



ALJAZEERA
MEDIA INSTITUTE

Bearing Witness Alone

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Journalists Testimonies
from Gaza and the West Bank



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Preface

When we asked our colleague Hisham Zaqout, Al Jazeera's correspondent in Gaza, to expand upon his testimony, his response was poignant:

"Oh, Ya Allah! Only our faith in the Almighty keeps us patient and able to endure—otherwise, it's all futile. This" testimony is written with tears and attempts to forget some of what happened. I wish you hadn't asked me to write even one more paragraph."

His words underscore the profound pain inherent in recounting such harrowing experiences. From the outset of this project, as we embarked on the task of documenting the testimonies of Palestinian journalists who lived through this devastating war, we understood that we were venturing into the heart of an ongoing tragedy. We deliberately chose not to seek polished or meticulously structured narratives. We recognized that those confronting mass killings, starvation, a complete siege, and the ubiquitous presence of death—those taking refuge in tattered tents, having suffered the loss of their families—do not possess the capacity for literary refinement.

Our motivation stemmed from a fear that Israel's relentless aggression would claim the lives of even more journalists, or that the passage of time would erode memories, allowing critical truths about this war to fade into oblivion. These testimonies are not mere ephemeral accounts; they constitute an indelible historical record for posterity, ensuring

that this senseless war is not reduced to the simplistic and misleading notion that it commenced on October 7th, 2023.

No matter how profoundly we attempt to grasp the magnitude of suffering endured by our colleagues, the testimonies within this book surpass the limits of human endurance. They challenge the very legal definition of genocide, a concept meticulously crafted by legal scholars to hold perpetrators accountable.

Never before in the history of journalism has such systematic targeting and brutalization of an entire professional journalistic community been documented. Amal Habib's desperate search for her husband in the morgues, resigned to his death, only to witness his miraculous return home two days later; Mohammad Al-Sawwaf's astonishing reemergence from death after the occupation annihilated his entire family; Lama Khater's confrontation with the abyss of the horrific Damon Prison; Anas Al-Sharif burying his father and then resolutely returning to his journalistic duty; Muath Amarneh living with a bullet lodged in a precarious location in his head – these are but a few of the stories that unfold within these pages.

With each testimony received, we were convinced we had encountered the most harrowing account, only to be confronted with even more overwhelming horror and shocking details in the next.

Reading these testimonies evokes a powerful urge to record every word, every narrative, as if it might be the last, driven by the fear that each journalist could be the next target of Israel's war machine. These are not merely accounts of

survival; they are testimonies from those living under the constant threat of death, with each passing day of this protracted war bringing them closer to the precipice.

Yet, amidst the pain, blood, and collective suffering, these testimonies reveal an unwavering refusal to surrender. They illuminate stories of resilience: Najwa, the hairdresser, creating moments of joy for "war grooms"; mothers struggling to educate their children amidst deprivation and hardship; and the documentation of festive moments during holidays and special occasions, even in the shadow of despair.

This raw, unfiltered narrative transcends the limitations of live reporting or conventional journalistic writing, resisting the impulse to categorize Palestinian journalists as either "collateral damage" or "superheroes." Instead, it portrays them as courageous truth-seekers, exposing the relentless violations of the Israeli occupation, alone and unarmed, amplifying the voices of the victims in the hope that the world will finally heed their cries.


These 16 journalists, representative of the Palestinian press corps that courageously covered the war after Israel sealed Gaza off from international media, abandoned by global organizations, recount details that will be revelations to many readers.

In a just world, this book would serve as irrefutable evidence to prosecute the perpetrators of these atrocities. However, in a world where justice is subservient to the powerful, these testimonies stand as a testament to the collective memory of Palestinian journalists documenting a genocidal war.

These accounts are not merely testimonies; they are acts of defiance against oppression, erasure, and death itself. As the late Elias Khoury once stated, "The things we do not write down die."

An aerial, black and white photograph of a city in complete ruin. The buildings are skeletal remains of concrete and steel, with debris scattered everywhere. In the foreground and middle ground, numerous people are seen walking through the rubble, some pushing carts or carrying items. The scene is one of desolation and the aftermath of a major disaster.

Between Life and Death

 Hisham Zaqout



Hisham Zaqout

A Palestinian journalist and Al Jazeera correspondent in the Gaza Strip, was born in the Nuseirat refugee camp to a family displaced from the occupied village of Isdud. He holds a PhD in psychology, and in May 2024, Birzeit University awarded him the "Shireen Abu Akleh Award for Media Excellence" in recognition of his courageous coverage of the ongoing war on Gaza.

Between Life and Death

Hisham Zaqout

The image haunts me: stones piled atop one another, like the jaws of dark skies clamping down on the earth's prey. The cries of those trapped beneath the rubble, limbs shattered, suffocating in the sand and dust. The gasps of survivors, desperately searching in the darkness, reaching for a loved one's foot, a neck – a desperate attempt to find life, or to accept the finality of death.

I run, camera in hand, fate my companion, circling the theater of death. Chasing the unfolding events, racing against the next missile strike, the next explosion that will tear bodies apart, scatter fragments of flesh and bone across the ravaged landscape.

I feign resilience, but how can I truly detach myself from the suffering? How can I ignore the sight of my brothers, my friends, my neighbors, writhing in agony amidst the fire, the shelling, the overwhelming loss?

The gunfire on May 2023 ,27 was relentless, the bombardment near our residence in Rafah unlike anything we had experienced before. Just after sunset, without warning, the occupying forces, deeply entrenched in Rafah's eastern neighborhoods, unleashed a furious barrage upon the west – particularly our area, near the main street leading to Tel Al-Sultan.

As darkness fell, the shelling intensified. We were surrounded. From our fourth-floor apartment, we could see Israeli tanks mere meters away. Terror gripped our hearts. Gathering our belongings, we retreated to the ground floor, knowing that venturing outside meant certain death.

Yet, even in this moment of existential dread, the journalist within us stirred. We began documenting the unfolding events, driven by an instinct to bear witness. These images, these videos, might be our last – perhaps the only evidence that we were ever here, that we lived.

Our cherished journalistic tools were gone, lost in chaos. The cameras and lenses that were extensions of ourselves, now inaccessible.

The phone, once a secondary tool, now became our lifeline. Our sole means of documenting, of filming, of transmitting news to the outside world.

This war was different. There was no stability, no sanctuary. We had left much of our equipment in Gaza City, our main headquarters, believing we would soon return.

But the war dragged on. The relentless need to document, coupled with the direct targeting of cameras and cameramen, meant that we were losing the very tools of our trade. It wasn't just the cameras; it was the loss of the fearless cameraman, the one who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the reporter, capturing the suffering, risking their lives – only to be deliberately targeted.

Samer Abu Daqqa¹, an Al Jazeera Arabic cameraman, was one such casualty. Deliberately targeted and killed by the Israeli occupation forces, who then denied ambulances access to save him. He was one of many journalists systematically murdered.

As Al Jazeera, its cameramen, and indeed all of Gaza's journalists, were repeatedly targeted, their equipment lost to shelling and the relentless demands of their work, the Israeli occupation forces also prohibited the entry of new equipment into the Strip. In these desperate circumstances, the mobile phone became our salvation – the only way to keep pace with the escalating violence.

Initially, relying on a phone felt inadequate for journalists accustomed to professional cameras and the "elegance" of their craft. But just as we adapted to loss, to hunger, to the deprivation of life's basic necessities, we adapted to this new reality.

The phone became an indispensable tool for the journalist and the cameraman. It allowed us to follow events, share updates, and maintain contact with the world. With no computers, no offices, the phone has now become our everything. Carrying a traditional camera was now a life-threatening risk, a beacon for an enemy terrified of the images we captured.

The traditional camera vanished, replaced by this small

¹ Samer Abu Daqqa, a 45-year-old Palestinian journalist, cameraman, and editor for Al Jazeera Arabic, was killed in an Israeli drone strike in Khan Yunis on December 15, 2023. Abu Daqqa was injured alongside Al Jazeera's Gaza bureau chief, Wael Dahdouh, while they were covering an Israeli attack on the Farhana school in Gaza. Abu Daqqa was left trapped inside the school for six hours as Israeli forces prevented medics from reaching him with nonstop shelling.

device. Through it, we documented the unfolding events, followed the news, and transmitted the truth to the world, even as the occupation targeted and destroyed our live broadcast vehicles. This small device persisted, fulfilling its impossible mission.

It was more than a tool; it was our window to life, our unbombable witness, ensuring that the voice of truth could not be silenced.

Perhaps the occupation eventually realized how we were continuing our work. The internet was cut off. But even then, the mobile phone proved indispensable. Electronic SIM cards provided a workaround, restoring our connection and allowing us to overcome this latest attempt to isolate Gaza and erase the images of its suffering from the world's screens.

Closer to Death

Covering the war in Gaza has always been "a dance with death". Journalists are falsely accused, targeted, forced to constantly improvise and find alternatives for everything they lose. Alternatives for equipment, for protection, for the basic necessities of life. All in an effort to deny the Israeli occupation any pretext for targeting them, though they often need none.

Over the course of this year-long war, tents replaced homes. There were no offices, no institutions, no safe havens. We carried our tents with us, fleeing airstrikes and evacuation zones, transporting them on animal carts, trucks, and even on foot.

We erected our tents near the sea, in areas devoid of basic necessities – no electricity, no water, no fuel. The little fuel that arrived was reserved for international institutions, forcing us to embrace a primitive existence.

Hospitals, or their surrounding areas, became our headquarters. We pitched our tents at their gates, hoping to access basic services. Hospitals were the only places in Gaza with electricity, powered by generators kept running through international aid. This meant access to water and the internet, enabling us to continue our work.

After the Battle for Survival

Having established makeshift workstations to resume broadcasting, we faced new challenges. The occupation waged war not just with bombs and bullets, but by denying the people of Gaza the most basic necessities. It was a war of attrition, designed to break our spirit and our will to resist.

The occupation manipulated our access to essential goods, blocking the entry of flour, for instance, only to relent under international pressure that would soon dissipate. Hunger was weaponized against us.²

Words seem to fail when describing the scale of death and devastation. The occupation "mastered" its brutality, leaving no path to death unexplored, while sealing off every avenue to life. Even medicine, a fundamental human right,

² Multiple reports from international organizations have confirmed that the Israeli government is using the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare in the Gaza Strip, a tactic that constitutes a war crime under international law.

was denied to a population suffering from war wounds and disease. Simple painkillers became precious commodities.

This time, substitutes for essential medicines were impossible to find. Pharmacies operated from tents made of tattered fabric. The only functioning hospital, in central Khan Younis, resumed its work amidst the ruins, a constant reminder of the ongoing war. Those providing medical care worked tirelessly, striving to save lives amidst the horrors of this modern-day apocalypse.

We were deprived of everything, even basic hygiene. No shampoo, no soap, no toothpaste, no detergent. As diseases spread, our work became even more fraught with risk. Alongside the shelling and the absence of safe zones, sickness followed us as we moved between the tents of the displaced, tents that were themselves bombed every few days.

A Winter in Gaza

The people of Gaza are enduring a complete collapse of their living conditions, exacerbated by the total ban on clothing imports. I won't conceal the fact that my clothes are worn thin, the shoes I fled with are falling apart. We never imagined we would be displaced for so long. We certainly didn't expect the world to stand by, silent witnesses to this genocide, an atrocity unparalleled in modern history, a testament to the death of humanity's conscience.

Summer gave way to winter, and we barely managed to secure some warm clothes for ourselves and our families,

relying on the kindness of relatives and friends. Even now, after a year of war, not a single item of clothing or footwear has entered the ravaged Strip to cover our weary bodies, weakened by this endless hemorrhage.

It seems that the very act of living, of simply existing, offends the Israeli occupation and its leaders. For those who survive the bombs, they seek to kill through disease, hunger, or despair.

All these details, and countless others, must be documented to bear witness to the enormity of these crimes against a people who have endured the horrors of war for decades. Now, a new war seeks to extinguish any remaining flicker of hope for freedom and liberation.

Amidst the struggle for survival, I waged a silent, internal battle. I avoided dwelling on its details, clinging to the hope that this senseless war would end, praying that my mind might find respite from its relentless thoughts, that my heart might find solace. It was a battle fought without allies, for all my comrades – friends, colleagues, relatives, neighbors – were gone. Those with whom I shared life, with whom I endured the bitter days of war, were no longer here.

On January 6th, 2024, after 100 days of covering the war in Deir al-Balah, my team and I decided to move south to Rafah. Many colleagues had established a makeshift newsroom in a tent there. Among them was Hamza Wael al-Dahdouh³, the eldest son of our colleague Wael. Hamza, a fellow journalist

³ Hamza Al Dahdouh, 27, a Palestinian journalist and cameraman for Al Jazeera was killed along with Mustafa Thuraya, a freelance video journalist, in an Israeli drone strike on January 7, 2024

at Al Jazeera, was someone I had known since he was a child. He had grown into a colleague, a friend, a little brother.

That first night in Rafah was filled with warm embraces, heartfelt words, and shared memories. Hamza was inseparable. In the evening, he accompanied me to the journalists' tent, where several reporters from Rafah had gathered.

We chatted with his friend, Mustafa Abu Thurayya, discussing the war, the future, and plans to meet again in the coming days.

The next morning, Hamza insisted we have breakfast together. Afterwards, he asked me to take a picture of him during his first live broadcast from Rafah. He posted it on his Instagram account, one of the most prominent accounts covering the war on the platform. Then, he left with Mustafa to report on an event in northern Rafah.

I didn't realize then that Hamza was saying a final goodbye, capturing his last moments with me. Later, a colleague called to inform me that Hamza had been injured in an Israeli airstrike. I rushed to the hospital, only to find him lying there, dead, a new martyr.

How Can I Tell Wael?

How could I bear to tell Wael? How could I find the words to inform this man, who had already lost his wife, children, and grandson just weeks earlier, that his eldest son, Hamza, was gone? I couldn't summon the courage. When Wael arrived,

he met the news with the same steadfast faith, the same lessons in patience and resilience he always embodied.

But the loss didn't end with Hamza. The list of the departed is long, and each name holds a special place in my heart. Every time an ambulance arrived, I found myself anxiously scanning the faces of the martyrs and the injured, fearing I would recognize a relative, a friend.

This fear became reality when my aunt's home in Rafah was bombed. The wounded began arriving at Kuwait Hospital, where we had set up our tent. Among the victims were children, women, and countless dismembered bodies. I recognized one martyr, then another, and a child – too many familiar faces. Among them was my cousin, Abdul Fattah, and his entire family. The occupation had erased them from existence, slaughtering displaced people seeking shelter in a house falsely deemed "safe."

Weeks later, the occupation bombed my grandfather's home in Gaza City, reducing it to rubble. Everyone inside perished: my uncle's wife, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Some bodies were recovered; others remain missing. This time, I couldn't attend their funerals, couldn't bid them a final farewell. The occupation had severed the tiny Gaza Strip in two, making travel from the central and southern areas to Gaza City impossible.

Even as I write these words, I try to evade the weight of this story, but I am drawn back to the memory of Samer Abu Daqqa. Tears well up every time I utter his name. How much more difficult it is to write these lines about him. I once

told him, almost as if I unconsciously anticipated his fate, that I could now recognize the martyrs before they became martyrs. I could see it in their faces, in their way of living, and in a strange feeling that washed over me whenever I spoke to them. Little did I know that, at that very moment, I was speaking to one of them.

The helplessness was suffocating. We couldn't save Samer as he bled before our eyes for more than six hours. We couldn't summon an ambulance because Israeli airstrikes surrounded us. Is there any greater helplessness than witnessing Samer's death while standing powerless?

What words can possibly convey the depth of this loss? How can we describe the pain of losing Samer, or Bassem, or Othman, or Ahmed, or Abdul Salam, or Jameel, or Fathi, or young Sama, Hamza, or the countless others we have lost? And how many more will we lose? How many more surprises await us when this war finally ends?

The Duality of a Journalist in Gaza

These are the daily realities of a journalist, a human being, in Gaza. To witness images and videos from every theater of fear, accompanied by screams and explosions. To then stand before the screen and narrate, explain, describe those sounds and sights. Yet, often, the journalist within falters, unable to transform the pain into words, to transmit it anew.

Can the world truly comprehend the life of a journalist who wakes and sleeps to the deafening roar of bombardments, the earth shuddering from the sheer force of it all? And yet, it

doesn't stop there. This journalist must run through the dust, beneath the tongues of fire, amidst the stench of blood and smoke, to capture the scene – knowing that no lens, no news report, no novel, however long, can ever fully encapsulate the horror.

On the other side of this story is the all-too-familiar reality of displacement, a reality we have endured for over a year. Pain accumulates in my chest, suffocating me. Walking through the alleys of the displaced, I feel as though I am dragging mountains of grief. I lean on my heart, yearning for someone to lean on it in return, to soothe its ache. I console the anguished passersby, the children cloaked in misery and deprivation, the elderly whose faces bear the etched lines of time and sorrow, and the women and young girls robbed of life's meaning and joy, for whom toil and suffering have become the defining features of this era.

This narrow strip, hemmed in between the sea and fire, is the only refuge for my family, my people, the residents of Gaza. It is the ground on which I stand, narrating the hunger, the overcrowding, the sheer hardship. And as I relay the suffering of my people in their tents, amidst the fires, I feel as if the microphone is voiceless, as if I were a child screaming in a dream, unheard.

How can a camera or microphone capture the full spectrum of suffering – the spiritual, physical, and economic devastation? How can it convey the burden of the past, the terror of the present, the uncertainty of the future?

How can I explain that two-thirds of an already besieged population are now besieged again, confined to a quarter of Gaza's land, denied even the chance to return to their homes, or what remains of them? How do I convey that a tent is unfit for sleeping, for living, for waiting, or even for dying?

I document this reality, and it circulates through Arab and Western media. This report tells the story. This news ticker runs on late-night bulletins. The internet is abuzz with conversations about our tragedy and our resilience. But the world remains unmoved.

This is my heart – caught between hope and despair, uncertain of which direction to take, yet clinging to both. Perhaps this is because my identity, which "used to be called Palestine and is still called Palestine," has become accustomed to uniting contradictions in one heart and one voice. Gaza has taught us to live with death looming above, to persevere while memories choke our spirits, and to chase after truth, for it is ours – even when an unjust world seeks to steal it and claim it as its own.

And so, we have no choice but to embrace the camera and raise our voices, letting truth resonate louder from this place of light and darkness, death and life, love and war: Gaza.



To Stare into the Void

Lama Khater

□ Lama Khater





Lama Khater

A writer and journalist focusing on politics and culture, Lama Khater is a media activist from the West Bank and a mother of five. She was detained by Israeli forces on October 2023 ,26, due to her outspoken views and advocacy. Released on November 2023 ,30, she played a key role in launching a media campaign to shed light on the harrowing conditions endured by Palestinian detainees, especially women, in Israeli prisons.

To Stare into the Void

Lama Khater

It felt like two different worlds, two different realities of imprisonment. The first time, early in 2019, a letter from my daughter arrived, its words piercing my heart: "Hello, Mom, from the other side of winter, from that cold sidewalk where I stood alone, waiting for the umbrella of your heart to shield me from the chill of absence." How different that felt from the prison I found myself in by the end of 2023, amidst the Israeli war of extermination on Gaza and the ensuing wave of violence across the Palestinian territories. The prisons became the crucibles of intensified torture and abuse in the long months that followed. Everything changed after October 7th, 2023. The mask was ripped away, revealing the true face of Israel, devoid of any pretense of ethics or respect for human rights. It was as if this war had brutally exposed the core of this entity, forcing us to confront the sea of blood upon which its existence in Palestine is built.

The physical prison in both instances was the same: Damon Prison⁴, perched atop Mount Carmel in Haifa, where all Palestinian female prisoners classified as "security threats" are held – those imprisoned for their national activism. I

⁴ Damon Prison is located in Haifa on Mount Carmel, on lands belonging to the village of Damon, which was ethnically cleansed in 1948. Since November 2018, this prison has become the central prison for all Palestinian female prisoners. Numerous reports confirm that the female prisoners in Damon Prison live in harsh and severe conditions, which have dramatically worsened since October 7, 2023.

spent most of my first imprisonment there between 2018 and 2019, and all of my second incarceration, which began on October 2023 ,26, around twenty days after the Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.

