



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

2024 Student Commencement Address

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Thank you to this very special university in this very special city for honoring me with a doctorate. To allow time for translation, I have had to write this text days before the results of the 2024 general election in India are declared. Before we know whether we will have to continue to live under a regime that has persecuted and murdered minorities — Muslims and Christians — incarcerated its critics, and brought us so close to what we in India thought could never happen to us. Fascism.

In this very short address, I cannot and must not speak of anything else if I do not speak of Gaza.

When we speak of Gaza, we must say these three words. Apartheid. Occupation. Genocide.

Israel is guilty of all three crimes. And none of them began on October 7th of last year. However hard the western media tries to obfuscate these crimes, by detailing the kidnappings and other crimes committed—as well as not committed—by Hamas, nobody can or should believe that there is a moral equivalence between committing genocide and deeds committed, however horrendous, in the process of resisting occupation and apartheid.

Those who support Israel in its task are also complicit in Israel's crimes of genocide and illegal occupation. This includes my country. Our (hopefully outgoing) Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a close personal friend of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While the US supports Israel with its wealth and weapons, India supports it with what we possess in abundance: the unemployed poor. More than 6000 Indian workers were recruited to work in Israel in place of Palestinians who were expelled. They are desperate enough to risk their lives in a war zone, and their dignity in a relentlessly racist society. The Indian corporation owned by Modi's most favored Gujarati industrialist, Gautam Adani, have also sent Hermes 900 drones capable of both surveillance as well as aerial bombardment to Israel.

India was once a friend of Palestine. There was a time when our streets and universities would have erupted in rage against what is happening there. No longer. We have lost our moral compass. I, as an Indian citizen, am deeply ashamed.

Since I am speaking to an audience of students in a country that has risked a lot to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Gaza, let's express our solidarity with people who have marched, as well as students and faculty on college campuses, in the US and Europe who have defied their governments and come out in their thousands to protest. We have watched armed police, sometimes on horseback, enter campuses to beat down the students. Not so long ago, police entered campuses in India, too, when students protested against the government's anti-Muslim citizenship law. But in the US we are seeing American police beat American students on behalf of Israel! Imagine a society in which universities, bloated with money from students' fees and huge infusions of capital from wealthy donors,

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corporations, and their foundations, function like little city-states, investing in genocidal regimes and weapons manufacturers. Can there be anything more immoral than that?

Palestine is illegally occupied. But it looks very much as though the US government is legally occupied by Israel, which seems to have first claim on its money, its weapons, its policies, and much of its imagination.

Whatever the result of the election in India, we have had a real opposition that is fundamentally opposed to fascism, corporate capitalism, and caste privilege. Look at the US. Despite being home to what people imagine are the best universities in the world—its Ivy League—what choice do the American people have? A choice between two eighty-year-old white men. Both of whom support genocide. Both of whom support apartheid. Both of whom are openly racist. This is what capitalism does. It gives you choices that are not choices.

The moral architecture of Western liberal democracies – which were never really moral – has been completely exposed, even to their own citizenry. On the other hand, the people who have stood up to them, Palestinians, Jews, Blacks, Whites, Browns, people of every race, color, religion and ethnicity have saved the world and prevented all of us from being able to lazily become reverse racist or antisemitic.

We live in difficult times. However hypocritical western democracies have been in upholding their own values, those values in and of themselves are important. Authoritarian regimes that do not tolerate dissent, do not give their citizens equal rights, do not see women as equal to men, that have medieval views on gender and sexuality, have come down on the right side of history as far as Gaza is concerned. That does not excuse their authoritarianism. It does not excuse their crimes in their own countries against their own people.

Looks like the lot of us—students, writers, fighters, workers, human beings—have plenty of work to do.

I will end by reading a small section from my very first political essay. It was called The End of Imagination, and I wrote it in 1998 when the Hindu right came to power and conducted a series of nuclear tests. It's a section in which a friend of mine and I are talking about the meaning of success and failure

You've lived too long in New York, I told her. There are other worlds. Other kinds of dreams. Dreams in which failure is feasible. Honourable. Sometimes even worth striving for. Worlds in which recognition is not the only barometer of brilliance or human worth. There are plenty of warriors that I know and love, people far more valuable than myself, who go to war each day, knowing in advance that they will fail. True, they are less 'successful' in the most vulgar sense of the word, but by no means less fulfilled.

The only dream worth having, I told her, is to dream that you will live while you're alive and die only when you're dead.

'Which means exactly what?' I tried to explain, but didn't do a very good job of it. Sometimes I need to write to think. So I wrote it down for her on a paper napkin. This is what I wrote: *To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never, to forget.*

As a writer, this has been my manifesto.

Thank you.