they came to do is being thrown out the window. I feel that it's important for justice to be served and for the land to be restored.”

Adam often turns to his grandparents for a better understanding of Palestine.

“My grandpa was telling me a story about how his dad used to own land in Jerusalem,” Adam said. “His dad was a gatekeeper, which is pretty cool, but his land literally got taken away from him, and his family had to move. I didn't really know how to respond.”

To learn more about the current situation, Adam's direct family watched several Youtube videos together.

“There were a lot of checkpoints with people with guns, and just out in the area, people with AK-47's,” Adam said. “There's a lot of little kids losing their parents and losing their own lives too. I saw this one kid get taken away right in front of his family and it's just really sad to see. I just feel horrible because I feel like I got an opportunity that they don't have and I wish they could have it too.”

As of May 18, the Israeli attacks on Gaza killed 63 Palestinian children, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health. Even four years ago, a United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) State of Palestine report stated that the armed conflict in 2017 resulted in 17 Palestinian children killed and 1,017 injured. In short, violence against Palestinian children is yet to be stopped, and other health and environmental problems brought on by the pandemic have only multiplied their daily stresses.

“It digs deep,” Adam said, “because I feel like that could have definitely been me if my grandparents didn't come to the U.S. And it just makes me so thankful but also sorry for the kids who couldn't get the same opportunity. I feel like I would trade anything for them to be in my position.”

Two years ago Adam visited Palestine with his family — albeit when the situation hadn't escalated to its current level.

“I saw how crazy it was,” Adam said. “It wasn't as bad as it is now. But there were soldiers all over guarding checkpoints, and it was an experience that opened my eyes. Growing up here, I realize that I took it so much for granted. When I went out there, there were kids on the streets, people trying to do anything, hustling for money.”

Adam's family was even cautious of avoiding dangerous territories, yet it was clear the country was still in a state of unrest.

“When we were first entering and exiting Palestine, they separated my grandparents and parents from me,” Adam said. “I didn't know how to be in an airport alone but I had to navigate everything by myself. Airport personnel questioned my grandparents and then my dad for an hour. They got out, almost right when the plane was boarding. I was honestly kind of scared.”

While Adam's direct family entered and exited the country safely, his family, who are still living in Palestine, doesn't have that same luxury.

“They can't leave,” Adam said. “There are no airports out there and you can't go past the checkpoints. I feel really bad about that.”

The protest speeches were given outside of Larcom City Hall by politician Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, a local activist and organizer Mohammed Furrha and University of Michigan Ann Arbor Ross School of Business graduate Lexi Zeidan. President of the New Generation of Palestine (NGP) and Palestinian-comedian, Amer Zahr, also played a huge role in rallying the crowd.

“It was cool to know that the community is taking a stand and that we can't forget about this,” Adam said. “The speeches also taught me a lot because they were talking about personal experiences and how things are going in Palestine.”

The U.S. is currently giving Israel \$3.3 billion in aid, according to the United States Agency for International Development. Throughout the protest, there were calls to defund Israel.

“There's been so many, so many indigenous people in history who have been swept under the rug, and have everything taken away from them,” Adam said. “For example, in the U.S., with the Native Americans. I think people aren't buying into it at first and then later on, everybody's gonna be like, ‘Wow, what a horrible thing,’ but it's too late. So I think it's important to talk about it now.”

For Adam, gaining a first-person perspective is vital.

“Some people don't know what Palestine is, some people don't know what the conflict is,” Adam said. “So I think the most important thing is to find an actual person, not just a YouTube video or website. It's important to find people who know more about the subject because sometimes the media can be portrayed in a very wrong way, which a lot of the time it is. My main thing is finding people who truly know the situation like my grandparents and parents.”

Adam even admitted how he wanted to actually go to Palestine, and despite it being dangerous and illogical, he just wanted to do something to help.

In the end, he decided to walk the downtown streets of his home city surrounded by Palestinian flags, creative signs and hundreds of like-minded protestors to chant:

“Free, free Palestine.”