Yet, Damon Prison, like all other prisons, was transformed after October 7. Letters, once a lifeline to our families, offering solace and easing the pain of separation, were now completely forbidden. All communication with the outside world was severed – no visits, no phone calls. The occupation had turned prison into an abyss, isolating us from everything. Not only were we cut off from the outside world and its unfolding events, but even paper and pens were banned, robbing us of the ability to record our memories and hopes. I may return to these details later, to share some of the stories that unfolded within those walls.

My mind drifts back to that first encounter in the Ashkelon Interrogation Center in 2018. The interrogator's words still send a chill down my spine: "We didn't arrest you because of your writings. You could carry out a “martyrdom operation” on paper, and that wouldn't be reason enough to arrest you." A chilling statement, designed to intimidate, to silence. I am a Palestinian journalist, and though my writing and activities were constantly scrutinized during those interrogations, I vividly recall the six Shin Bet officers we were forced to meet on the day of our release in the prisoner exchange deal in November 2023. I was part of the sixth group freed. Those officers hurled threats, their message unmistakable: "You are forbidden from writing even a single letter anywhere after your release, or we will arrest you again and double your sentence. Don't think you're lucky for being released in this deal!"

Their words hung heavy in the air, a stark reminder that even freedom was conditional, that our voices were a threat to their power. Perhaps I would still be languishing in their prison as I write these words if it weren't for that "Freedom" deal. The Shin Bet officer who raided my home with dozens of soldiers on the night of my arrest had promised me a long sentence. He even sneered at my husband, saying, "Don't wait for your wife; she won't come out this time. Marry someone else and forget about her!" Then, two weeks into my detention, they returned and arrested my husband as well. He wasn't released until eight months later.

The Night of My Arrest

That night, the night of my arrest, I knew we were entering a new phase, one where the occupation had been given free rein to unleash its brutality without consequence. After October 7th, all pretense of restraint was gone. Israel had either lost all reason, or perhaps, more chillingly, it was simply revealing its true face.

My daughter woke me around 2:30 AM. She had heard the soldiers approaching our home in Hebron. I barely had time to put on my hijab before they stormed into my bedroom. They forced my husband, my children, and me into the living room and began ransacking our home with a shocking ferocity. They confiscated everything they could find – magazines, books, electronic devices – piling them on the floor in front of us. All the soldiers were masked, except for the regional officer, who spent the entire time shouting, hurling insults, and cursing the resistance.

He sneered at me, his voice dripping with contempt. "You were happy on October 7th," he spat, "and we will hold you accountable for that."

"Are you going to punish me for my feelings?" I asked, incredulous.

"We'll hold you accountable for everything," he snarled. "Everything has changed. Prison used to be a vacation. You were a prisoner before, but today you're a prisoner of war, and you have no rights."

Then he turned to my husband, his voice thick with malice. "We'll hold you accountable too," he threatened, "because you let her do what she wants without stopping her. If she were my wife, I would have beaten her and taken her head off."

My husband, his voice steady despite the terror in his eyes, retorted, "Maybe you beat your wives, but we don't. My wife is free in her thoughts and actions."

I couldn't help but scoff at the hypocrisy. This officer, representing a state that claims to champion women's rights and equality, boasting of its liberal values, didn't hesitate to use such a pathetically chauvinistic tone to try and humiliate me. The jailer, it seemed, was trying to incite the men around us to become our oppressors, to replicate our imprisonment within our own homes. This behavior is common; the pressure is always on Palestinian men to control the women in their lives, to suppress their resistance, their writing, their activism, ultimately erasing their role in society and the national struggle.

After two hours of this – the destruction, the threats, the shouting – a female soldier roughly searched me, and I was dragged outside. No goodbye to my family, no bathroom break, no water, no chance to grab even a change of clothes. They marched me at gunpoint for what felt like miles before shoving me into a transport vehicle. Before I could even climb inside, they blindfolded me, bound my hands, and threw me onto the floor. I remained in this position, humiliated and terrified, until we reached the first detention station near the Kiryat Arba settlement. Throughout the journey, I clung to prayers and verses from the Quran, desperately trying to calm myself, to prepare for whatever horrors lay ahead, knowing this would be unlike anything I had experienced before.

They pulled me from the vehicle, still blindfolded and handcuffed, and dragged me to an unknown location. I heard a voice, a Shin Bet officer I presumed, shouting about October 7th, questioning my beliefs about what had happened. Then, out of nowhere, he threw a horrifying threat at me: "There are 20 soldiers in this room. I could let them rape you the same way your people raped the Jewish women in the settlements around Gaza."

The threat pierced me like a knife. I knew they were capable of anything. But somehow, I found my voice. "You're lying," I said, my voice shaking. "There was no rape in the settlements. These are all lies to justify your soldiers' savagery."

His fury exploded. "If you deny it," he screamed, "I'll bring your daughter, the one we saw in your house, and rape her in front of you. Or maybe I should go now and burn down

your house with all your children inside!"

At that point, I refused to speak. He threatened to leave me on the floor, bound and blindfolded, until I was ready to cooperate. But I knew engaging in any political discussion with them was pointless. They wouldn't be satisfied until every Palestinian saw the world through their twisted lens. But I couldn't remain silent in the face of such outrageous accusations.

After an eternity of threats and shouting, I understood the purpose of this exercise: to break me, to crush my spirit, to humiliate me with their vile language. Before they dragged me out, the officer snarled, "The only reason we aren't carrying out what you've just heard is because we don't have permission from the government. But rest assured, there will come a day when this government is gone, and another will allow us to do whatever we want to you." He added, with a sneer, "Now, you're headed to another round in Ofer prison. I'll make sure they take good care of you there."

Hours later, they transferred me to Ofer Prison⁵ near Ramallah, a sprawling complex with a large prison holding thousands of Palestinians, an extensive interrogation center, and military courts. When I arrived, they threw me into a cold, empty cell, still blindfolded and handcuffed. I managed to catch glimpses

⁵ Ofer Prison, also known as Ofer Camp, is an Israeli military prison located on the appropriated lands of Beitunia, west of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank. It includes a military court, a detention center, and several sections for holding thousands of prisoners. Numerous human rights reports have documented the subjection of Palestinian prisoners in Ofer to brutal and retaliatory treatment, including providing water for only 45 minutes a day, and denying adequate and quality food, with the intention of spreading diseases among the prisoners, including scabies.

of my surroundings from beneath the blindfold. About half an hour later, two other women were brought in. Their clothes were covered in dust, and they were utterly exhausted. It took me a moment to recognize them – Ruqayya Amro and Maryam Salhab, also from Hebron. Their wrists bore deep, painful marks from the tight restraints. Maryam told me how they had forced her to lie face down in the dirt at Kiryat Arba camp for hours, stepping on her back whenever she tried to lift her head to breathe.

Despite the physical and emotional torment, our reunion in the cell brought a sliver of comfort. We tried to slip off our blindfolds, to loosen our restraints, to see each other. We called out to the guards, begging to use the bathroom. After what felt like hours, they finally allowed us to go, but they only removed the blindfolds, leaving our hands bound. We had to relieve ourselves while still handcuffed.

Later, they took me for interrogation. On the way, I saw that all the interrogation rooms were full of detainees being cursed and abused. I overheard one interrogator forcing a young man to curse God and insult Hamas leaders with obscene language. In the interrogation room, a large file sat on the desk, and the interrogator began listing a series of charges against me, including incitement against Israel, glorifying "terrorists," and participating in demonstrations supporting Gaza. He presented a stack of papers that he claimed were my writings after October 7th, gathered from social media. I denied all the accusations. He then began checking my phone but found no social media apps on it. He accused me of deleting them beforehand, insisting that it wouldn't help me avoid prison.

This interrogation was brief compared to the one I endured during my first arrest, which had lasted 35 days at the Ashkelon Interrogation Center. After it ended, they immediately transferred me to Sharon Prison⁶. In the hallway, I caught a glimpse of Umm Asif Barghouti⁷. Her arrest shocked me, and I realized that there had been a widespread crackdown on women in the West Bank that night.

Starvation and Violations

The food was meager and of abysmal quality. We used to count the spoonfuls of rice at lunchtime to ensure equitable distribution, and we were forced to consume things we would never have touched outside, like undercooked sausages or cold, boiled eggs with yolks turned an unsettling blue. Despite the lack of food, some prisoners found solace in feeding their portion of eggs to the feral cats roaming the prison yard, even though this was against the rules and punishable.

After the war, the female prisoners faced increased repression from the guards. We were sometimes subjected to tear gas or physical assaults, treatment that was rare before and would have sparked uprisings in the men's prisons. But with the isolation imposed on all prisons, these abuses occurred in silence, shrouded in secrecy. No one heard about them

⁶ Sharon Prison, or Hasharon, is located in central Palestine, near the city of Netanya. It is designated for Israeli criminals and also contains several cells known as (al-Ma'bar) or temporary detention, designated for Palestinian female security prisoners. They are held there in difficult and poor conditions for several days, from the time of their arrest until their transfer to the central women's prison (Damon) in Haifa.

⁷ Umm Asif Barghouti is the widow of Omar Barghouti, a freedom fighter and former political prisoner. Her son, Saleh, was killed by Israeli forces, while another son, Asim, remains imprisoned. Her brother, Jasser, is a freed prisoner exiled to Gaza. And her brother-in-law, Nael (68), holds the heavy title of longest-serving Palestinian political prisoner in Israeli jails.

unless a lawyer managed to relay the details after a visit, or a freed prisoner shared their experiences with the media. The only way for us to glean any news of the outside world was through the arrival of a new prisoner or during fleeting meetings with our lawyers – though most lawyers avoided bringing news to prevent being barred from future visits.

A few days after my arrival at Damon Prison, I received an administrative detention order for six months, a term that is typically renewed multiple times. During those days, a lawyer visited, and I recounted everything I had endured, especially the threats of rape and the strip searches. After my testimony was publicized, I was summoned for interrogation by the prison intelligence. The Shin Bet officer was furious, demanding to know why I had shared my experiences. I told him I had merely spoken truthfully about what had happened to me. I asked him, "If this is your policy in prisons, why are you afraid of the world knowing about it?" He retorted, "This is a prison, not a hotel." I responded, "And I have the right to speak about everything that happened to me." After that, I was punished by being banned from meeting with my lawyer. But I never regretted sharing my testimony, nor did I waver in my conviction that every prisoner should speak out about their experiences and the violations they endure – especially those arrested after the war.

I have always believed that documenting the prison experience is crucial, whether through writing or other means. Today, I believe this is even more critical, especially for female prisoners. After the war, the occupation deliberately violated their privacy, from the moment of arrest to their release. Physical abuse and mistreatment have become

commonplace. I have heard numerous testimonies from prisoners who were beaten, both in Sharon Prison and other detention centers. One prisoner endured twelve continuous hours of beatings, another had her hijab torn during an assault, and a prisoner from Balata Refugee Camp in Nablus (in the northern West Bank) arrested just days after me, had recently given birth. She and her husband were arrested during a raid on the camp. She suffered severe beatings that left her with excruciating pain and uterine bleeding, yet she received no medical treatment. Unable to eat due to her physical and psychological trauma, she cried constantly for her infant daughter, whom she had left behind. She was released as part of the prisoner exchange deal after only a few weeks in detention.

During my first arrest, I diligently wrote daily entries about our life in prison, documenting my thoughts, feelings, and experiences in detail. We even found ways to smuggle our writings out. I always knew that writing from within the prison held a different weight, a different impact, than writing about it after release. Today, however, writing in prison has become a crime. The almost daily raids on our cells would result in the confiscation of everything we had written, and this was one of the most distressing aspects of imprisonment for me. In prison, paper and pens are precious, especially for a journalist. I had managed to save a small notebook that survived the confiscations during the war, and I would jot down brief notes and key phrases to help me later recall the overall experience – the emotions, the mental states, the impact – so the details wouldn't fade with time. The scarcity of writing tools made it impossible to write extensively. I succeeded in hiding those few notes

throughout my detention and was determined to take them with me upon release.

On the morning of November 2023 ,29, the day I was freed as part of the sixth prisoner exchange deal, the prison section manager entered the yard and sternly warned us not to take anything with us, threatening punishment for anyone found with even a scrap of paper. Since we were never told in advance who would be released, we had developed the habit of preparing ourselves early every morning, just in case. That day, I had prepared my notes, but after the guard's threat, I hesitated. I opened them, read them over several times, and finally, with immense regret, tore them up and threw them away. Even now, I try in vain to remember what I had written.

For years, the prisoner exchange deal had been a dream for thousands of prisoners. I recall how the eyes of those sentenced to long terms would light up whenever there was news of a possible deal during my first imprisonment. When the exchange finally came, it was accompanied by a heavy toll of blood and overwhelming grief for Gaza, which was still enduring its brutal onslaught. In November 2023, all the long-sentenced female prisoners were freed in the deal, except for Shatila Abu Ayyada from Kafr Qasim, who is serving a -16year sentence with about eight years left. For those prisoners who had long dreamed of this moment, it was a significant victory, but it was difficult to feel any real joy amid the horrors inflicted on Gaza and the anguish that consumed our hearts.

The day of our release was long and exhausting. The Israeli guards and intelligence officers made sure to drain us

emotionally and physically until the very last moment. We were transferred from Damon Prison to Ofer Prison, where we were held in cold cells for about 12 hours, lying on the freezing floor, before finally being freed in the early hours of the next day – around 2 a.m. Despite the stream of threats and warnings from the Israeli intelligence officers, we could clearly see their frustration with the deal, knowing they were forced to release us before we had served our full sentences.

When the guards finally removed our restraints and the Red Cross bus took us away, we spontaneously began singing a song familiar to all prisoners:

—“Your spirit doesn’t care about imprisonment... no matter how long it lasts... Sister, your liberation is my concern... And in your prison, don’t worry... I swear, even if they spill my blood... You won’t stay in the darkness...” —

We emerged from Ofer Prison, expecting to be met with empty streets and the silence of abandonment. Instead, we were greeted by a sea of faces, flags waving, banners held high. Tears streamed down our faces, a mixture of relief and overwhelming emotion. In that moment, the profound significance of our release, won despite the occupier's will, washed over me. It was a bittersweet victory, tinged with the pain of Gaza's suffering and the pride in the resistance's unwavering spirit.

Months have passed since my release, yet Damon Prison remains filled with our Palestinian sisters, their voices silenced, their spirits caged. This is our reality, and it will remain so until we achieve true liberation. There is no complete joy for

us, only the constant struggle, the defiance, the unwavering patience in the face of overwhelming challenges. Blood and lives are sacrificed on the path to freedom, just as years are stolen and spent within prison walls. These sacrifices are the price we pay, unavoidable until we attain collective salvation for our people and our nation.

Even though many days have passed since my release, the prison's shadow lingers. Its memories flicker in my mind, vivid then fading, a haunting presence I can't escape. I try to keep those memories alive, clinging to the words I wrote during my first imprisonment. My eyes trace the lines I scrawled after that grueling interrogation:

“What is planted in you during moments of deep conviction can never be uprooted by the hand of oppression, nor can its roots be dried by the scorching desert sun. Some things your heart will never let go of, no matter how much force is used to tear them away. These are not just things that cannot be bought—they cannot be sold, and no one else can feel their warmth and flow in your heart like you do.”

These words, born of defiance and etched in my memory, are a testament to the enduring strength of the human spirit. I cling to them, to the certainty that even in the darkest of times, hope remains. We, in this occupied land, must hold onto those convictions, nurture them, so that the darkness does not consume us. We must continue to renew ourselves, to rise from the ashes of suffering, so that our goals remain clear, even as exhaustion threatens to break us.

These words, these fragments of memory, are but a glimpse into the reality of life behind prison walls. They are a modest offering, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable suffering. They are a reminder that even in the darkest of times, the flame of hope continues to burn. And as long as that flame burns, we will continue to resist, to defy, to endure, until the day we finally achieve our freedom.



A Year Out of Life

Lama Khateb

□ Maram Hmaid



Maram Hmaid

A journalist and correspondent for Al Jazeera's English website in Gaza, Maram has been dedicated to covering the stories of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in Gaza, both before and during the war.

A Year Out of Life

Maram Hmaid

Every time I attempt to write about this war, my words seem to echo themselves, endlessly describing the daily horrors, the relentless cruelty. The only difference is the passage of time.

I wrote about the first days of the war, about a month of war, two months, a hundred days, six months, then eight and ten. Today, I find myself writing about the first anniversary of this conflict. And what a year it has been.

Names have changed, and what we desperately wished to avoid has become our reality, against our will. Nothing ever seems to go according to our will.

I've started filling out the periodic journalist data update form, and in the address section, I now write, "Deir al-Balah, near the roundabout," instead of "Gaza City, Palestine Square." My address has been forcibly changed, as have my routes home and to work.

For a year now, we have tried to deny that we have grown accustomed to this existence, but the truth is, we have. Against our will. My father has started calling our place of displacement "our home." I hear him referring to the people in the area as "our neighbors," and he calls the area "our neighborhood."

In one year, the names and addresses we knew all our lives have been erased. Our memories, possessions, homes, daily habits, thoughts, ways of life, routines – all gone. Our personalities have dissolved and reformed. We have experienced trials and situations that we never imagined we would face.

The war has irrevocably changed us. Our personalities have morphed into something we haven't yet deciphered, something we don't know how to name. The tragedy is that the war continues, but we have grown accustomed to it. This is our life now.

I walk through the streets daily, amidst the hustle and bustle of street vendors, people desperately seeking an internet connection, and vehicles pulled by animals. It's overcrowded, miserable, and there's an unnatural scarcity of basic goods.

People have become accustomed to this life that barely resembles life. Wherever I ask, they tell me they're "just going through the motions." They're either ashamed or perhaps refuse to admit they've adapted. In the eyes of many, becoming accustomed to this injustice is a defeat, a surrender. I often try to reassure them, reminding them that there are no other options available to any of us.

After a year of war, I find myself walking down the street and being followed by children whose camps I've visited, whose families' stories I've written. Mothers and women greet me, sometimes hesitant to shake my hand because they don't look as clean as they used to in their homes "a year ago."

I pass by tents, and a child shouts to their mother inside, "Mom, the journalist Maram is here." Another says, "Ms. Maram is here." They've memorized my face over the course of this year. I greet everyone I know and don't know with a smile and daily conversations that often intersect with the journalistic stories I'm working on.

I break the monotony, the despair of seeing the worn-out tents, women in faded prayer clothes, and children in dirty clothes with tangled hair, with a simple phrase: "Allah bless you, everyone." Everyone replies with a long sigh, "Amen."

With each visit to the camp, the situation becomes more desperate. People tell me their stories, their problems, their pain, even their personal squabbles. In a quick visit, I stop by to hear the latest updates.

That tired-looking woman, as she arranges her tent, tells me about the problems between her engaged daughter and her fiancé, who insists on marrying her during the war, but they – mother and daughter – refuse.

The beautiful young woman adds to her mother's words as she stands in the tent doorway, "And where will I get married, Ms. Maram? Can't you see the situation? A tent and these difficult conditions? I won't agree, Mom!" I nod in agreement, sitting on some stones, and tell her, "You're right, don't agree at all."

Umm Muhammad offers me coffee she just boiled on a wood stove. I take a quick sip and apologize for having to rush off due to my many tasks. She prays for my success and

whispers shyly, "Keep me in mind," referring to any financial or material assistance.

I reassure her with, "Inshallah, there will be good coming," and I move on.

I finish my journalistic rounds asking people where they were displaced from and how many times they've endured the torment of displacement. People reply with a heavy word: "تَشَانِطْنَا" (tshantatna), a Palestinian dialect word that encapsulates the suffering and humiliation of being shunted back and forth between the north, south, and center.

People answer my questions with sadness and despair, waiting for any glimmer of hope. Some residents gather from nearby tents, trying to express what's in their hearts. One says bitterly, "No one cares about us here, we're forgotten."

Then he continues on his way to his tent, angrily, "Look at our lives, look at that pile of garbage and the sewage there," pointing at the piles of waste surrounding the tents, emitting a foul odor, sewage flowing around it.

This scene alone is enough to make anyone lose their appetite for life, let alone those who have endured it day and night for almost a year!

