



Statement on the Self-Immolation of Airman Aaron Bushnell

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention wishes to honor the memory of Aaron Bushnell, who took his own life in February in protest of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. We express our deepest condolences to his friends and family. His sacrifice will be remembered as an action taken by a very moral soul in the face of the world's gravest crime. While we do not advocate for protest that mortally imperils those demonstrating, we honor the commitment to opposing genocide and the moral clarity of those who have engaged in acts of protest.

A Facebook post attributed to Bushnell frames his views of the Israeli genocide and the gravity of the situation, "Many of us like to ask ourselves, 'What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?' The answer is, you're doing it. Right now."

On 25 February, active duty Airman Aaron Bushnell filmed himself walking to the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC. While approaching the embassy, Airman Bushnell referenced the nature of his protest, "I am about to engage in an extreme act of protest, but compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers is not extreme at all." Before arriving at the gates to the embassy, Bushnell says with regard to his impending self-immolation, "This is what the ruling class has decided will be normal."

Following his comments, while recording, Bushnell douses himself in an accelerant before igniting the liquid. Bushnell repeatedly screamed the words "Free Palestine" before succumbing to the flames. While Bushnell lay engulfed in flames, one police officer aims his firearm at the motionless Bushnell, while another officer screams, "I don't need guns, I need fire extinguishers!"

Aaron Bushnell later passed away due to the injuries incurred from the fire.

The powerful scene and images of Bushnell in flames, screaming for a land he had never visited, were met with an outpouring of compassion, love, and solidarity from around the globe. Palestinians on social media thanked him for the sacrifice he had made in the name of an end to the genocide.

However powerful the outpouring of compassion was for Bushnell, there was equal, if not greater, mainstream media criticism of Bushnell's actions and motivations. Several news agencies characterized Bushnell's self-immolation not as an act of protest but as a sad display by a mentally disturbed individual committing suicide. Initial US reporting either purposefully failed to mention Israel and Gaza or effectively buried the lede. Defenders of the Israeli genocide in Gaza quickly endorsed the mental illness narrative in an effort to disparage Airman Bushnell and silence the message he was attempting to convey.

Self-immolation, however extreme, is not a new form of protest, nor one to be condemned. The act of self-immolation has been utilized as a last-resort protest by demonstrators across the globe for decades. The self-immolation of [Mohammed Bouazizi](#) in Tunisia, for example, is an event widely understood to have been a trigger of the Arab Spring. One of the most haunting and widely known images of the Vietnam War is of the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhist monk [Thich Quang Duc](#), who died protesting the South Vietnamese regime. More than one hundred Tibetan activists have set themselves aflame in protest of the Chinese occupation of Tibet over the years. The United States has been [no stranger to this form of protest](#). In 2018, David S. Buckel, LGBTQ advocate and climate activist, took to self-immolation in protest of the United States' continued allegiance to and reliance upon fossil fuels. Years later, in 2022, climate activist Wynn Alan Bruce died after self-immolating in front of the Supreme Court.

Weeks before Bushnell's protest, a similar event occurred in December outside the Israeli consulate in Atlanta. In December, while [holding a Palestinian flag](#), a woman doused herself in gasoline and ignited the accelerant before being doused by a nearby security guard. The protester was taken to the hospital in critical condition while the intervening security guard received treatment for second and third-degree burns. The protestor's identity and condition remain unknown, and the US press has been silent.

The extreme, and absolute, nature of self-immolation is meant to be uncomfortable for its witnesses; it is intended to challenge dominant narratives, force conversation, and lead to introspection among people who are blindly supporting immoral acts. To reduce the act of self-immolation to mental illness and suicide is useful only to detract, obfuscate, and censor the message of change Bushnell was attempting to impart.

We at the Lemkin Institute look with dismay at the United States government and world powers who continue to allow the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza to proceed unchecked. We especially

call on the United States and President Joe Biden to change course from the policy of arming Israel.

The Lemkin Insitute will honor the life and death of Aaron Bushnell in our commitment to the fight to end genocide, whether it be in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Myanmar, or Armenia. In our remembrance of Airman Bushnell, we ask that his words be taken to heart and that we all reflect on our possible complicity in genocide.

Airman Aaron Bushnell's last words were, "Free Palestine."

May he find peace.