"Insects have eaten our bodies and the bodies of our children, illnesses and headaches that don't go away," says one woman who spends her day searching for a sliver of shade.

Her husband, who doesn't like cameras or the media, is economical with words, saying, "We're living dead."

People often respond this way when I introduce myself and ask them to speak. They initially apologize, claiming they don't trust the media, but as soon as I ask the first question, they open up like a gushing river, narrating their tragedies in painful detail.

"Najla's Hair Salon"

In the early months of the war, life seemed paralyzed. The war raged uncontrollably, and life ground to a halt for months. People had no experience dealing with such a prolonged conflict.

We were merely surviving, day by day, with great difficulty. Little food, no internet, no electricity, no chargers, no fuel. Cooking on fires, cut off from the world, the constant sounds of explosions and the radio in the background. It felt like a scene from the Middle Ages.

After about two months, when people had become somewhat hardened to the war, I decided to take my eight-year-old daughter to a hair salon for a haircut. I felt awkward asking, aware of the implied answer: "It's not the time." The truth is, I knew the situation didn't allow for such normalcy, and sadness permeated the atmosphere. But necessity knows no law.

A woman told me about a hair salon nearby that opened for a few hours each day. I took her directions and went the next afternoon.

The woman at "Najla's Hair Salon," operating from her home during the war, greeted us warmly. She was kind to my daughter and me, and for a moment, I felt disconnected from the war, despite the continued sounds of explosions. Then, out of journalistic curiosity, I asked, "Do you have customers during the war?" She replied with a hearty laugh, "Of course, and every day!" Then she continued, "The war has been the busiest period I've ever experienced!"

Her answer shocked me. "Dye and makeup during the war?!" The hairdresser laughed as she trimmed my daughter's hair and replied cryptically, "What's wrong? Does the nature of women change in war?" implying that women maintain their beauty rituals regardless of the circumstances.

That visit shifted something within me. I don't deny that I felt a surge of joy imagining the women of Gaza, maintaining their beauty routines amidst the chaos, like women all over the world. Women are women, everywhere.

Then sadness and bitterness washed over me as I thought about how the war had wronged these women, depriving them of their former lives, forcing them to bear unimaginable burdens.

My visits to the hairdresser became more frequent. Each time, she would tell me new stories, both humorous and heartbreaking.

"Every day, we have one or more brides getting ready for their weddings," she would say, preempting my questions about their preparations, their housing, their circumstances.

According to Najla, brides during the war make do with simple makeup and hairstyles. Some insist on wearing a white dress after an arduous search, while others are content with a simple embroidered dress. As for the ceremonies, they consist of a quick family gathering and some photos without music. The groom takes his bride to his house, his tent, or whatever shelter they have.

"No drums or flutes" is the constant in these wartime joys, which are essentially a testament to the continuation of life, but stripped of any real celebration amidst the sadness and pain.

One of the most heartbreaking stories was that of a twenty-year-old bride whose entire family, including her parents, was killed in the war. Her groom, her cousin's son, also lost his entire family in another bombing.

"Both were left alone after their families were martyred, so the cousin decided to marry his cousin to keep each other company."

Marriage Amidst Annihilation

Stories of weddings around the world begin with love, joy, engagements, and celebrations. But in Gaza, they begin with the tragedy of loss, deprivation, and loneliness.

This bride, the sole survivor, refused any adornment or a white dress, despite the hairdresser's attempts to persuade her. But the bride's sorrow was too profound. She settled for a simple hairstyle and basic skincare, agreeing with her

grieving groom not to hold any celebrations.

"There are many stories," added Najla, sweeping up the hair from the floor. "Every day, I see many women and hear many sad stories during the war."

Every time I returned from Najla's salon, I would take the longer route home, wanting to absorb the human details, the lives of those struggling beneath the weight of war, lives that cameras don't capture and news articles don't tell.

I was always searching for a way to write a story, a proposal that would cover these human-interest angles, but the scale of the massacres and ongoing bloodshed always tipped the balance.

Should I rush to write the story of the two girls who had their legs amputated in a bombing? Or the story of that young woman who lost her entire family and her ability to walk?

This is another conflict, where priorities clash: the priority of the story is for those whose lives are on the line, not for "sideline" details like Najla's Hair Salon.

And so my year of war passed. All the stories were priorities, and some stories were like a candle in the darkness, a light in the gloom, but the fighter's rest had not yet come.

"Education in Secret"

The thing that drained me the most, filled me with resentment and sadness, was depriving my daughter of her education.

All my hopes were pinned on my daughter, who was studying at a private school, achieving excellent grades. She had just started her third year when the war erupted and stopped everything. Education stopped, displaced people took refuge in schools, and the academic year was lost.

I can't leave the country, but my primary reason – if I could – would be to ensure my daughter's education. She was tired of sitting at home with nothing to do.

Somehow, my daughter got her right to education, and somehow I also managed to provide internet access at home after a lot of hard work. Many people helped.

After 3 p.m. every day, I would declare a state of emergency in the house. My daughter, Baniyas, would sit in front of my mobile phone or computer and log into Microsoft Teams for her daily online classes. Often, I would be out working at the hospital. But nothing could make me forget her class time, and I would stay connected with all the WhatsApp groups, sending everything to my husband or sister at home to ensure Baniyas could attend her classes.

We often faced difficulties with the internet connection, problems with connectivity and downloads, but we never gave up. I saw my daughter's education as my last and only winning card in this war.

We continued like this for five months. Once, a windowpane shattered on Baniyas while she was attending class remotely. We had to evacuate our home more than once, and the sounds of shelling were ever-present, but we never retreated. We

wrote our assignments and submitted them on WhatsApp, printed textbooks at exorbitant prices, and in the end, we did it! My daughter is now in the fourth grade.

We deserve nothing but life and joy, and our hearts are full of love. I want to walk and scream in the street: Stop the war, people are tired.

This is a summary of a year of wandering among them, witnessing their suffering: we want nothing but for the war to stop. People are tired of their memories, of the bitter comparison with what they used to have. Some have maintained composure, adapting and innovating. Others have surrendered to fatigue, carrying burdens too heavy for mountains. Some have the energy but not the means; everything has become exorbitantly expensive.

Everything: from a handful of salt to a tent peg, to a nylon cover, even a potato, a tomato, an hour of internet access – everything is increasing in price except the value of human life here; their blood, their limbs, their bodies.

This is another summary of the war: there is no value for human beings here, no value for their pain, dreams, future, or even their feelings. People feel that the world sees them as nothing more than firewood burning, forgetting that they are made of flesh and blood!

Is there hope that this will change, even after a year?



A Year of Hell: Reporting from Gaza

□ Anas al-Sharif



Anas al-Sharif

A correspondent for Al Jazeera in the Gaza Strip, was one of the few journalists who continued to cover the northern part of Gaza. He received several threats from the Israeli army to stop his coverage and prevent him from documenting a series of massacres during the war. On December 2023 ,11, the Israeli army targeted Anas's home and family in Jabalia refugee camp, resulting in the tragic death of his father.

A Year of Hell: Reporting from Gaza

Anas al-Sharif

Anas al-Sharif, a correspondent for Al Jazeera in the Gaza Strip, was one of the few journalists who continued to cover the northern part of Gaza. He received several threats from the Israeli army to stop his coverage and prevent him from documenting a series of massacres during the war. On December 11, 2023, the Israeli army targeted Anas's home and family in Jabalia refugee camp, resulting in the tragic death of his father.

After a full year of covering this genocidal war – a year of displacement, hunger, bombardment, and relentless massacres – I cannot fathom how to describe the extent of the pain and suffering we have endured. I honestly don't know where to begin or end this narrative. Perhaps it will take days, months, even years, to tell this story in its entirety.

The Story Begins

The story begins at the very moment the war erupted. I began working as a journalist to cover the events unfolding on the ground, including the continuous bombing and massacres committed by the Israeli occupation. My colleague, Tamer Almisshal, contacted me and asked me to start filming reports for Al Jazeera. It was not an easy task, especially since I had been a still photographer for many years and had no prior experience in television reporting. Nevertheless, I

made a firm decision to embark on this path, to convey the suffering of the Palestinian people in the northern Gaza Strip to the world.

We moved from one area to another, and whenever we thought we had found safety, we were confronted with even greater danger. We were displaced more than twenty times, trapped in hospitals, alleys, and streets. Some of us survived by sheer miracle, while we lost many dear colleagues, including Ismail al-Ghoul and Rami al-Rifai, among others who gave their lives for our homeland and our cause. They are heroes who sacrificed themselves to convey the truth, symbols of courage and sacrifice.

Today, everyone who practices this profession is in danger without any real protection. Perhaps, as I write these words, I and my colleagues may be deliberately targeted at any moment, despite wearing identification that clearly marks us as journalists.

Ismail Al-Ghoul⁸

Ismail al-Ghoul insisted on staying in the northern Gaza Strip to cover the unfolding events, despite being deemed a "legitimate target" in the language of the occupation. An Israeli missile deliberately struck him, and neither international law nor his press vest offered him any protection. My connection with Ismail went beyond mere collegueship; we shared a deep friendship. He attended my wedding in 2016, and I attended his. We worked together in several media institutions,

⁸ Ismail Al Ghoul, a 27-year-old Palestinian journalist working for Al Jazeera Arabic, was killed in an Israeli drone strike with his colleague Rami Al Refee as they were leaving Al Shati refugee camp, near Gaza City on July 31, 2024

and when the war broke out, Al Jazeera brought us together again. We refused to evacuate to the south, determined to remain in Gaza and the north to report the truth.

Ismail was a brother, a friend, an irreplaceable companion. I saw him for the last time just a day before his martyrdom. We had planned to meet in Gaza City, but instead, I received a call informing me of an attack on Al-Jalaa Street.

I reached out to Ismail to postpone our meeting, as he was covering an event near the strike site. While heading to report on the bombing, I was horrified to learn that the targeted house belonged to my sister. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that my entire family was there. Ismail covered the event and prepared his report on the massacre. Then, he helped my family and my sister's family, including children who miraculously survived, move to a "safer" location – a relative term under such circumstances. Afterward, he returned to his lodging at the Baptist Hospital.

I was in Al-Saftawi, Gaza City, when I heard the devastating news. Al Jazeera Mubasher correspondent Mohamed Shaheen rushed to me, shouting, "They bombed Ismail!" I ran out barefoot, unable to process what was happening, and hurried to the scene. At the Baptist Hospital, I found Ismail, lifeless, beside our colleague Rami Al-Rifi. Both had perished in the most horrific way.

Ismail's death was a massive shock. The brutality of war hit me harder than ever after his loss. His absence left me overwhelmed with grief and pain. I lost a brother and a partner, yet I feel a duty to carry on his legacy – continuing his mis-

sion to reveal the truth and share our people's suffering with the world.

In Gaza, tragedy spares no one. We, the journalists, were no different from everyone else. We lived through every detail of danger – displacement, siege, and the gnawing hunger that wore us down. We were part of the people, sharing the same pain and facing the same threats. The Israeli occupation made no distinction; everyone was a target – men, women, children, and journalists alike. Despite this unrelenting agony, we felt a profound responsibility to report the truth. It was a trust that outweighed fear, and despite the risks, we never hesitated to pursue our mission.

Shattered Lives, Shattered Bodies

In Gaza, there is no safe haven. Everyone lives under the constant threat of the Israeli death. Entire families are wiped out, while others remain buried beneath the rubble. The wounded perish in hospitals due to a lack of care. We have seen orphans and widows, witnessed the deaths of colleagues – journalists, doctors, engineers, teachers – and the imprisonment of many others.

We experienced horrors that words can neither describe nor erase. We saw massacres unfold daily against children, women, and entire families. Limbs were amputated without anesthesia, and children were buried alive beneath debris as their desperate cries for help echoed around them. We heard children calling for their parents to rescue them from the flames, but no one could respond. Hundreds of mutilated bodies piled high before our eyes – an indelible imprint on my memory.

Among all the atrocities I've witnessed, the massacre at Al-Tabi'een School⁹ stands as the most harrowing. One pre-dawn night, I received a call about yet another massacre. Without stopping to put on shoes, I rushed out in my house clothes, heading toward the site despite the surrounding dangers.

As I neared the school, the road was littered with lifeless bodies. Inside, I was engulfed by a devastating scene: torn and dismembered human remains scattered everywhere. Every step I took felt unbearably heavy; there was no clear ground, no safe footing, free of the victims' remains. In the darkness, we relied on flashlights to navigate. As the full extent of the devastation came into focus, I froze, clutching my head, overwhelmed by the enormity of the tragedy. Words failed me – the scene was beyond anything language could convey.

We faced an excruciating dilemma: to respect the sanctity of the bodies and remains around us, or to step between them to document the crime. With heavy hearts, we chose to move through the shattered remains to capture the enormity of this massacre. Pieces of children, women, the elderly, and young men lay intertwined on the ground, side-by-side, as they had been when they gathered for dawn prayers. This massacre left a deep wound in my soul, one that time can never heal.

Another image that remains vivid in my memory is the haunting sound of survivors trapped beneath the rubble, calling

⁹ On 10 August 2024, Israel struck the Al-Tabi'een school located in eastern Gaza City, which was hosting displaced Palestinians seeking shelter there. At least 100 Palestinians were killed and scores were injured, with several victims being trapped in the school as the fire spread.

out for help. Their voices reached us, yet the civil defense teams stood powerless to rescue them due to a lack of resources. To watch them die slowly under the debris, unable to intervene, is a scene no words can capture or convey.

In Gaza, there is no sanctuary. Hospitals, streets, shelters, homes, schools, and even tents – all are potential targets. There is no refuge, no safety, only the constant shadow of danger. Yet, we are compelled to document these atrocities, even if this costs us our lives. This is an open-ended war – endless massacres, relentless shelling, and the systematic extermination of an entire population.

As journalists, we live through this catastrophe just like everyone else. We face the same threats and endure the same risks, yet we know that our voice is our most powerful weapon. Even if our lives are the price, we will not stop documenting the truth. This is our duty and our responsibility to our people and their suffering. It is this sense of purpose that drives us to keep going, no matter how great the danger.

The Price of Reporting

During this war, I received several threatening messages from Israeli occupation officers. They tried to pressure me into ceasing my work with Al Jazeera, urging me to stop reporting and evacuate to the southern Gaza Strip. Yet, these relentless threats did not deter me from continuing my mission. My choice was clear from the outset: with the unwavering support of my family and my father, I decided to stay in the northern region and document the events, no matter the cost.

Even as danger closed in and Israeli forces invaded Jabalia camp from the west, attempting to push deeper, I stayed to report on the incursion and the massacres they committed. Israeli forces besieged civilians and displaced people in a shelter, arresting some and forcing others to flee under a hail of gunfire. Despite the peril, I remained nearby, documenting everything. Moments after finishing a report on these events and broadcasting it on Al Jazeera, I received news that both my home and my family's home had been bombed.

The price was steep. Perhaps the occupation thought targeting my family would silence me. But they didn't know that my father's death didn't break me – it only strengthened my resolve to continue down the path I had chosen. His final wish for me was clear: to keep fulfilling my duty and to be a voice that speaks the truth, no matter the circumstances.

I won't deny that I was deeply shocked. I had always known the occupation would retaliate against me and Al Jazeera's reporting, and I was fully aware of their treacherous nature. Still, the news of my father's deliberate killing hit with a pain I can hardly describe. During the 50 days of war up to that moment, I had seen him only once or twice. I carried an immense longing to be with him, and I felt that he left this world yearning to see me too. Our third meeting was the most bittersweet – it was to bid him farewell as a martyr.

The grief overwhelmed me, an indescribable weight of sorrow. I had desperately wished to embrace him alive, but instead, I laid him to rest with pride and unwavering faith in Allah's will.

Despite the pain of loss, I stood in front of the camera mere minutes after his death to report the news of his martyrdom and cover his funeral. I did not hesitate to continue my work because I understood that conveying our suffering to the world is a duty I cannot abandon, even when I became a part of the tragedy myself. Through my grief, I continued reporting, knowing that our voice must be heard – no matter the cost.

The Cost of Survival

The war has obliterated every basic necessity of life. My testimony about what I've experienced and witnessed may not fully capture the grim reality, but it offers a glimpse into a tragedy that has devastated everything – fields and homes, stone and tree, every facet of existence.

The conditions we endured while covering the war are unparalleled. I doubt any journalist in the world has faced what we have gone through this past year. Beyond the constant threat of being targeted, hunger gnawed at our bodies throughout the long months of war.

My colleagues and I desperately searched for anything to stave off starvation, but we couldn't even find a single kilogram of flour. Occasionally, we managed to get some nuts or candy, but they ran out quickly, leaving even the simplest of things a rare treat. For four consecutive days, we couldn't secure a single proper meal. Often, we stood in front of the camera, hungry and exhausted.

I know I've failed to describe many of the massacres I witnessed, and I haven't been able to fully convey the depths of starvation we endured. This particular experience defies description. It's impossible to articulate how people survive, how my colleagues and the people of Gaza endure the relentless bombing and hunger simultaneously.

There were times when I found myself wandering among the mangled bodies of children and women in a state of numbness. I adapted to this grim reality, yet there were scenes I could hardly bear. Still, I forced myself to carry on, to deliver the message.

Some might argue that risking our lives for a story or an image isn't worth it. But we know that without taking those risks, the world would remain oblivious to what's happening here. My duty isn't just national; it's a moral and religious obligation – to convey the suffering of Gaza's people and the horrors they endure. While much of what we've documented has been met with silence, some massacres have stirred the world, even if only slightly, to support the victims.

A bitter year has passed since the start of this ongoing Israeli war of extermination against Gaza. Yet, I remain on the same path, truthfully reporting what unfolds, determined to show the world the reality we endure every day. Some may ask why I persist when nothing has changed, when the destruction continues unabated. My answer is simple: perhaps a single image, a story, a moment we capture will ignite the spark needed to end this war someday. But even if it doesn't for now, we will continue to bear

witness, to document the truth, and to demand that those responsible for these war crimes and atrocities are held accountable.

A black and white photograph of a destroyed building in Gaza, with a red border. The building has multiple floors and arched windows, many of which are missing or broken. Debris is scattered on the ground in the foreground. A crowd of people is visible in the middle ground, some standing and some sitting. The overall scene is one of devastation and suffering.

Images of Death in Gaza

□ Bilal Khaled



Bilal Khaled

A Palestinian photojournalist and graffiti artist from Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip, Bilal Khaled has worked as a photographer for international agencies and media outlets. Over the past decade, he has played a pivotal role in documenting Israeli assaults on Gaza. Most recently, he covered the war launched by Israel against the Palestinian people starting on October 7, 2023.

Images of Death in Gaza

Bilal Khaled

On October 7th, I wasn't in Gaza. I was in Doha, following the events on television and social media, like the rest of the world. But that day, I sensed this wasn't a routine escalation. I was certain we were on the brink of a devastating war, unlike anything the region had ever seen.

The "March of Return"

We in Gaza have a unique instinct for these moments; past wars have taught us how to read the signs. Israeli escalations typically begin with smaller incidents, like the burning balloons launched by young protesters during the March of Return¹⁰, followed by targeted airstrikes and the inevitable loss of life. But this time was different – the news spoke of abductions and large-scale attacks.

As a journalist, I was convinced that the Israeli military's response would surpass anything we had experienced before. Without hesitation, I booked my ticket and left Doha, embarking on an unplanned journey. I had been in the Qatari capital for only 20 days, but the decision was immediate and unshakeable. I felt, as a Palestinian journalist, that my

¹⁰ Great March of Return were a series of demonstrations held each Friday in the Gaza Strip near the Gaza-Israel border from 30 March 2018 until 27 December 2019, in which Israeli forces killed a total of 223 Palestinians. The demonstrators demanded that the Palestinian refugees must be allowed to return to lands they were displaced from in what is now Israel. They also protested against Israel's land, air and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip.

rightful place was there, at the heart of the unfolding events. Journalism for us is not just a profession – it's a calling. Let's be honest: we don't enter this field merely as a career; we do so because we carry a greater mission. We see our work as part of the struggle, a means of defending our cause.

But what truly compelled me to return was my family – my father, my mother, my siblings – all of whom live in Gaza. In those critical moments, I needed to be with them. I'd experienced the anxiety and fear of past wars, even if only for a day or two, and I knew how draining it could be. The uncertainty is overwhelming, not knowing what's happening back home. How could I endure watching this war from afar while my family was in danger? It was an unbearable thought.

We arrived in Egypt that evening and had to wait until morning at the border crossing, where the crowds were overwhelming. By the time we entered Gaza, it was around 10 p.m.

The scene at the border was unlike any I had witnessed before. The usual bustle was replaced by an eerie silence and stillness, broken only by the drone of surveillance aircraft overhead and the distant rumble of explosions.

This was my welcome back to Gaza: the unspoken words of war echoing across the sky.

Straight to the Field

There was no time to pause, no moment to catch my breath or process what was unfolding around me. I headed straight

to the field, camera in hand. The first story I documented was the massacre of the Daloul family.

We were driving from Khan Younis to Gaza City – before the city was split into northern and southern zones. My colleague Yasser Qdeih and I were in the car when suddenly, near Salah Al-Din Street, we came under fire. We stopped immediately and ran toward the site of the strike.

What we found was harrowing: a house reduced to rubble, its residents trapped beneath. The rescue efforts had just begun. I still can't find the words to fully describe the scene.

I vividly remember the moment when a woman and her daughter were pulled from the debris. The mother, dressed in a prayer garment of black and green, was either embracing or sitting beside her little girl. Her face was turned toward her daughter, their arms outstretched beneath the collapsed roof that had entombed them. The recovery was painstakingly slow, hindered by the lack of equipment and the overstretched civil defense teams occupied at countless other disaster sites.

The residents of the camp did everything they could to help, armed with nothing but their bare hands, a few rudimentary tools, and immense determination. I'll never forget the image of the entire community coming together to lift a massive concrete beam. That scene became a powerful symbol of unity and resilience, embodying the spirit of solidarity that fuels their survival. It was as if they were telling the world: Despite the pain and loss, we stand firm. We endure.

Over the years, I've worked with Anadolu Agency, Al Jazeera English, Agence France-Presse (AFP), and ABC News. During this war, I captured countless poignant images, but one in particular remains etched in my memory. It was of a man carrying a young girl pulled from the rubble, his face contorted in anguish as he cried out: "Netanyahu, child killer!" The image was hauntingly powerful – the girl looked as though she were still alive, amplifying the emotional weight of the scene and touching everyone who saw it.

As a photojournalist, my primary duty is to document moments and bring them to the world's attention. Yet, I've always felt that my first obligation is to help the victims before ever raising my camera. This balance between humanity and professionalism defines the essence of my work.

When I work in the field, my first instinct is to help the victims. For us, as photojournalists, we must act quickly, always keeping our cameras ready and staying alert. The sound of an explosion or a cry for help immediately sets us in motion – either to call for assistance or to contribute directly until rescue teams arrive. Often, we are the first to reach the scene of devastation, arriving before ambulances or civil defense teams. In those moments, we find ourselves sifting through the rubble, pulling out bodies, or trying to save those still clinging to life.

As a photojournalist, there are times when setting the camera aside becomes necessary. Journalism is fundamentally a human endeavor, a voice for the voiceless. But when someone is dying before your eyes, the value of a photograph pales in comparison to the value of their life.

I recall this vividly during the Al-Taj massacre¹¹ in Gaza on October 25, 2023. A residential block on Al-Jalaa Street was struck by over ten missiles and barrel bombs, obliterating 13 floors and leveling the entire area. The scene resembled the aftermath of a massive earthquake in one of Gaza's most densely populated neighborhoods. Bodies were scattered everywhere, entangled with the debris and blanketed in gray dust. We stumbled over them while surrounded by fires, as if we had stepped into a hell.

One image, etched forever in my memory, was of a child's hand protruding from beneath the rubble, while the anguished cries of women echoed from nearby towers. The terror and pain of that moment were so overwhelming that neither I nor my colleagues could raise our cameras to document what we were witnessing.

The Powerlessness of the Camera

This feeling of helplessness when it comes to capturing suffering on camera has haunted me many times, especially when devastated families come to us after the martyrdom of their loved ones. How can I possibly describe this pain? How can I grasp it or express it in words? I don't think words can truly encompass such feelings. These are moments that seem as if they've been ripped straight from hell itself, where sorrow and destruction intertwine in a scene that is hard to forget.

Amidst this chaos, I must find the right angle, the most im-

¹¹ The attack on the Al-Taj tower in Gaza City, bombed on 25 October, killed 101 people, including 44 children and 37 women, and injured hundreds.

pactful story. There are stories I will never forget, like the family crushed by a tank, which besieged and shelled their house for an entire night. The children arrived at the hospital broken, only to be detained by the occupation forces. And there's the story of the woman who was martyred along with her newborn child. There are also stories of entire families who were martyred in a short period, each story carrying a different character and expressing a unique suffering. We don't just treat these events as stories; we know these families by name, like the Hamdan family, the Abu Muheis family, and the Ghanem family. Each family has lost several members, and the massacre leaves a different mark on each place.

As time passed after the war, I began to deeply understand the power of images and their immense impact, especially with the growing global solidarity with Gaza through social media. My photos and others became powerful symbols in the demonstrations and protests that swept the world, used as graffiti and posters on streets across different continents.

One artistic movement that had a significant impact was "Unmute Gaza,"¹² which was inspired by my photos, leading to a widespread solidarity campaign. It was amazing to see how images became a powerful tool to express pain and resistance, and how they united voices from around the world in a single call for justice and freedom.

¹² The "Unmute Gaza" is a creative movement using the art of photojournalism as a foundation to recreate their imagery for a global print-and-paste campaign, in order to bring attention to the atrocities in Gaza.

My obsession was not merely to document a fleeting moment for the daily news, but rather to seek images that would be etched in the collective memory, haunt the perpetrators, and remain a witness to the genocidal massacres. I was looking for those moments that encapsulated the meanings of life and death; scenes of painful farewells, the last embrace, and flashes of life emerging from the heart of death. At the same time, I was very careful to respect people's privacy, especially women whose hijabs might be revealed in a moment of weakness. In such a moment, one is obliged to respect their modesty.

I was also careful to capture authentic images without people being aware of it, as their reactions might change if they knew a camera was present.

One morning, I would wake up completely exhausted from filming the endless massacres, especially when the sound of explosions would wake me up at 3 a.m. to discover that the massacres were still ongoing. The schedule was incredibly busy; we would move from one funeral to another, and each time there was a different story for each martyr, each carrying their own pain and suffering.

On some days, we would photograph up to 300 martyrs, and it was not easy to comprehend what was happening. Dealing with corpses, inhaling the smell of blood during the day, and then moving at night to bombing sites – all of this carried an enormous psychological burden. We would move as soon as we heard of any targeting, documenting everything with the camera's lens, in an attempt to capture the harsh reality that no words can describe.

The Price of a Picture

I was targeted repeatedly during the war. On one occasion, while I was capturing footage of a bombing, I was surprised to find that the adjacent building was targeted in what seemed like a deliberate attack. In the photos and videos, you can see the shrapnel raining down on us. We lost two members of the civil defense team. This targeting was just a brief glimpse of the danger that loomed over us; our movements between Gaza and the city were constantly subjected to direct targeting by artillery, aircraft, and drones.

During the war, our house was targeted three times in succession, clearly demonstrating an intention to intimidate me. It became clear to us that targeting journalists and their homes and families was a goal in itself.

We witnessed the targeting of our colleagues, Moamen al-Sharafi¹³, Mohammed Abu al-Qamsan, Wael al-Dahdouh, and Mohammed Abu Hatab¹⁴. We witnessed them coming under fire along with their families. So, even if you are not the direct target, they seek to inflict psychological harm on you and pressure you to stop your work. They focused on targeting the elite – thinkers, doctors, and professionals – with the aim of destroying an entire generation and erasing any trace that could contribute to exposing the crimes or rebuilding life in the Gaza Strip. Anyone wearing a press vest

¹³ An Al Jazeera correspondent who has lost 22 members of his family in an Israeli air attack on the home in which they were sheltering in the Gaza Strip. Al Sharafi's parents Mahmoud and Amina, his siblings and their spouses, as well as nephews and nieces were among those killed in the attack, on Dec 6, 2023.

¹⁴ A journalist and correspondent for Palestine TV, Mohammed Abu Hatab was killed along with 11 members of his family in an Israeli airstrike on their home in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza Strip on November 2, 2023.

and helmet is considered a legitimate target, to the extent that some people used to joke, saying: "Don't stand next to a journalist, even if death in Gaza is distributed equally!"

We were constantly facing threats: they would call a specific person, a specific journalist, and say, "You, you, you, and so-and-so, were in such-and-such place today. Be careful." It was certainly not out of concern, but rather a way of threatening, letting you know they were fully aware of what you were doing and monitoring your movements.

Not only that, but our family homes were being bombed directly, and it was impossible to conclude that it was random. My family survived two missiles.

Neither intimidation nor the messages I received from the Israeli army deterred me from doing my job. I worked with the American press, acutely aware of their editorial line and its bias towards the Israeli narrative. Therefore, I tried to convey the strongest images that truly captured the genocidal war.

Here, I want to emphasize a crucial point: social media platforms, despite all the restrictions, provided us with a vital outlet through which we could reach the world and confront the Israeli narrative.

Western legacy media often paints a distorted picture, their narratives shaped by agendas and propaganda. But social media offers a raw, unfiltered view, straight from the people on the ground – Palestinian influencers, journalists, and ordinary citizens. These are platforms where voices can rise, where solidarity can ignite, as we saw when students

in America and elsewhere took to the streets to protest the atrocities in Gaza.

Television interviews, especially on American channels, are often carefully curated to align with their political biases. But when you follow events directly from the field, you hear the truth, unvarnished and undeniable, because Palestinians themselves are telling their stories.

Yet, even social media, our lifeline to the world, is not without its limitations. My account has been restricted countless times, my posts deleted, my voice silenced. But we refuse to be silenced. We create backup accounts, we find new ways to share our stories, because we know that Meta and its platforms are actively suppressing Palestinian voices. This censorship is just one more obstacle we face in our struggle to be heard.

Life and Death

During the Israeli war on Gaza, my focus was on all aspects of the genocide, from indiscriminate bombing and displacement to bloody farewells and heartbreaking loss, to horrific injuries and the shortage of medical staff, and humanitarian crises such as famine, water shortages, and the lack of health services. We also documented scenes of daily life; how people welcomed the month of Ramadan in tents, how they decorated their simple homes and celebrated their joys despite the conditions.

We photographed people getting married in UNRWA schools and in tents, and we documented how they turned their tents

into temporary homes, and how they gathered around the suhoor¹⁵ table amidst harsh conditions. Our efforts were directed at documenting the steadfastness of the people of Gaza and their determination to maintain life despite all the destruction and hardship. These scenes that highlight the inner strength of the people upset the occupation, which could not bear to see the spirit of life manifested in the midst of genocide.

I remember a person who worked at a music institute and decided to provide music lessons to children in UNRWA schools on a regular basis, an initiative that reflects the degree of challenge and determination in the face of the occupation. It wasn't limited to teaching children the basics; it also included providing lessons in music and art, including workshops to teach children drawing and art under the sun and in tents.

Capturing Resilience Amidst Ruin

We documented all these scenes, capturing moments of defiance and hope amidst the destruction. We sought to shed light on the crimes, documenting every atrocity, every life lost, and every story of hope and resilience. These artistic and educational initiatives, despite the conditions of genocide, were a powerful symbol of the spirit of resistance and creativity that people in Gaza continue to exhibit.

Images are usually more powerful in conveying human suffering because they capture the entire scene. Sometimes,

¹⁵ Suhoor (سحور) is the pre-dawn meal Muslims eat before starting their daily fast during the month of Ramadan. It is typically consumed before the fajr (dawn) call of prayer.

words cannot do justice to a picture. You cannot express with words the sound of a scream, the moment of parting, the intertwined hands, the bloodstains on the hands of parents and children, or the scale of a building that crushed people inside. It's impossible to accurately describe all this in words. The brief stories that images carry present a larger picture better than writing, and each person finds their own stories within the image, reflecting different experiences.

Sometimes, I discover a new story when I look at a photo and find someone else telling me about the background of the image. The more I zoom in on the image, the more details are revealed, like a photo of a funeral procession at a hospital that shows a woman making bread in the background. What can be said about that image is that it's difficult to imagine the level of contradiction in it, something that cannot be conveyed in words.

Now, as the war enters its second year, I still remember almost every detail. I cannot talk about just one image, one scene, or one tragedy, but let me conclude this testimony with this story:

At the beginning of the siege, we were at Nasser Hospital, where we, the Al Jazeera team, were among the last media crews to leave. The hospital was surrounded on three sides, and we were accompanied by a team of other journalists.

A little girl arrived at the hospital on a donkey cart, injured in her leg, crying all the way. She entered the hospital, and I expected someone to take care of her, but after about half an hour, I found her lying on the floor. A doctor had written

a note for her requesting an X-ray, but where were the doctors? Most of them had left due to threats from the occupation, while only a few remained to provide medical care.

I asked the doctor about the girl, and he told me that she needed an X-ray and that we needed someone to take her to the designated room. I volunteered to take her, and when we entered the room, I saw her younger brother and sister sitting on the floor. They saw the girl and said, "This is Arwa." The girl was lying on the floor, wearing a gray jacket and a mask, and when she raised her eyes, they met mine. It was a shocking scene: the girl whose picture had gone viral, wearing a mask with a black eye due to blood pressure. For the first time, I felt that all the destruction and the body parts I had seen could not compare to the pain I felt because of this little girl.

The girl didn't realize the magnitude of the disaster that had befallen her. In her innocence, she talked about the incident as if she were telling an ordinary story. When I asked her, "What happened to you? And why is your eye like that?" she replied simply, "We were sleeping at night, and then the tank came and climbed on our house." The tank passed over them three times while they were asleep, crushing their bodies and their parents under its heavy weight. Their father, before hearing the sound of the tank, had tried to move them away and say goodbye, but in the end, he was killed.

Despite their injuries, it was clear that the child and her siblings didn't fully grasp what had happened. They were playing with a plastic toy, unaware that their father would never return. I bitterly wondered, "Who will take care of these chil-

dren?" They were alone in the hospital, and when I learned they would be staying there, I went home and brought them some clothes and food. I would visit them every hour or two, follow up on their condition with the doctors, and help the little girl with the broken leg, taking her to the bathroom and staying with her.

Those tragic moments made me ponder deeply, "Why? What have these children done to deserve this?" They were so young, having seen so little of life, yet they experienced unimaginable horrors. Their mother was abroad, treating her brother who was battling cancer, while they had lost their father. Who would take care of them?

This story haunted me. I couldn't shake the image of that little girl, her innocence juxtaposed with the unimaginable horror she had endured. With no ophthalmologist available in Gaza to treat her, I knew I had to do something. I posted her photo and reached out to organizations who could help. Finally, after contacting the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a glimmer of hope emerged. The girl and her siblings were transferred to Qatar for the specialized medical care they desperately needed. She is recovering now, at least physically, but the scars of war run deep.

That Smell... That Sound

□ Alaa Abu Aisha





Alaa Abu Aisha

A Palestinian journalist based in Gaza, is a seasoned writer and trainer with 17 years of experience. Her work, primarily focused on journalistic storytelling, has been featured in numerous Arabic publications.

That Smell... That Sound

Alaa Abu Aisha

This entire experience was a maelstrom of chaos, mirroring the events that overwhelmed us all when the massacres made Gaza their home, leaving us to brace ourselves for death. We wrote our children's full names on their legs and arms, hoping against hope that survivors might be able to piece together the fragments of their stories if the worst happened.

On Friday, October 13, 2023, an evacuation order descended upon the city, dragging me and hundreds of thousands of others into a new chapter of our long "Nakba." It was an endless road of despair, where olive trees were shattered on their branches, buildings crumbled, and the stench of death clung to the air, mercilessly harvesting lives.

On the road to the southern valley (Gaza Valley) – following the first Israeli evacuation order – people walked and rode, heads bowed under the constant threat of gunfire, hurrying their steps! Where to? No one answered... no one knew! I remember a man carrying the weight of the city on his back, weeping, "It took me 40 years to build my house... in a moment, they destroyed it." A young woman, whose wedding was just days away, cried out, "My groom is a martyr." Children clung to their mothers' dresses and ran, carrying school bags filled with everything except books and toys. They cried, calling for their fathers who had gone to buy bread in the morning and never returned.

Amidst these surreal scenes, an elderly woman, unable to keep up with the desperate exodus, sat on the back of a truck, wailing and slapping her cheeks. She begged her son to turn back, shouting at the terrified people fleeing south, "Don't make the same mistake our parents made!" Then, gesturing with her hands, she pleaded, "Go back, my children... go back."

The Echo of Her Words

How could we have listened? How could we have understood then that what she said was true? How could we have thought clearly while death loomed over Gaza, while we fled on a path with no end in sight? We were all enacting the role of Khaled Taja, but in a new Taghreba,¹⁶ believing the departure would be short, that the whole ordeal would last "just a couple of days, and we'll be back."

We arrived in Rafah, in the far south of the Gaza Strip, about seven hundred meters from the Egyptian border. I didn't sleep that night, listening to the hallucinations of my eldest daughter, Tuqa (11 years old), who was calling for her friend Mayar amidst a torrent of words I couldn't understand.

Mayar had been martyred in her sleep five months before the Israeli genocide began. She was killed during an Israeli bombing in the dead of night, the first martyr in a five-day aggression that began on May 9, 2023.

¹⁶ Al-Taghreba al-Falasteniya (التغريبة الفلسطينية) is a Syrian historical drama television series that depicts the Palestinian exodus (Nakba) in 1948 and the subsequent displacement and struggles of Palestinians. The series, which aired in 2004, gained widespread popularity across the Arab world and became a cultural touchstone for its poignant portrayal of Palestinian suffering and resilience.

Morning broke on tears dried on Tuqa's cheek. She opened her eyes and surprised me with a question: "Mom, if someone misses someone, can God bring them together soon?" I put my hand on my heart, its beats turned to stone. I couldn't utter a word. I was consumed by grief.

On the sixth floor of a building that swayed to the rhythm of missile and shell explosions, I spent five months. I'm not exaggerating when I say that I was isolated from the world. I literally only heard the sounds of explosions tearing through the quiet of the night, Mayar's name in Tuqa's nightmares, and the trembling voice of that old woman who kept saying, "Go back, my children... go back."

I could only smell the smoke of burning firewood, lit by women to cook dough on the roofs of houses spared by the shelling, and the smoke of recycled cooking oil emanating from the exhausts of taxis after the occupation prevented fuel from entering Gaza. And the smell of blood wafted between the lines of the stories and reports that reached me for publication in the "Nawa" network, affiliated with the "Filastiniyat" women's media institution, where I work as a journalist.

Between four walls, with a complete cut-off of electricity and the internet, and sometimes even the communication network, I was documenting the annihilation from afar. I berated myself every moment for not being in the field, witnessing the stories of death firsthand. I didn't live the experience on the ground, but I realized that I had lived the experiences of all the journalists who wrote for "Nawa."

I could smell the scent of death in every description of a martyred body, and I listened to the heartbeats of the bereaved as they talked about the last words spoken, the last moments of laughter. I was like any other journalist; displaced, dreaming of return with every passing day, behind a screen that flickered with news of death every four hours.

I borrowed a laptop, its battery on its last legs. I sent it to charge at my colleague Mona's house, which had solar panels. A few hours later, the device returned fully charged, and in its bag, a flash drive crammed with newly edited files that Mona had extracted from the organization's private mail – destined for "Nawa."

I pressed the power button with a heavy heart, imagining myself as a 1970s office worker, placing a handkerchief under his turban, tucking morning newspapers under his arm, and swatting away flies with an old rag.

I sat up straight on the floor, remembering my large desk in my elegant living room, crowded with antiques. I placed the laptop on a cushion and flipped through the files of stories and reports written by female journalists who worked with us on a piece-rate basis.

These were different stories, united by a single spirit, "as if they were writing a farewell will and not conveying a story." For the first time in 17 years of journalistic work, I wondered about the purpose of writing in the age of "neutrality"? And I began...

In editing the stories of the "annihilation," I wasn't just writing; I was pouring my sadness between the lines without sub-

jecting it to a specific editorial philosophy or writing theories. I was straightforward in my limited goals: the sorrows of the ordinary person are a thousand times more important than the laws of writing, no matter how beautifully disciplined they may seem on paper.

I admit that I am deeply affected by powerful words, by phrases that evoke tears and touch my heart. I feel the word the same way I feel danger, hope, or sadness, and I shift from the "grayness" of objectivity to the side of the victim – the human victim, guilty of nothing except being a child of Gaza. And then I finally understand that we write because words live longer, are more accurate in their descriptions, their letters fixed in the rock of time, returning to those who call upon them, even after a long while.

Amidst the overwhelming grief that bled from the lines, I often felt that I was just learning to write! I would put my head in my hands and stare, walking barefoot on the thorns of the "text," leaving my "blood" on the words to guide me back. These were stories that defied belief, stories about the "most moral army in the world," the least terrifying of which tells how a "police dog raped a prisoner in Sde Teiman¹⁷, according to the testimony of a recently released citizen from the southern Gaza Strip.

After a year of "genocide" I became part of the story. Under

¹⁷ Sde Teiman is an Israeli military base in the Negev desert near the Gaza Strip. During the war on Gaza, it was used as a detention camp where Palestinians were subjected to horrific abuse, including frequent and arbitrary violence, sexual assault, humiliation, deliberate starvation, forced deprivation of hygiene, sleep deprivation, restriction and punishment of religious practices, confiscation of personal belongings, and denial of adequate medical care. For further details, see B'Tselem's August 5, 2024 report, "Welcome to Hell" (https://www.btselem.org/publications/202408_welcome_to_hell).

fire, I was no longer just a formulator of beginnings, endings, and headlines. I saw myself in every story. I could smell the stench of corpses emanating from the morgue, and I could hear myself in the trembling voice of a child who told a colleague how tank tracks had crushed the body of her injured mother "alive," silencing her last screams, wiping away her "name" and her tears. I found myself identifying with a child who described trying to hide from the eyes of "quadcopter" drones¹⁸... I covered my face, trembling with him in the face of death raining down from the sky.

The Human Element in War Journalism

As a war journalist during times of "annihilation," I often struggled to find words that could adequately describe the "ugliness" I encountered in the stories I received. Stories of graves in homes and squares, of unknown martyrs with no mourners or witnesses; of dogs driven by hunger to eat the flesh of the dead; of long lines of people crying in front of a camp's toilet; of living in a piece of "hell"; of a child craving bread and meat; and of a bride who lost the love of her life on her wedding day.

I tried to treat editing as a mere profession, but I found myself dying as I reported on the martyrs' funerals, while their children mourned behind them. How could I be satisfied with merely polishing the text, removing redundancy, adding background information, and verifying facts, when I was accompanying the coffin itself, separated only by the

¹⁸ The Israeli army has used small drones (quadcopters) to fire on and kill Palestinians, according to the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor. These drones, often used for surveillance, have been weaponized by the Israeli army to inflict harm on civilians in Gaza.

timing of the annihilation, which had "given me extra time to breathe"?

Back in 2015, during the Jerusalem uprising, someone I trusted—a dear friend, a brother in arms—asked me to write his story if he were martyred. How could I betray that trust, reduce his life to a cold, impersonal account? How could I simply state, "He was martyred," and then clinically recount his words, his actions, as if his sacrifice meant nothing? No. I had to do more than that. I had to purify my pen, dust off the weariness, and pour out from my heart the words that would truly honor his memory, that would capture his spirit, his dreams, his unwavering commitment to the cause. I had to write words that would keep his name alive, that would ensure his sacrifice was never forgotten.

The reports and stories that reached me daily were varied, some painting vivid pictures in my mind, others leaving me grasping for details. This was understandable, given the scarcity of visual material amidst the chaos and destruction. But I had to do it, to bring those stories to life, even without the internet, even when the words felt inadequate. I had to become a creator, not just an editor, transforming words into images, breathing life into the narratives of those who were suffering.

How can one describe the burning alive of a disabled person in a school-turned-shelter without capturing the trembling legs of their father, forced to stand in line with other detainees, powerless to save his child? How can I convey his helplessness as he watched the flames engulf

the room where his loved one slept? How can I ignore his silent tears, knowing that any outcry would have meant certain death?

I believe that editing and writing are intertwined, a dance between the "whole" and the "part," as media theories suggest. Media cannot achieve its purpose without shaping the message, without thinking, expressing, and conveying facts through symbols that resonate with the audience.

But it wasn't easy. I had to find focus amidst the chaos, summon the right words from the depths of my vocabulary, all while surrounded by my four children, including two-year-old twins, who clung to me, trembling with fear every time a rocket screamed overhead.

I had to finish the work before the laptop battery died and the sun set, always ready to comfort my children after a nearby bombing. I had to be a mother, a journalist, a survivor, all at once. I cooked on firewood, scrubbed mountains of laundry on the floor, washed dishes with a makeshift water bottle, and constantly checked the street to make sure the donkey-drawn water tank hadn't forgotten us.

After two months of this annihilation, I finally got a SIM card. I was connected to the world again, climbing to the roof each morning to catch a faint internet signal, surveying the devastated city. Looking at the tide of displaced people camped at the border, I thought of Mahmoud Darwish's words, describing the homeland as "the house, the mulberry tree, the chicken coop, the smell of bread, and the first sky." Now, of all that, we had only the sky... and a tent.

Ignoring the roar of warplanes overhead, I frantically checked the network's email. I found messages from our colleagues, their words filled with apologies for the delays and difficulties of working amidst the war and displacement.

Winter descended, heavy and unforgiving, mirroring the struggle of working under fire. I longed to connect with the writers, to clarify missing information, to discuss a phrase that didn't quite convey its meaning, to confirm the place and time of an event. But communication was sporadic, unreliable. We were working to document the annihilation, not for publication in the traditional sense, but to bear witness, to ensure that the stories of our people would not be erased.

A new style of writing emerged from the ashes, a style steeped in despair. It was as if a spirit of grief breathed life into every scene, every word. These were not just stories; they were cries of anguish, testaments to the relentless brutality of the war.

And yet, amidst the despair, there were glimmers of hope, songs of resilience. Writers, displaced from their homes, wrote about art, music, Ramadan decorations, and holidays celebrated in tents. They wrote about adaptation, about learning, about the enduring spirit of resistance. I didn't tamper with their words, I didn't try to extinguish their light. I knew that the world, watching Gaza die, needed to hear the song of life that persisted within its wounded heart.

On February 29, 2024, I left Gaza. I sought safety, but found myself consumed by a different kind of fear. The nights in this land of exile were haunted by the ghost of the old wom-

an, her voice echoing in my ears: "My child, come back." Guilt gnawed at me. I was alive, sheltered, while my loved ones in Gaza suffered.

On the other side of the crossing, I heard the weak voice of my uncle, a survivor of the first Nakba, asking, "How are you, my son?" Words failed me. I wept silently, knowing that language belonged to those who had endured far more than I.

I returned to editing the stories, the guilt of leaving eased by the knowledge that I was still playing a part, however small, in preserving the voices of those who had suffered. Their stories, their pain, their resilience, were more important than any stylistic rule or editorial guideline. We write because words endure, their letters etched in the rock of time, echoing through the ages, ensuring that the stories of our people will never be forgotten.



The Meaning of Writing in Times of Annihilation

□ Amani Shninou



Amani Shninou

An independent Palestinian journalist from the Gaza Strip, collaborating with the International Journalists' Network and several other platforms. Her work focuses on digital media, women's empowerment, and shedding light on the challenges faced by women in the Arab world and media.

The Meaning of Writing in Times of Annihilation

Amani Shninou

Read this with your heart, not just your mind. Imagine the world tilting on its axis, the life you knew shattered in an instant. For a year now, we have been living in the wreckage of that upheaval, the pain and displacement a constant companion. We try to grasp the enormity of it all, but the mind simply recoils.

Days bleed into one another, each one heavy with unimaginable suffering. It is a burden for any human being, let alone a mother, a journalist, trying to make sense of the chaos while shielding her children from its horrors.

It was October 7. The alarm rang at six, as it always did. I woke my children, prepared their school bags, and made breakfast. The familiar rhythm of life, the comforting routine. Then, the earth shook. The air filled with the piercing screams of rockets, launched from our land towards the occupied territories. Time seemed to stop. What was happening?

Fear choked me. Should I send my children to school? No. I couldn't. Not until I understood what was unfolding.

I tried to escape, to burrow back into sleep, to pretend this was all a nightmare. "It's just a passing escalation," I whispered to myself. "It will end soon." But the explosions grew

louder, shattering any illusion of peace.

By midday, the phone was ringing with frantic warnings: "Get out! The situation is dangerous!" We lived close to the sea, a prime target. There was no time to hesitate.

We packed our bags, those grim companions of war, filled with the essentials of a life constantly under threat: identity papers, certificates, a few precious belongings. The same frantic ritual we had performed countless times before, seeking safety, fleeing the familiar comfort of home. Always with the hope that we would return, that we would pick up the pieces, that life would go on. "It's simple, we'll fix it," we would tell ourselves, clinging to the fragile thread of normalcy.

But this time was different. The escalation was swift and brutal. Within days, six journalists were killed. My task was to write a report on the situation, on the dangers faced by those of us who dared to tell the truth. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Not just because of the difficulty of gathering information amidst the chaos, but because every keystroke felt like a betrayal, every word a futile attempt to capture the immensity of the suffering. The electricity was gone, the internet barely functioned, and the shelling continued relentlessly. I wrote with tears streaming down my face, the weight of the world pressing down on me. We were all targets now, journalists and civilians alike. The daily death toll was a grim reminder of that reality, a reality that refused to stop.

Torn Between Roles

I felt torn between my roles as a mother and a journalist, acutely aware of the importance of protecting my children's mental health during these terrifying times. I tried to calm their fears; with every explosion, my young son would run and ask innocently, "What's that sound?" I didn't have an answer that could explain the horror to a small child, so I would hug him and try to distract him, play with him, sing and clap, hoping the sound of play and singing would drown out the shelling. But the truth was stronger, no matter how hard I tried to build a safe world for my children.

You think you're going through the worst of times, until days arrive that surprise you with something even worse, like that night of October 14, a night I'll never forget.

We had gathered as a family, trying to distract ourselves, to "invent" an atmosphere of warmth amidst the chaos. We sat by the light of a lamp, a substitute for the electricity that had been cut off. My brother and his family had joined us, fleeing the intense shelling in their area of Sheikh Radwan district northwest of the city center. They walked through back roads, searching for a safer place. That night wasn't just a family night; it was a moment where our fear and anxiety mingled, and we tried with all our might to appear strong, even though everything around us was collapsing.

Suddenly, at two in the morning, I received a notification on my phone, a copy of an email sent to employees of international organizations in Gaza from their managers, urging them to evacuate the north. I was shocked. I tried to calm

myself, to understand and verify the message. I messaged a friend who works for an international organization: "Did you receive this email? Is it real?"

Unfortunately, the news was true. I told my family about the evacuation order, and we started exchanging worried glances. "Is the Sinai plan real¹⁹, then? Is this a new Nakba?"

Trapped in a Nightmare

The days passed in a blur. All we knew was that we were still trapped in the vortex of the October 7 shock, as if time had stopped at that moment. Every passing day added to the pile of pain weighing down our souls. The traumas accumulated, building mountains of pain on our chests and suffocating our minds. We were unprepared, unable to comprehend what was happening, and the evacuation order came like a bolt from the blue, stealing sleep from our eyes and turning night into a continuous nightmare. We prayed Fajr with exhausted bodies and hearts heavy with worry, and then fatigue overcame us, unaware that that night would be our last in northern Gaza.

At noon, my husband came home, his decision clear: "We have to leave for the south." In a tone tinged with certainty, he told me, "Bring a bag with your papers and some clothes, that's enough for a few days. We'll be back soon, when the storm calms down."

¹⁹ This refers to statements by several Israeli officials, including former Brigadier General Amir Avivi and former Israeli ambassador to the United States Danny Ayalon, advocating for the forced expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza through the Rafah border crossing into Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. The plan was widely condemned as a violation of international law and human rights, that would result in the displacement of millions of Palestinians, and the ethnic cleansing of Gaza.

On the way south, people were running in the streets, clinging to any car: "Take us with you!" Thousands were walking, children and adults alike. The scene was heartbreaking, just like the scenes of the Nakba.

We almost ran out of fuel on the way, finally reaching the al-Zahra neighborhood²⁰, the last stop before Wadi Gaza. We stayed with relatives, but soon the place became crowded with more family members, and every meeting was a mix of sadness, tears, and hugs.

Three days passed without internet, isolated from the world, not knowing what was happening. Then came the news: the occupation is threatening to invade by land. And with the massacre at Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital that claimed hundreds of lives, we realized that this war was unlike any before, that the situation was escalating, and that the threat of a ground invasion was imminent.

We decided to leave Al-Zahra because the owners of the house were also thinking of leaving. Where could we go? Where does anyone go when they are not allowed to return to their homes? We decided to return to the Nasr area, reluctantly, with the "loss" of other options and the confusion that had taken over our minds. For five days, we didn't sleep. The area was almost empty of residents, and the shelling was shaking the entire building, the flares a constant presence in the sky around us.

²⁰ Al-Zahra, established in the 1990s by the late Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, was a neighborhood in northern Gaza known for its spacious homes, abundant green spaces, and recreational areas. It is located just north of the Wadi Gaza river.

On Friday, an officer from the occupation called and threatened us, saying that we had ten minutes to leave the Nasr area and go south, or they would bomb the building. The bags were ready at the door. We carried them and rushed downstairs, got in the car, and drove as far away from the place as possible. Then we asked each other: Where do we go now?

We were stunned, acting almost unconsciously, driven by shock and fear, and only the instinct of survival propelled us forward.

We went to the Al-Jalaa area, to an empty house completely devoid of everything, where we spent three more days of suffering. This time, the conditions were exacerbated by the lack of drinking water and other basic necessities.

On the third day, the occupation dropped leaflets on us demanding evacuation, after a terrifying night when we all huddled together in one room, expecting a rocket to strike at any moment. But thanks to God, we survived. The shelling had targeted a place near us.

To the south, then! We emptied the house again, and we agreed to go to Khan Yunis. Displacement taught us that priorities change, so we reduced our entire lives to a single bag, in a way that made us less burdened materially and heavier with pain.

We arrived in Khan Yunis, specifically Al-Mawasi. For the first time in my life, I visited this area of the Gaza Strip. It seemed strange, almost empty of people, and located on the coast.

On our way, we saw the traces of shelling on the rest areas and the new port. But in any case, we – the three families – were lucky because we found a house to rent, with electricity for an hour or two a day, and water, but without internet.

You can imagine how much we suffered trying to find out the news. The sound of shelling never stopped throughout the day. At first, we went through another difficult night; they dropped flares and smoke bombs on us, and we heard the "quadcopter" drones and warplanes hovering overhead. We prepared ourselves and packed our belongings again, ready for another possible evacuation. The hours passed slowly, and we wondered what would happen next. The hours were long, and we were consumed by questions: What is happening? And what do they want from us? I was able to find out through the internet on a SIM card that there was a security event, but no details. I tried to calm myself to calm my three children; Abd al-Rahman, the eldest, 10 years old, Kanaan, four, and Muhammad, three. They didn't understand why we left our home, why we moved from place to place. They were afraid, they didn't sleep well, and on this night, I kept them awake until midnight in anticipation of a sudden "escape."

The night passed, and I don't know how our minds endured all this fear.

The Haunting Reality of Displacement

We learned from our neighbors that our home had been bombed, and that loved ones had been killed, martyred. The faces of my friends won't leave me, one of them had two

daughters who looked like angels. She, her daughters, her husband, and her entire family were killed by Israel.

I tried to gather myself, to work, to formulate proposals. I would spend days writing a single word, conveying only the most important news. Being a freelance journalist means you don't have a job or financial stability. Your institution won't pay you without work, even when facing catastrophic circumstances like ours. They are interested in proposals that align with their agenda, and you struggle to find an internet signal and a moment when the bombing stops, which is rare.

Shock had taken hold of my hands and mind. How do you live through annihilation, leave your favorite places, lose people you love, and then simply continue? My home with all its details – its walls, the comfortable sofa where I loved to work and drink coffee, the balcony overlooking the sea – all of that was gone. How do I continue working? I tried to open my laptop and a word document every day, but the page remained blank for days. The very act of survival and continuing required so much energy, let alone work.

Despite the psychological and physical hardship, I was able to complete my reports and continue working, amidst other tasks that the war had created for us, like washing clothes by hand due to the lack of electricity, making bread and baking it in primitive clay ovens, and searching for food. We often ended up buying ready-made canned food due to the scarcity of vegetables, and if any were found, the prices were exorbitant.

"Sometimes I close my eyes and imagine myself in Gaza,

as it was before the war. I miss it, I miss its beauty and the fluidity of life there. I wish, I wish, and I won't complain about the traffic jams, that's a promise!"

A news item I heard on November 2nd... every time I remember it, I try to imagine what the eyewitness said: "Our houses were bombed with explosive barrels that I saw flying from the ground, then returned shattered, creating a large and deep hole."

I am talking here about the massacre of a residential square in al-Bureij, which is added to a series of massacres that took place in Jabalya, Sheikh Radwan, al-Shati camp, Beit Lahiya, and al-Nuseirat. Massacres in every street and every area, that have happened and are still continuing.

The news continues, we hear it as if it is part of an old memory, the voice of the announcer takes me back to long news bulletins I heard since childhood, the same words: killed, wounded, shelling, destruction, massacre..." I can almost feel the sound coming from the depths of my memory, then another break: "Where are the millions... where is the Arab nation?" A national song we memorized, all generations know it well in our country, and its question still has no answer.

Are you tired of reading? Well, we are exhausted, both physically and emotionally.

Sometimes, I feel hysterical as I ask myself: How did they take Gaza from us? Who gave them the right?

For years, we've encapsulated our homeland in the image of Gaza, its streets, its neighborhoods, its cafes, every place.

We never imagined that a war like this would change the geography of our first dream, our small homeland.

Another Displacement

After seven months in our rented home, the landlord decided to raise the rent to an astronomical amount – five thousand dollars. Only international organizations, after their offices were bombed, could afford such a sum. After a long search for another place to live, we ended up in a metal container, making it our sixth displacement into an utterly inhumane existence. In the early days, I fell ill, and my children contracted hepatitis. Naturally, there was no luxury of going to a doctor for a prescription. All we could do was ask a pharmacist for painkillers and search Google for treatments and preventive measures.

In a camp, even the simplest daily tasks become a struggle, especially with the lack of electricity and internet. Our reliance on weak cellular data as a substitute for the internet meant I had to go to an internet café or a spot with a signal in the street just to send a work email.

I remember a friend saying, "Freelance journalism is best for mothers, it gives them more freedom to practice their motherhood and work without being restricted by a schedule or time." But in this war, where I play multiple roles simultaneously, I realized that what my friend said wasn't entirely true. I used to think that the independence of freelancing would give me more freedom to tell the stories I deemed important, but I quickly discovered that this freedom carries a heavy burden, especially when many war stories are rejected. Perhaps the world has grown tired of our stories after a year,

and we are not the center of the universe as we think.

I was forced to work without any logistical support or protective equipment, and there was no team to transport or protect me. I was alone with my laptop, moving from place to place, either searching for the internet or fleeing sudden shelling.

One day, I was finishing an important story when the warplanes started firing without warning. We all froze for a few seconds, bullets hitting the eastern walls of the container. I don't know how I managed to close the laptop, put my children's shoes on, and run, holding their hands. We were forced to walk between the tents with our heads bowed because the bullets were chasing us, passing over our heads. Tanks advanced towards us alongside the planes, through narrow passages. We crossed until we reached the main street, took shelter behind parked trucks, and there was no time to think or decide where to go. We ran until we reached the Deir al-Balah area.

This was a temporary displacement. For three days, we barely slept, our souls kept running, escaping from ghosts, chased by bullets even in the camps.

We returned when the occupation withdrew from our area, and we continued our lives in the camp. Every morning, we send our mobile phones, computers, and batteries – which we use for lighting at night – to a charging point in the street. We wait an average of at least three hours a day for a full charge. We handle our phone batteries carefully, minimizing calls as much as possible, and when I write something for work, I use minimal lighting, although it's harmful to my eyes.

But faced with the challenge of charging, we have to. What in our lives isn't harmful now?

Harm surrounds us from every side, as if it's part of our new life, which we didn't choose, but are forced to endure.

In the evening, I look at my children as they fall asleep in the dim light of a barely-lit battery, and I realize that war not only steals our homes and dreams, but also takes patience and endurance from our souls, and steals our children's childhood and their right to life. I work from the heart of the camp, and the children are always around me, as the place is small and there are no other spaces to play.

Why Do I Write?

I write because writing is power, because our stories must be heard. After a full year of this Israeli genocidal war, what you see on your screens is but a glimpse of the reality we endure. Every day, every hour, we fight to preserve our humanity, our dignity. We resist. We refuse to let this become our normal. Every time I step out into the streets, I force myself to remember that these overcrowded camps, these tents pitched on rubble, are not our home. This is not the Gaza we know, the Gaza we deserve. Bitterness and helplessness threaten to consume me, but I refuse to surrender to despair. I have learned to create hope from the ashes, to find strength in the face of unimaginable suffering. No matter how impossible it seems, no matter how catastrophic the circumstances, I will not stop documenting, I will not stop resisting, until the day this war ends and we reclaim our rights, our existence, our Gaza.



**"We'll Be Back
in Two Days!"**

 Amal Habib



Amal Habib

A Palestinian journalist from the Gaza Strip, has been chronicling the daily lives of Palestinians under siege in Gaza through her writing and videography. Her work has been featured in numerous local and Arab media outlets since the beginning of the conflict.

"We'll Be Back in Two Days!"

Amal Habib

This question haunts me as I write. Documenting a year of genocide in Gaza, I'm interrupted by a breaking news alert flashing red on my screen. This is a death without blood, without a body, without a sound. Why the color red?

"They have evaporated!" the government media office confirms in a new clip. "Twenty-two martyrs were not transported to hospitals after the Al-Mawasi massacre in Khan Yunis. Their bodies melted and disappeared due to the giant bombs used by the occupation."

The news ends, the alert disappears, they all vanished, evaporated. I write so we don't evaporate, so the story doesn't disappear, so we don't become just another bloodless breaking news alert!

We are witnesses to an unprecedented war, a complete erasure of entire families from the civil registry since the first day of the aggression. Residential blocks have been wiped out, a firepower we've never experienced before. A siege, hunger... and let me dwell on this last point, this gnawing hunger that consumes us in North Gaza.

I've never written while hungry. I've never practiced my profession while my stomach gnawed at me, demanding a loaf

of bread and a cup of hot tea, a cup of coffee and a piece of chocolate, a plate of salad – visual nourishment for my heart and my empty stomach. Hunger is a new experience, a gnawing emptiness that shows on my face. I'm experiencing famine for the first time.

At the al-Kuwait roundabout, south of Gaza City, the true meaning of famine is embodied. Hundreds of people wait for a bag of flour amidst the heat of fire and gunpowder. The Israeli occupation has imposed a starvation war upon them, another weapon in their arsenal of annihilation.

They wait for an entire day, hoping for an aid convoy carrying flour to make bread. Hoping that it won't be hit by artillery shells, preventing the aid from reaching them; a punishment, starvation for those who remained in North Gaza and refused to flee south.

I was about to go there to capture the scene, to share with the world the details of the famine that had driven all segments of society to the al-Kuwait roundabout. Then I heard the news of the massacre that killed hundreds... my husband was there.

I rushed to al-Shifa Hospital instead, starting with the morgues, desperately searching for my husband among the unidentified. He had left in the morning to fulfill our children's dream of a piece of bread. They had told him, "We don't want to eat fodder or barley, we want real bread!"

I write about my children's dreams, about a loaf of bread, about our pain and hunger. Does anyone hear us? Has any-

one imagined thanking the animals in Gaza for sharing their food, as I have?

His phone is unreachable, he has no ID. We lost all our official documents when our house was bombed at the beginning of the war. A man screams in the corner of the reception area: "Unidentified bodies at the refrigerators."

I couldn't find him. A worker told me that every unidentified person had a family member with them and was now identified. I wiped away my tears and thanked God for them. They would bury their dead, say their goodbyes, find them space in a temporary grave. I muttered a prayer and moved on to search among the wounded.

The wounded lay on the floor in the reception and emergency rooms, bleeding, screaming in pain: amputated limbs, shrapnel-riddled bodies, scars scattered across their flesh. My memory stores the scene, my eyes document it.

I didn't lose my husband that day. He returned from the roundabout after helping the wounded get a donkey-drawn cart to take them to the hospital. I didn't lose him, but I lost the ability to walk for two days after twisting my ankle while frantically searching for him among the martyrs.

Despite this surreal scene, my little Bassel (three and a half years old) declared a state of emergency during the funeral of my cousin who was killed in the flour massacre. They carried the martyr on their shoulders, placed him in front of his mother, his five young children curled up around the white shroud.

This profound sadness was interrupted by Bassel's screams. He kicked the door, crying, "Where is the flour? Dad, I want bread."

It's hard for anyone who hasn't experienced it to understand what I'm describing. Hunger makes you suffer, feel humiliated, helpless, and abandoned.

How can I convey the expression on my child's face when we received a chicken last August after months of deprivation and embargo? That two-kilogram chicken arrived after the occupation allowed five trucks into North Gaza. My son sat next to it, staring at it, exploring it, asking, "Where are its hands? Is it going to wake up now? Is it going to fly? I loved chickens before the war."

Haven't I told you that we swallow our humiliation before and after food? We would betray the trust of the pen if we didn't convey this picture, if we didn't write, if we stopped documenting. As journalists, we are living a unique experience; we have become stories, witnesses, victims. One of us wears a helmet with "PRESS" written on it, while another asks, "What's the use of a helmet if the occupation plucks out heads like they did with our martyred colleague Ismail al-Ghoul?"

I'm part of the story: a displacement bag on my back, my little Maha holding the hem of my dress, shells exploding overhead, the phone in my pocket, trying to hold it steady with my hands. I have to capture the image, and I also have to refute the occupier's narrative, who suddenly attacked and stormed al-Shajaiya district in eastern Gaza for the third time

without prior warning, despite what they claimed in their media. And I have to maintain my sanity, reassure my children that we will survive, and think about where to go next, where the way out is. "Where do we go?"

The third displacement was the hardest: the shells were falling around us, above us, we were fleeing from death to death. I called out my children's names, one by one, we ran, we cried. It wasn't easy for a mother to film a clip of my eldest daughter wrapping herself up and screaming, "Where is Dad?" But I did, I felt it was my duty. This is my message.

It was a scene ripped from *Al-Taghreba al-Falastenyia*²¹, that iconic tale of Palestinian displacement. I could almost hear the voices of its characters echoing in my ears, their accents, their cries of despair. The commander Abu Saleh's desperate promise, "We'll be back in two days!", hung heavy in the air, a cruel mockery of our reality. How could this be happening? How could we be living through this nightmare again? The next day, I published the material my eyes and heart had captured together. I wiped away my tears, but who can wipe away the humiliation?

I sat in an internet room in the west of the city, crowded with journalists eager to upload and send their material. If you were lucky enough to get a weak signal, you were considered fortunate.

²¹ *Al-Taghreba al-Falastenyia* (التغريبة الفلسطينية) is a Syrian historical drama television series that depicts the Palestinian exodus (Nakba) in 1948 and the subsequent displacement and struggles of Palestinians.

And I was lucky, not because I was able to upload the material, but because I had acquired new skills beyond writing and journalism. I boasted that I could now skillfully chop wood with a large saw, light a fire, and cooking over a fire no longer took me long, but it did take a toll on my health. I inhaled the air, along with the black smoke, as I burned foam, nylon, and clothes. After the firewood ran out, I burned everything. This war has burned our hearts too.

Sometimes, I find myself in a water line, filling a black tank in the corner of the shelter where I live. Other times, I put my clothes between my palms and rub them vigorously. Everything has become manual here. We've left the age of automation behind.

This life is not us. It's too primitive. I find myself jumping on a donkey-drawn cart to reach my office in the city center. It doesn't matter if my mode of transportation is a donkey or a car, the important thing is that the message is delivered. I'm continuing on the path I chose since childhood, when I stood in front of the mirror, talking to myself, holding a comb like a microphone, imitating Layla Odeh and Shireen Abu Aqleh. I was waiting for the day when I would carry my country's pain, and now here I am, carrying both the pain and my country, conveying the truth as the late Shireen instructed us, so that the full picture becomes clear.

My worries are a heavy burden, unnoticed by the world. As a displaced journalist and mother, I must preserve my mental strength, protect my inner front (my children),

and maintain my balance, my work, my message, and my identity.

They took photos of me as I bid farewell to loved ones and family members. I was both the subject and the mourner, as I threw myself onto the bodies of Sham, Jamal, and Rania, my cousins' grandchildren, and my children's friends. The three of them were gone, all at once, with their small faces and bright eyes, innocent beyond compare. Why did they kill them? Why must I tell my little ones that they won't play with them again, that they've gone to a new life where there's no killing, no rockets, no artillery?

A Palestinian journalist during this war has their heart broken countless times. The Israeli occupation has not only destroyed our city but has tried to erase our memory and history. Every part of Gaza is a part of us, we belong to it, it defines our identity, our roots, and our origin.

When you walk through the streets of this coastal city and feel lost, you ask yourself, "Where am I?" This was one of the hardest feelings I experienced as a journalist while documenting the daily life of the war. I never imagined I would feel "lost" in the streets of Gaza.

The city's features have completely changed, everything is desolate, surrounded by rubble. I tried hard during this war to preserve my mental strength, believing in the justice of our cause, in the right to self-determination, in freedom. But it's death.

The story of scattered body parts, bags filled with kilograms of human remains. Every 70 kilograms is a body²². You're living in a time of weight measurements. Have you, as a journalist, ever encountered this standard? Have you found a bag waiting to be weighed and measured? Have you taken a picture of a mother's face searching for a lighter weight, saying her son was frail and this is extra weight, wanting her son's remains without any extra? You can't stop covering the story, and you're expected to write, document, move from one story to another, from one branch of a tree to another. Alhamdulillah, the task of finding the right height to hang a saline solution for a wounded child in al-Maqassed Hospital in the center of Gaza City is over.

Here, there is no way to survive, even being injured means a slow death. This is a deliberate method used by the Israeli occupation after targeting hospitals and the entire health system in North Gaza. There are no medicines, no beds. Even the medical staff were forced to evacuate south, some were arrested, and many were killed, part of a systematic targeting and direct killings by the Israelis.

For two months, I've been capturing and documenting details and scenes from al-Maqassed Hospital in Gaza, especially after suffering a transient ischemic attack when my blood clotted. Does blood really freeze in veins? My legs could

²² The devastating impact of Israel's bombardment in Gaza often leaves human bodies fragmented and unrecognizable. In these tragic cases, medical professionals are forced to collect the remains and present grieving families with bags of their loved ones, identified only by weight (70 kg a corpse!). This grim practice underscores the brutal reality of the war and the dehumanizing impact of the indiscriminate violence inflicted upon Palestinian civilians.

no longer carry me. The burden was too heavy, my children were crying. I found myself lying on the floor of a tuk-tuk on a bumpy road, over potholes and rubble, with a small plea: "Amal, don't lose consciousness!"

We reached al-Maqassed, and finding a bed in these conditions was impossible. The scene was chaotic: they were carrying a martyr, lifting a wounded person, an IV needle here, and many questions from the doctor about the history of the pain, when my hands and face went numb. Did I feel my feet? Then he asked strange questions: "Are you feeling anxious? Have you been under stress? Extremely sad?"

I tried to look at the doctor's face, opened my eyes wide, to make sure the question was directed at me specifically. I answered, "I'm Amal, a journalist from Gaza. Is that enough of an answer, or do you want more?"

I leave the keyboard. My little girls, Mariam and Maha, are calling me, they want me to come to them immediately. What are they doing? From the rubble of their room, they built a wall for their toy city, trying to snatch life from the jaws of death.

This is Gaza, a place that defies understanding. We will never stop writing about Gaza, about the victims, about love and war, about the tenacious voice of life that refuses to be silenced. This is not just a city; it is the mother of all cities, a place that lives within us as much as we live within it. In war, Gaza bids farewell to a part of itself, again and again. This is how we survive, how we die, how we resist. Then the martyr's mother comes, her face a mask of grief and de-

fiance. She carries the body of her child on her shoulders, smiles and weeps at the same time, and whispers a prayer for strength: "O Allah, grant me patience in my affliction and replace it with something better." In her grief, in her resilience, she declares the unwavering spirit of resistance. And isn't journalism, in its essence, a form of resistance too? A refusal to let the truth be silenced, a commitment to bear witness, even in the face of unimaginable horror?

A black and white photograph showing the aftermath of a disaster. The scene is filled with rubble, including broken concrete blocks, twisted metal, and debris. In the center, a person is visible in a dark, shadowed area, possibly a doorway or a narrow passage. A large, cylindrical metal water tank is prominent in the lower right foreground. The overall atmosphere is one of devastation and hardship.

Returning from the Dead

□ Mohammad al-Sawaf



Mohammad al-Sawaf

A Palestinian filmmaker and journalist from the Gaza Strip

Returning from the Dead

Mohammad al-Sawaf

In Palestine, especially in Gaza, hardship is a familiar companion. We endure it as naturally as we breathe. Successive occupations, displacement, oppression, sieges, wars—we know this long and thorny road. We know how to persevere, how to find resilience in the face of relentless adversity. But the war that Israel launched in October 2023, a war that rages on even as I write these words, is unlike anything we have ever known. It is a war that reshapes reality, that shatters our capacity to adapt, that strips us of our habits and routines, leaving us suspended in a perpetual state of uncertainty, every moment a fleeting reprieve from death. As journalists and filmmakers, we found ourselves adrift, our tools and plans inadequate to capture the sheer scale of this catastrophe. This war has not only transformed our work, but it has also irrevocably altered our lives, our behavior, every fiber of our being.

I am a journalist and filmmaker, born and raised in Gaza, where the stories of the Nakba and the Naksa are woven into the fabric of our existence. I witnessed the first Intifada as a child, the second as a young man. Wars have been the grim punctuation marks of my life, a recurring nightmare that refuses to end.

I started working in filmmaking in 2009, after transitioning from print journalism. These successive wars provided the material for our films; they came to us, we didn't have to go to them. We experience the same suffering as the people,

which allows us to convey their stories and experiences authentically.

In 2017, I founded "Alef Multimedia," a company specializing in documentary filmmaking with a team of friends and colleagues who share my passion.

With every war on Gaza, we brace ourselves for the difficult days ahead. We develop our plan from the beginning of the aggression, distributing our basic filming equipment – especially cameras, lenses, and sound equipment – among the team members. We do this for two reasons: first, to avoid damage and targeting the company itself, preserving the basic equipment that can keep us "operational" to document events. Second, documenting the war and its stories requires us to be constantly ready, with the camera always within reach, to start recording immediately. There is no time for waiting or prior preparation.

We distribute the cameras among the cameramen so that if one of us is incapacitated, another can continue filming.

Behind Every Person, a Film

As filmmakers, we weren't always drawn to the same things as journalists who cover an event and then move on to the next. Our team's first rule is that we don't just cover the news; what's important to journalists isn't necessarily what's important to us. We focus on the behind-the-scenes, the human stories. For instance, during a home bombing, our story might center on a civil defense worker trying to rescue someone, or a child watching from a distance, or a woman search-

ing for something amidst the rubble. Our coverage doesn't end with the event; we follow up on what happens after the news cycle moves on. We believe that behind every person is a story, a potential film, and we must observe, follow, and record the details for later filming. This was our approach in this war, but it was bigger, more devastating, than we could have imagined.

During the first week of the war, some team members suggested evacuating all of our company's equipment. But I realized that if I did that, I would instill fear in the team. So we agreed to stick to our old approach and only take the cameras, adding a main editing device to the evacuation plan. Coincidentally, that very night, the building where our company was located was bombed and completely destroyed.

We were fortunate; we survived the bombing, and our precious editing device was salvaged from the rubble. Sometimes, some team members and I would stay overnight at the company, working late into the night, driven by the urgency of the situation. As for our families, they were left to fend for themselves, their safety entrusted to God. This is the price we pay, working in our industry, in our country. Our families bear the brunt of our choices, and I am eternally grateful to my wife and brothers for shielding them from the worst of it. Like many in Gaza, I live in a small building with my extended family – parents, siblings, all of us crammed together, a tight-knit unit bound by circumstance and shared hardship. We are a family, a team, facing this war together.

A Home and a Workplace

After our company headquarters were bombed, our primary concern wasn't dwelling on what had happened, but figuring out how to continue working, especially with the ongoing power outages in Gaza. I couldn't find a better option than my apartment, where I could control the conditions. Fortunately, I had already equipped it with solar panels and batteries due to the persistent electricity problems in Gaza. Thus, my apartment became the new headquarters; we started our day there and returned after work to plan and coordinate our next steps.

In the field, there were only five of us: me, Salah and Ibrahim (cameramen), Ahmed al-Shiyah (producer), and Marwan (sound engineer and occasional cameraman). I also carried a camera and filmed; the events and stories don't wait.

We started uploading the material through the offices of friends that remained intact and the fast internet points in Gaza, before the service was cut off, making things more difficult.

My family was somewhat understanding of my colleagues' constant presence in our home. My father, a veteran journalist, knows the importance of this profession and has instilled its values and ethics in us. Some of my brothers work in the same field, but some were worried about the impact of our movements on our safety, fearing that we might be targeted because we are journalists.

During that time, most of the team decided to evacuate from

Gaza City towards the south, although there is no truly safe place. The only thing we agreed on was to complete our mission, no matter the location or circumstances.

Let Your Camera Roll!

In this war, our approach was that every individual represented a story, a potential film. There was no room for preparation, research, scriptwriting, or any pre-production requirements. All you had to do was pick up your camera and go into the field; you'd find your film's subject along the way. The important thing was to let your camera record and capture everything. Try not to interfere, just follow, and your film will take shape. In such difficult, fast-paced, and volatile events, there's no time for the luxury of preparation. Just before you leave your story, know its destination and try to find a way to contact its subjects, as we might return to it later.

At night, I started compiling the footage, and the seeds of films began to take root. Here's a story that can be followed, and there's another that's finished. We discovered that raw footage is the most powerful and impactful. Just follow your story, weave its threads, and film its protagonists, and you'll need only a little editing to produce a raw, visceral documentary.

One of our films, "Rescue Mission in Gaza," was shot in just one day. The film won numerous awards in journalism and film, including the Edward R. Murrow Award presented by the Overseas Press Club (OPC), and the Royal Television Society Award for Television Journalism 2024 in the United Kingdom, in addition to the Gold Medal at the 2024 New York

Film Festival. It also won The World at a Crossroads" award and is still being nominated for others.

After that, the opportunity arises to develop your films by following their stories and giving them more depth. Our stories evolve as the events of the war evolve, and everyone in the Gaza Strip has had their life turned upside down. We are still following many stories and developing them into films.

Perhaps it was our way of filming that drew attention to them. It doesn't require a pre-written script; the stories and rapid pace of the war write the screenplay and drive you to follow it with passion.

It's crucial to remain patient and focused while documenting a war; this is documentary filmmaking, not just a rush to capture breaking news. Keep the story simple, avoid excessive details, and the essence of the truth will emerge. A good documentary filmmaker seeks spontaneity and attention to detail, allowing the characters to forget the camera's presence. In our case, the sheer scale of the events, the overwhelming emotions, ensured that the camera became an invisible observer.

We didn't stay in my apartment for long after the Israeli bombardment destroyed our company headquarters. The violence escalated rapidly in Sheikh Ajlin and Tel al-Hawa, forcing people to flee their homes. We joined the exodus, our families scattered among relatives, our company reduced to a memory.

Our cars became our offices, our meeting point the al-Shifa

Hospital, where we planned our days and assigned roles. It was a fluid plan, adapting to the ever-shifting landscape of the war. We would choose a topic, a story to follow, and send a team to capture the unfolding events.

We moved the editing device to a colleague's office, one of the few spared by the Israeli bombs. The final editing, however, was impossible to do in Gaza. With great difficulty, we uploaded the footage and collaborated with colleagues outside Gaza, sharing screens and editing remotely while Israeli bombs rained down.

Some might think this was an unbearable pressure, and they would be right. But it also gave us a sense of purpose, a feeling that we weren't passively waiting for death. We were actively resisting, documenting the truth, countering the Israeli propaganda machine. I realized the importance of this work even more when an injury forced me to stop filming for a while.

The Israeli occupation soon divided Gaza, making face-to-face meetings impossible. We were scattered, separated, but our work continued. Each team member knew their role, and we had honed our skills over years of documenting life under siege. The picture became more comprehensive, encompassing the tragedy unfolding across the entire Strip.

My First Injury

I continued filming in the north with Marwan, while the rest of the team remained in the south. We were coping, until the day the Israeli military escalated its attacks. Feeling guilty for neglecting my family, who had evacuated to my grand-

father's old house, I decided to visit them. I brought my wife and children from their refuge at their grandfather's house, hoping for a brief respite from the war.

But our reunion was shattered when Israeli bombs rained down on our neighbors' house. The rubble collapsed, injuring me and traumatizing my children. My brother suffered a broken thigh, and several of our neighbors were killed. It was another massacre, this time in our own neighborhood.

I was taken to al-Shifa Hospital, where, injured and bleeding, I continued to document the suffering around me. One of the heroes of my films, recognizing me, helped me get treatment. Despite my injuries, I filmed those moments, knowing they might be woven into a future project.

We are now working on a new film, a testament to our experiences, a tapestry of stories woven from the threads of this devastating war. It is a challenging project, one that tells our personal stories alongside the larger narrative of Gaza's struggle.

We believe that the Palestinian experience must be seen, must be heard. Our films are the memory of our people, our message to the world. We must tell these stories, preserve them, so that they remain a witness for generations to come. Palestinians must be visible, even in their suffering, even in death. If our voices cannot save us, then at least they should disturb those who watch, those who contribute to our killing. Our films are our screams, launched into the void, hoping to awaken the conscience of a world that has remained silent for far too long.

I gradually recovered from my injuries, but the work continued. This is the strength of a dedicated team, a team that understands its mission and doesn't require constant direction. We are filmmakers, and we know what needs to be done. While I healed, the team continued documenting, and soon I was back with them, planning our next steps.

In mid-November 2023, the Israeli attacks intensified. Fear gnawed at us, the fear of losing our loved ones, the fear of becoming another casualty in this endless war.

While filming "Rescue Mission in Gaza," an Israeli bomb exploded near our car. We rushed to document the aftermath, people emerging from the smoke like ghosts. The bombed house belonged to our colleague, Fadl Hammami. We barely recognized him, covered in dust, weeping for his brother's children.

We continued filming, capturing the raw grief and devastation, knowing that our own families could be next. We filmed and wept, then picked ourselves up and continued working. I knew this fear was eating away at my team, but I couldn't tell them to ignore it, to simply carry on. "Our work is important," I would say, "and our safety is paramount. But if we don't tell these stories now, when will we?"

Forty-Seven Martyrs

The building where my grandfather lived, where we had sought refuge, was hit by three devastating missiles. Inside were my father, mother, four of my brothers, my brother's wife and their seven children, my uncle and his sons, my

aunt, and a large number of my relatives. I was sleeping in the room that my cousin had allocated to my parents in her apartment, until I suddenly found myself, on the night of November 17th, 2023, thrown far away from the room where I was sleeping next to them, with rubble above me and smoke and fire surrounding me.

I was suffocating, unable to move, waiting for a missile to end everything or for me to fall asleep and wake up from this nightmare. For a moment, I thought I was dreaming.

Paramedics passed by me and thought I was dead; I was covered in blood and motionless. In that darkness, saving the living was a priority, but it seemed I was no longer one of them. The entire building collapsed; the ceilings fell on top of each other, bodies were torn apart, and fires raged. When they discovered that I was still alive, they transferred me to a temporary health center, and there I waited until dawn, hoping that an ambulance would arrive to take me to a hospital that was not besieged by Israeli forces. Al-Shifa Hospital was nearby, as was the Arab Ahli Hospital²³ which was only one kilometer away, but both were surrounded by tanks and planes.

At the health center, I began to wake up and scream in pain, but my voice couldn't reach anyone. I was torn apart, in desperate need of a strong painkiller, but there was nothing available. I heard whispers around me: "He's dead," "He's

²³ The Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (also known as the Baptist Hospital) is a local institution providing healthcare to residents across the Gaza Strip. It is affiliated with the Anglican Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and is one of the oldest hospitals in Gaza. Israel committed one of the most horrific massacres in the Gaza Strip when its warplanes targeted the hospital on October 17, 2023. This attack resulted in the deaths of over 500 Palestinians, the majority of whom were women and children seeking shelter from the Israeli airstrikes.

taking his last breaths." Maha, my niece, who was twelve years old, died in the hands of the nurse who was trying to save her. I watched death materialize before me again and again, and with each departing soul, I felt more broken.

I was eventually transferred to al-Awda Hospital in northern Gaza, under constant shelling. I stayed there for a day and a night, and there was nothing that could be done; there were no neurologists or orthopedists. They gave me painkillers and some fluids, and they stitched up my wounds that had worsened from my previous injury. It wasn't long before Israeli tanks approached and began shelling the hospital's surroundings.

Despite my pain, all that was on my mind was that this had to be documented. I pointed to Khalid al-Halaw, the hospital's media officer and a friend of mine, and told him, "Record, document, and send as much as you can. We must not die without an image and a voice, we must at least die visibly." I don't know what he did after that; I was in a miserable state, and all I wanted was a painkiller to relieve my pain.

In the end, some of my relatives arrived in a car to rescue me, and we escaped from the hospital a few hours before it was shelled. The two doctors who treated me, Dr. Ahmed al-Sahar and Dr. Mahmoud Abu Najila, were martyred, along with some patients who were unable to escape. My body had survived the shelling, but my soul was still stuck among the rubble.

I returned to my grandfather's bombed house, as I no longer had a place to go. A small warehouse that had not been

damaged remained, and I stayed there. My cousin Mohamed, who is studying nursing, and the remaining living members of my brothers took care of me, and I began to learn who had been martyred and who had survived. Forty-seven martyrs from my relatives, including my father and mother, whom I used to sleep next to, and my brothers Mahmoud and Ahmed, my brother's wife, my cousin Zain and her children Baraa, Maha, and Karam, and my brother Ahmed and his children Omar and Shahd, and my uncle, my uncles' wives, and my cousins' children, and my aunt's children. Forty-seven martyrs.

I stayed in that ruined place, suffering, for thirteen days. The remaining members of my family spent eleven days digging through the rubble, collecting the bodies of the martyrs and burying them. They found everyone except the body of my cousin's nine-year-old child, and half the body of my aunt's wife; they had seemingly evaporated due to the intensity of the shelling.

My brothers Marwan and Muntasser continued documenting, but another tragedy struck on December 1st, 2023. Marwan, Muntasser, and everyone who was with me were shelled. The rest of my brothers, a nurse who was helping us, and a number of neighbors and friends were martyred at the door of the warehouse. I couldn't comprehend the shock. My body was unable to move, and I couldn't go to assess the extent of the disaster myself. What was this relentless shelling? Death was chasing us at every moment.

And after only five days, Israeli tanks reached our location and began shelling our surroundings relentlessly. They car-

ried me in a desperate attempt to escape, and miraculously, we managed to reach a house in west Gaza, thinking it would be safe. But after only a few hours, we found ourselves surrounded by tanks again. They had surrounded the area, turning it into a military base, and began shelling and burning the houses around us.

Every moment intensified the pain; it was as if death refused to leave, pursuing us wherever we went.

Twenty Days in Hell

We lived for about 20 days as if they were 20 years in hell. We expected death at any moment, until we were certain of it. People were dying in the street next to us, tanks were stationed in front of the house, demolishing its walls and storming into shops. Quadcopters and Apache helicopters hovered overhead, bullets piercing the walls. Then the soldiers started walking in our corridors. I was bedridden, unable to move, even to relieve myself, while my painkillers ran out.

We were certain that we were doomed, but our prayer was to be buried with dignity, not consumed by fire, or devoured by dogs, or left to the elements. Our friend, the journalist Alaa Atta Allah, lived in a house near us, and they burned her house and executed her, her brothers, and her nephews.

Water was scarce. The young men would collect drips from a hole in the ceiling, a grim reminder of the Israeli shelling that had created it. Some would watch the street, hoping to catch a stray chicken or duck, a meager feast if they were lucky. But if the Israeli soldiers caught them, it would mean cer-

tain death. We spent our days and nights praying, our hands clasped to our hearts, fear a constant companion. The young men, driven to distraction by the endless hours of confinement, played cards to the soundtrack of Israeli bombs. If one of them forgot themselves and raised their voice in excitement, our hearts would plummet, bracing for the inevitable punishment. It was a terrifying existence, made even more unbearable by the knowledge that our families didn't even know where we were, our phones dead, communication with the outside world cut off.

Amidst this chaos, one thought consumed me: this must be documented. This must be filmed, preserved for history. But I was injured, paralyzed, with no camera to capture the horror. As the siege dragged on, I slowly regained some mobility. When the Israeli artillery began shelling our apartment, we knew we had to flee. Dying while running seemed a better fate than being burned alive, crushed by a bomb, or executed by the Israeli soldiers.

I leaned heavily on my brother, my body wracked with pain, terrified to look back, to see the Israeli tanks or missiles that might end our lives. Finally, we reached relative safety.

Meanwhile, my team continued documenting, filming, driven by a mission that transcended their own fear and loss. They didn't stop, even when I was unable to lead them.

Eventually, I reunited with my wife and children, who had endured their own ordeal of homelessness and fear. My health slowly improved, and after two months of isolation, I reconnected with my team in the south. The news of our

films winning awards was a beacon of light in the darkness, a testament to our collective resilience.

A New Team

By April, I was able to return to filming, my body still bearing the scars of the Israeli attack. I formed a new team in the north, drawing on former colleagues who had been forced to stop working during the war's peak. We were back in action, two teams now, one in the south and one in the north, capturing the unfolding tragedy from both sides of the divided Strip.

Salah al-Haw, one of our team members, managed to leave Gaza. He set up an editing studio outside, and we collaborated remotely, sharing screens and editing our films while the war raged around us.

I have always been meticulous in choosing my team. Skill alone is not enough; it must be fueled by passion, by a deep commitment to our work. We see filmmaking as life, as art, as an addiction that drives us forward, even in the darkest of times. Our bond goes beyond mere collegiality; we are a family, bound by shared experience and a deep love for our craft. This war has proven that our strength lies in our unity, in our unwavering commitment to telling the stories of our people.

We continue to document this annihilation, despite the immense burdens we carry. My days are consumed with searching for food for my family, navigating the realities of famine, tending to my injuries, and fleeing the ever-present

threat of Israeli tanks. Yet, amidst all this, I find time to film, to capture the moments that define our reality.

What we have witnessed must not be forgotten. It must be etched in our collective memory, shared with the world, so that future generations understand the price we have paid. Our films are our legacy, our testament to the resilience of the Palestinian people. They will tell the story of our suffering, of our resistance, for centuries to come. We document the crimes of the Israeli occupation, so that the perpetrators will be remembered, even if justice remains elusive. We cling to the hope that future generations will find the conscience to hold Israel accountable and restore the dignity of the victims. Our films are our weapons, our screams of defiance, aimed at shattering the silence and awakening the world to the injustices inflicted upon the Palestinian people.



The Photojournalist: An Unwavering Eye in Palestine

■ Mu'ath Amarneh



Mu'ath Amarneh

A Palestinian photojournalist from the West Bank who works for several news agencies. Born in 1987 in the Deheishe refugee camp southeast of Bethlehem, he lost his left eye on November 15, 2019, after being directly shot by Israeli soldiers while documenting clashes with the Israeli army in the town of Suruh in the southern occupied West Bank. On October 16, 2013, Mu'ath was arrested due to his journalistic activities and remained under administrative detention for nine months.

The Photojournalist: An Unwavering Eye in Palestine

Mu'ath Amarneh

I am Mu'ath Amarneh, a Palestinian photojournalist. My existence and work have been a thorn in the side of the occupation, so they targeted my eyes. One was extinguished, leaving the other, along with my wife and three children: Mais Al-Reem, Ibrahim, and Bassel. I am 37 years old and live in the Deheishe refugee camp²⁴ south of Bethlehem; we are displaced from the village of Ras Abu Ammar west of Jerusalem.

There are many pivotal moments in the life of a Palestinian journalist. Our very existence and daily work under the constant targeting of the occupation, the expansion of settlements, and the growing rage of settlers is in itself an unbearable paradox, a kind of adventure that often borders on putting one's life (and in my case, my eye) on the line. But I will start with the most significant moment in my professional and personal journey, as there is not much difference, in many ways, between the professional and personal in the life of a Palestinian journalist working under a savage and extremely stubborn military occupation. This occupation always takes an absolute

²⁴ Dheisheh camp was created in 1949 to offer shelter to the Palestinian families expelled from 45 villages around Jerusalem and Hebron areas. Dheisheh camp today hosts at least 13,000 people. The Ras Abu Ammar village was a small Palestinian Arab village in the Jerusalem Subdistrict. It was ethnically cleansed and depopulated in 1948.

and annihilating position towards the indigenous population, and an even more severe position towards journalists. This moment goes back to Friday, November 15, 2019.

We were in the town of Surif, north of Hebron, covering a sit-in and Friday prayers on the town's lands that were threatened with confiscation by the occupation. On that day, the suppression was unusually violent compared to previous sit-ins, and the demonstration turned into confrontations with the occupation forces. People were forced to move away from the site, and we journalists found ourselves in a difficult situation because our cars were parked on a hill near a settlement, and the only road there had begun to be closed by the demonstrators. We had to get our cars out; leaving them there would expose them to the risk of attack and destruction by settlers.

The Sniper's Bullet

I was the last journalist to leave. A group of soldiers stopped me, and the officer demanded that I hand over my car keys. I got into an argument with him and refused to give him the keys, because I was used to dealing with them in such situations. All the journalists before me had passed without any problems, so why stop me? I locked the car as safety procedures required, but I sensed danger and decided to move. I didn't want to be a shield for them or for my car to be damaged, and then have the pictures appear and be blamed on the citizens.

There was a sniper nearby, close to the road. He called to the officer and spoke to him jokingly and mockingly. I didn't fully

understand the conversation, but from the soldiers' laughter and their manner, I felt that there was some kind of malicious intent. The officer asked me to leave quickly, but I moved slowly and cautiously; I felt that they might claim I had escaped from them for some reason and target me. These are the calculations of a Palestinian journalist in the West Bank when clashing with the occupation forces.

When I reached my fellow journalists, I told them that something strange was happening, and that we should wear all protective gear and press identification so as not to give them any excuse to target us. We continued our coverage, and while there were moments of calm and caution, we noticed that the army was not responding to the approach of the demonstrators. We realized that they were probably planning an ambush, so we remained vigilant.

Suddenly, I felt like my head had exploded. My whole life flashed before my eyes in seconds. I felt like I was living my last breaths, and I felt colleagues running towards me, trying to save me. In the horror of that moment, I wondered, "Is this a dream or reality? Will I see anyone else?" I didn't understand what had happened.

While my colleagues were trying to rescue me, we were surprised by the army's behavior. The soldiers came with cameras and started documenting my injury. Usually, in such cases, the army either arrests the injured person or intervenes to rescue them in rare cases if there are many cameras around and they want to polish their image. But what happened was strange; they put the camera in front of my face and filmed the injury, as if they were making sure that

I had been injured accurately. It seemed like a kind of challenge between them, as if they wanted to prove that they had succeeded in injuring me in the desired place. They filmed and then left without saying or doing anything.

The injury was from a sniper using internationally prohibited bullets. I was transported in one of my colleagues' cars because the ambulance was not nearby and it was difficult to reach. After several stops, I finally arrived at Hadassah Ein Karem Hospital in occupied Jerusalem, the only hospital capable of dealing with my critical condition. There, the doctors decided to perform three surgeries at once: removing the bullet, removing the eye, and repairing the facial fractures. They told me that the operation was very risky and the success rate was low, but there was no other option. I entered the operating room at 8 am on November 16, 2019.

The journalist inside me could not understand the reason for what had happened. I was unable to comprehend the sheer, blind injustice of it. Blindness in that injustice had reached the point where it decided, for what seemed to be entertainment, to blind the journalist who relies on his eye to photograph the facts of the occupation. That was the only motive I could sense.

A Life Changed Forever

The neurosurgeon decided against removing the bullet due to its precarious position against my brain's membrane. Any movement risked tearing the membrane, resulting in immediate death. The maxillofacial surgeon was unable to repair the fractures for the same reason. Eye surgeons attempted

a repair surgery, but unfortunately, it was unsuccessful, and they had to remove my eye after three days.

Following my discharge from the hospital, the subsequent days were the most difficult I've ever experienced. The pain from the injury still accompanies me to this day, especially those electric shocks that would course through my skull – a pain that was unbearable. The outpouring of solidarity I received from family, colleagues, and the community alleviated some of this suffering. Everyone stood by me during the initial days of my injury while I was in the hospital, and even after I was discharged. This support was enough to help me overcome the initial shock of the injury, as if I were living in a dream. However, at a certain point, I woke up to the harsh reality that this was my new life, irrevocably different from before. The moment I grasped this truth was devastating, and I had to start thinking about living with the effects of an injury that had shattered all my ambitions and hopes. Today, I feel that my life, in a sense, stopped at the age of 33, and everything I am living now is just borrowed time, a reward for that life I left behind.

Some might wonder why I am so certain that my injury was intentional, and why another journalist wasn't targeted instead. In fact, the targeting of journalists hasn't stopped, and it certainly didn't stop with me. The events leading up to my injury confirm this. On November 11, on the anniversary of Yasser Arafat's death, my colleague Musab Shawah and I were documenting the death of Omar al-Badawi²⁵, who was

²⁵ Omar Al-Badawi, a 22-year-old Palestinian from Al-Aroub refugee camp, was tragically killed by Israeli forces while attempting to extinguish a fire near his home. Despite carrying a white flag to signal his peaceful intentions, he was arbitrarily shot and killed, as documented in a video and confirmed by several investigations.

coldly murdered. Omar was standing at the door of his house waving a white cloth, trying to seek help after his house caught fire. We documented that tragic moment; he posed no threat to the soldiers or anyone else, he was an unarmed civilian. These images spread rapidly, causing widespread outrage, but it was not enough to stop this pattern of killing and targeting journalists. Instead, the occupation escalated its campaign against us, to the point that any coverage was met with deliberate harassment and targeting, even before they targeted the citizens.

One day before my injury, on November 14, we were covering confrontations at the northern entrance to Bethlehem. Journalists had been standing in the same spot for more than ten years, and it was known to everyone, including Israeli soldiers and officers, that it was our gathering place. But on that day, they tried to expel and suppress us without any clear reason. One of our colleagues approached the officer and asked him, "What do you have left? You haven't left us anything, so do you want to kill us and give us rest?" The officer's response was chilling: "When I decide to kill you, I won't consult you." And the next day, I was indeed targeted.

It was clear that the targeting was not directed at me personally, of course. I was merely a tool to convey the message that the occupation wanted to send to all journalists, a warning of an escalation that would continue against them. The occupation wanted to intimidate us, force us to stop covering events, to change our behavior completely, or to give up life altogether. The message was brutally clear: "You work with your eyes, and we will pluck those eyes out."

Despite the severity of the injury, especially losing sight in one eye, I was able to return to the field after about a year, thanks to the support of my colleagues and family. It was a significant challenge, especially when I held the camera for the first time after the injury. I felt a tremor in my body, and I remembered the moment I was shot, but I had to overcome my fear and continue my mission of conveying the truth.

Today, I see that the images I capture are not just professional work, but a message that I convey to the world to document the crimes of the occupation against our people. Before I was a journalist, I am a Palestinian, suffering from the occupation and its evils. This is what motivates me to continue my work and to perform it at the highest level of professionalism. I realized that the Palestinian journalist is shaping the very meaning of professionalism anew, as we are exposed to all forms of harassment, targeting, and killing, especially in the Gaza Strip, as well as in the West Bank and Jerusalem. This reality has no impact on how the mainstream Western press deals with the occupation entity, and the extent of the necessary coverage of these direct crimes. However, I realized that completely leaving the field would affect my colleagues and their morale, and might push some of them to retreat. When I returned to coverage and saw the joy on the faces of my colleagues, I felt that the occupation's goal of intimidation and suppression had not been achieved, and that was a small victory.

However, violations have become part of our daily lives. In every coverage, we take into account the possibility of being subjected to direct assault. We must be careful in every step and movement, and even in every word. Today, the Pales-

tinian journalist thinks a thousand times about any word they say or any picture they take. Even when traveling, there is the risk of arrest, interrogation, and pursuit. We must think about the consequences and act wisely under very restrictive and mentally and physically exhausting conditions.

I returned to the field gradually, and I had planned to limit my coverage of breaking news. But the moment that changed everything was before the "Sword of Jerusalem" war in 2021, when confrontations erupted at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. I was there, and in an unconscious moment, I found myself taking pictures and broadcasting the events on my Facebook page. I was surprised by the enormous interaction, and media outlets began sending me messages asking me to continue the coverage. Despite the great danger, I found myself returning to my profession fully.

The day of October 7th was another major turning point in my life, as it was in the lives of many others. I woke up around 6:30 in the morning to the sounds of sirens and explosions. Rockets were falling on Bethlehem and the areas near Jerusalem. Images began to arrive from the surrounding areas, scenes as if from a science fiction film. No one could believe what was happening, and the images were powerful and unprecedented. For me, as a Palestinian citizen under occupation, those were moments that carried a feeling between pride in the ability to emerge from the oppression that had controlled the Gaza Strip for many years, and a great fear of what would follow. As a professional journalist, the feeling of fear prevailed; fear of the destruction and killing that the occupation does not hesitate to unleash in such circumstances. We knew for sure that horrific massacres would

be committed against the Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip, and that the occupation's brutality would expand in the West Bank as well. In the early days of the war, my concern, as a Palestinian journalist in the West Bank, was not to focus only on the violations occurring in Gaza, but also to expose what was happening simultaneously with the war of annihilation here in the West Bank, in terms of arrests, violations, killing, and assaults. The occupation had turned the West Bank into a large prison; it closed roads, set up checkpoints at the entrances of cities and villages, and moving between cities was an adventure that could cost a person their life.

On the morning of October 16, at around 3:30 am, a special force surrounded my house. They placed explosives on the door, and when I asked them to open it quietly because there were children and women inside, they blew it up. They entered the house and tied me up, then took me to the bathroom. I tried to talk to the officer in charge, telling him: "Tell me what you want, I will give you what you need without breaking or destroying anything," but he didn't care. He told me: "We won't hit you here, but we will understand outside." He told me that they would arrest me on charges of "incitement against the State of Israel." When I asked him how I could be an instigator when I am a journalist conveying what is happening, he told me: "What you convey bothers us," and told me clearly: "We will show you what it means to be a journalist."

They took me outside, and they started insulting me with vulgar words and threats, until we reached their military vehicles. I felt terrified, especially when confrontations erupted in the camp. They were firing wildly, and the soldiers who had

grabbed me were pointing their weapons at the Palestinian young men, as if they were waiting for a chance to kill me under the guise of the clashes.

A Nightmarish Experience in Israeli Prisons

We arrived at the 'Etzion' detention center around 4 AM, where an officer from the facility's administration took custody of me. Before handing me over, he said, "Thank God you made it here alive." I was then taken to an interrogation room, where I was strip-searched and thrown into a cell. The following morning, they called me and a group of other detainees. The detention center lacked even the most basic necessities of life; the food was terrible, placed in a large bowl and served to all detainees in a humiliating manner. Those who could stomach this food did so only because of extreme hunger.

The next day, I was transferred to Megiddo prison²⁶ after a long, agonizing five-hour journey in a transport vehicle where I was handcuffed and shackled. The conditions inside were miserable; the iron chairs were uncomfortable, and insults were hurled throughout the journey²⁷.

²⁶ Megiddo Prison is a notorious Israeli detention facility located in northern Israel, near the city of Megiddo. It is known for its harsh conditions and the systemic abuse of Palestinian prisoners, including physical and psychological torture, denial of basic human rights, and medical neglect. The prison holds both Palestinian political prisoners, often subjecting them to overcrowded cells, unsanitary conditions, and inadequate medical care. Human rights organizations have repeatedly condemned Megiddo Prison for its violations of international law and its mistreatment of detainees.

²⁷ Numerous reports and testimonies have confirmed the degrading conditions under which Palestinian prisoners are transported by the Israel Prison Service. These conditions include prolonged confinement in transport vehicles, denial of bathroom breaks, and withholding of food and water during long journeys, all of which violate the basic rights and dignity of the prisoners.

Upon arrival at the prison, we were beaten again while disembarking from the vehicle, then subjected to another strip search. At each stage, I thought the beating was over, that there was no more abuse I could endure, but they continued the insults and assaults. At one point, I lost consciousness after being severely beaten on the head. When I woke up, I found myself in a room with prison intelligence officers, and then they transferred me to Section 8.

This experience was one of the hardest I have ever endured. I had completely lost control of my body and was unable to move. All that was going through my mind was that I was about to die, and I had no hope of survival. When I reached "Section 8", I found a group of detainees sitting in the dark; the electricity was cut off. They told me that they had been living in this darkness since the beginning of the war, and that the electricity was only returned for two hours a day.

All I could think about was escaping this suffering and staying alive by any means possible.

I had two shirts and a jacket with me at the prison gate, and during the strip search, they did not confiscate those clothes, but deliberately humiliated me by making me put them in a bucket, a garbage can, with my own hands. When I reached the cell, they allowed me to rest for a while, and I immediately fell asleep from exhaustion. I had spent more than 12 hours without food or drink, subjected to beatings, insults, and threats. It was a sleep like death, or perhaps an escape from it.

I woke up in the morning to the counting of prisoners, which took place around 5:30 or 6 AM. My fellow prisoners woke

me up with difficulty, and after that, I got to know them. I looked exhausted, and I asked them if I could get some medicine. They told me that I could ask the nurse during the count. During the second count, at around 10:30 AM, I asked the nurse about medication and the possibility of seeing a doctor, but to no avail.

In those days, there were constant searches, but the severe beatings inside the cells had not yet reached their worst. On the fourth morning, they called me and told me that I would be transferred without explaining why. I was surprised that they returned me to the prison gate area, where I was handcuffed and shackled, and put back on the bus. They told us we were going for interrogation at Ofer prison, a journey that took about three hours. The entire way, we were subjected to humiliating and painful beatings. When we entered the iron vehicle, they kept pushing our heads towards the doors, causing severe injuries.

When we arrived at Ofer prison, they subjected me to a very short interrogation that did not exceed ten minutes. The interrogator was angry and threatening, and started asking provocative questions. He asked me, "Are you happy with what happened on October 7?" I replied that no one is happy with killing (although the ongoing war and the torture showed countless examples of masochistic pleasure on the part of the occupier in the pain of the Palestinians). The interrogator continued to insult and swear at me, and threatened me with rape and severe beatings. His tone was full of threats, attempting to intimidate me, and in the end, he asked me to sign papers that I had not read. Out of confusion, noise, and fear of increased beating, I agreed and signed without looking at the contents.

After the interrogation, they returned us to Megiddo prison. We arrived around 5 or 6 PM, exhausted and having eaten nothing all day. Upon arrival, we were subjected to another strip search and beating, and when I entered the cell, I found the young men exhausted as well. I noticed that half of the belongings that were in the room had been confiscated, including chairs and some electrical appliances.

In the following days, I was transferred again to a court session via video conference. I was charged with “incitement”. The court was adjourned several times, and in one of the sessions, the judge ordered that I be given medication and see a doctor after I explained my health condition and my suffering from diabetes. But things did not improve; they gave me medication that was not suitable for my condition, and I was suffering from severe headaches and blurred vision, especially after my glasses were confiscated. When I objected to the medication, they mocked me. They would do anything to further insult and humiliate the prisoners, to remind us of our insignificance in their eyes.

In the second court session, the judge couldn't help but express sarcasm about some of the evidence presented against me, including a short video that I had posted on social media, stating that this video did not constitute evidence of any incitement. Despite this, my detention was extended, and I was transferred to administrative detention for six months.

Life inside the prison was very difficult. The food was terrible; the three meals were served at once at the end of the day,

and the quantity was meager, not enough for one person, but we were forced to share it among ten or more because of extreme hunger.

Negev Prison: A Descent into Despair

Late in October, a raid unit stormed the sections and confiscated everything from the rooms, including blankets and clothes. We were left without shoes or enough clothes to face the bitter winter cold. This situation continued for several months until the lawyer was able to file a lawsuit to improve conditions. After that, I received some clothes and blankets.

Finally, I was transferred to Negev prison in mid-April 2024. The journey there was grueling, a six-hour ordeal in the prison transport van. Upon arrival, we were beaten again. After a strip search, they put us in Section 22, where the conditions were worse than I could have imagined. The room was overcrowded with detainees, and most were suffering from skin diseases due to the appalling hygiene. We lacked the most basic necessities of life, with little food or blankets to face the cold that was penetrating our bones.

Contagious skin diseases spread rapidly among the prisoners. As soon as I entered Section 22, I found myself in a room with nine other prisoners, all suffering from painful skin diseases. The prison administration paid no attention to treating those affected or stopping the spread throughout the prison. Each case seemed different, and there was no treatment. Facing these diseases and their symptoms created a devastating psychological impact on the prisoners.

Shortly after entering the room, the young men warned me, "Be careful, we have a skin disease." We didn't fully understand the nature of this disease, but the prisoners concluded from their experiences that skin diseases spread quickly in prisons due to the lack of hygiene.

They allowed me to sleep on the upper bunk to minimize my direct contact with them. The room was tiny, with two double beds, so four prisoners slept on the beds, while the rest slept on mats spread on the floor.

After ten days in that room, I developed an inflammation that started in my big toe, then spread to my entire foot and up my leg. The situation became unbearable, and I could no longer stand or walk. My psychological state deteriorated rapidly, especially as I watched the older prisoners who were sentenced to long terms, ranging from 18 to 30 years. Some of them had spent more than twenty years in prison. It was difficult to see those prisoners and then feel helpless in front of them, knowing that I would be released in two months, while they would remain there for many years after me.

My foot swelled terribly, and every day I asked to see the doctor or get painkillers, but to no avail. The health conditions inside the prison were tragic; there were prisoners suffering from open, festering wounds, yet they received no treatment. The prevailing feeling was that the jailers were waiting for us to die, or that they were taking pleasure in this kind of systematic public torture, as they watched our bodies wither, decay, and become ill before their eyes. It was behavior that was not surprising, but it had reached levels that we had never heard of, let alone seen and experienced over

many months, without charges or a fair trial, and without any distinction between a journalist and anyone else.

After about two weeks, the lawyer was able to visit me. I told him about my condition and explained what was happening. He noticed that I was genuinely unable to walk, so he quickly filed an appeal. After five days, I was finally transferred to the clinic, where the doctor examined me and was shocked by the severity of the inflammation. I got the medicine – ointment and some painkillers – and my condition improved slightly.

However, the conditions I lived in and the types of torture that I and the other prisoners witnessed in Negev prison were unlike anything I had heard about this place before. It was a place completely devoid of humanity and hope, except for the hope that I drew from the steadfastness of the older prisoners, despite their severe suffering.

Free But Still Bound

My arrest was sudden, and so was my release. I had no warning, no preparation. One moment I was languishing in my cell, the next I was being ushered out, blindfolded, handcuffed, and shackled, unable even to say goodbye to my fellow prisoners. This was their tactic, a cruel mind game designed to keep us off balance, to crush our spirits. After hours of waiting, I was finally released at the Dhahiriyah checkpoint in Hebron.

But freedom, when it finally came, was bittersweet. The joy of release was overshadowed by the lingering effects of my imprisonment. I yearned to embrace my family, to feel the

warmth of their love after months of isolation and abuse. But the skin disease I had contracted in that overcrowded, unsanitary prison prevented me from getting close to them. I couldn't hug my mother, my wife, or my children. It was a cruel twist, a reminder that the trauma of imprisonment extended beyond the prison walls. The hospital tests confirmed the physical toll of my detention: scabies, gout, the consequences of months of neglect and inadequate food.

My treatment continued for a long time, and I am still grappling with the physical and psychological effects of my imprisonment. Despite the horrific conditions, the prisoners I left behind maintain their spirits, defying the isolation and the forced separation from the outside world. Journalists, my colleagues, are still languishing in those prisons, their plight fading from the headlines, even as we continue to demand their release. The Israeli aggression against Palestinians rages on, in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, and especially in Gaza, where a war of annihilation has unfolded, resulting in one of the largest massacres in modern history. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost, including those of 185 journalists, deliberately targeted by the Israeli military. And still, they seek to silence us, to extinguish the voices of truth, the voices that dare to expose their crimes. But we will not be silenced. We will continue to resist, to document, to speak truth to power, until the day that justice prevails.



Journalism in Gaza: Humanity First

□ Youssef Fares



Youssef Fares

A Palestinian journalist and correspondent from the Gaza Strip, who contributed to reporting on the war and documenting numerous Israeli crimes in northern and central Gaza.

Journalism in Gaza: Humanity First

Youssef Fares

Writing about a professional experience that unfolds amidst an ongoing war feels like an impossible task, especially when that war seems to stretch endlessly into the future. The grim truth is that we probably haven't even seen the worst of it yet. In my 15 years as a journalist, I've covered four major wars, countless smaller battles and confrontations, and two years of the Great March of Return on Gaza's eastern border. But nothing prepared me for this. Even as a Gazan, born and raised in this besieged city, this war has been uniquely devastating, its brutality surpassing anything I could have imagined.

It's a strange irony that even Russia, with its vast military might, hesitated to call its invasion of Ukraine a "war" for two years, opting instead for the euphemism "special operation." But here in Gaza, we face a nuclear power that has openly declared war on us, a war of annihilation against a city already deemed "unlivable" by the United Nations²⁸. A tiny strip of land, overcrowded with 2.25 million people, lacking basic infrastructure, shelters, or safe zones, now faces the full force of Israel's military machine: 500,000 soldiers, tanks, armored vehicles, drones, surveillance systems, and the chilling precision of artificial intelligence.

²⁸ A 2017 UN report declared Gaza to be "unlivable" due to the dire humanitarian situation, including a severe electricity crisis and a 60% youth unemployment rate.

Given this level of brutality, mobilization, and full official Western and American support, it was understandable, for the first time in my professional life, to temper my usual rush to the scene. So, on that morning, I didn't put on my press vest and rush to cover the events. I had to use the precious hours before Israel woke up from the shock of the initial attack to prepare myself for what was to come. My first priorities were to secure my family and move them to a place we thought was safe, then secure as much equipment as possible, such as batteries, power banks, internet SIM cards, fuel for the car, and a place to stay.

I don't remember, as we approached the first anniversary of the war, how that initial period passed. Many moments are etched in my memory: the night they threatened the building where I had moved my wife and children, and I rushed at 3 AM to evacuate them. Then they bombed the house next to my family home, and 15 neighbors were martyred, and my father was injured. After that, they bombed a mosque near the house where I had moved my wife and children, and I had to evacuate them again.

In the first twenty days of the first month, I realized how difficult it would be to be both a witness and a victim simultaneously. I was experiencing the conflict that every custodian of a message and a profession lives through. I was experiencing the highest levels of failure and helplessness; to be content with writing reports and following news from home while the large scale of field events required all eyes, cameras, and pens. More accurately, we were facing great horrors and hesitant men.

Later, I realized that the worst was yet to come. The major ground offensive on the northern part of the Strip began, and 17 members of my family were killed in different locations. We ended up sleeping in the street, and I could only move them to what was called the "safe area" in the city of Rafah in the south, while I stayed in the north, which was almost empty of media personnel. And here, the real work began.

To be honest, the first month of the war left many scars on me. When I went into the field to meet the victims and capture the images, I was overcome by the feeling that all my colleagues shared: "We are telling our story with multiple mouths and eyes." This time, Israel did not give anyone an exception from death; journalists, doctors, paramedics, relief workers, everyone was a legitimate target. You had to work not just to fulfill your duty, but also to make an effort to improve your performance in a way that does not turn the victims into cold numbers, and human dignity into content for display. In the face of the magnitude of the massacres and the Israeli madness in desecrating everything, it was logical to ask many questions about the directions of coverage and angles of treatment.

One of the first of these issues is the general line in covering the war. Reaching an objective and fair level requires a careful search for a balance between the duality of the superhero and the defeated victim, because excess in either direction without the other involves a lot of injustice and obscuring reality.

The gray area between the two colors refers to the search for new vocabulary in which the hero will appear tired, bruised,

sacrificing, and often sad, but also generous, noble, and refusing to submit or surrender. Similarly, the victim, in this situation, will occupy the largest space in the picture, with all the details surrounding their difficult life, emphasizing that these are not victims of a flood, a natural earthquake, or a volcano, but rather victims of a political cause and a historical injustice, upon whom punishment is inflicted by the largest machine of brutality and crime in the region.

When reporting on the displacement from the north of the Strip to the south, then the large camps, you face a dilemma of highly sensitive professional questions. Our enemy always has the ability to reproduce the crime, and even create the same scene as it was sixty-seven years ago. So is it right to talk about a new Nakba in 2023, while we ourselves initiated the reasons for it?

The most difficult professional requirements in the face of such a war are not securing logistical needs, nor choosing words to present the victims' stories, but rather devising a general line that frames this war in the context of history, present, and future. It must highlight the reality of a people who have not been given a chance to live a real and dignified life since they were displaced from their land in 1948, and were forced to live in a reality where the occupation controls even the breath that enters their lungs, reaching the stage of extermination and uprooting at the hands of an extreme right-wing government that believes it has a historic opportunity to settle the Palestinian issue definitively – geographically, narratively, and religiously.

Perhaps reading the events from this angle gave me the abil-

ity, as both a witness and a victim, to create a special tone in my coverage, which includes employing the best contexts and journalistic styles, and exploiting all available media and platforms to show the image of the Palestinian who loves life and desires to live it as it should be lived, and who, at the same time, fights and dies for a just cause in the face of an enemy with no morals. In this context, the human story was the color that could be used to break out of the ordinary framework of the journalist's task, which is to convey the image of the event, provide statistics, and answer the curious questions for which the news was created.

At an early stage of the war, I saw that simply stating the numbers would be cold if we did not breathe the spirit of details into each one. We must, through the journalistic story, liberate the victims from the long list of numbers, and reveal the aspects that give them the right to remain, to be circulated, to be sympathized with, and to be imprinted in the minds and hearts of the recipients who will thus transform from viewers of the event to those who interact with it. This approach also takes the coverage out of the realm of repetition and into renewal; on the assumption that each victim – a martyr, an amputee, or a person with a destroyed business or a shattered ambition – is an independent story with a beginning, a climax full of surprise, and an open end where death and destruction do not put a period at the end of its line. And here, the stories that have taken their right to be presented in a professional and carefully considered manner become icons with uniqueness and a lasting presence, and are not simply part of the visual and informational overload that, over time, has become a burden even on the recipients.

The truth is that I do not rely on what the eye sees, the ear hears, and the senses consume in the manner of fast scrolling on social media, but rather on what resonates with the common human values between the hero of the story, the journalist, and the recipient. This must align with the political dimension that must always be taken into account; because the existence of the occupation represents a personal problem for all Palestinians, and not for a specific party or group that the occupation wants to burden with the task of annihilation. In this context, the story of Hajja Aqila al-Sakni comes to mind, a woman who was born in the year of the Nakba, and every stage of her life intersected with major national events. The Israeli army demolished her family's house in the Jabalia refugee camp when she was 16 years old, and on the morning of her wedding day, her family hid from her the death of her brother Hussein in the "Black September" events of 1970. Then, at the beginning of the second Intifada in 2000, her son Khalil was killed, and her younger son Hussein was injured. In this war, she lost five of her sons and remained alone, raising 26 orphaned children. Such a story, with all its backgrounds, events, and momentum that connects the past to the present, is one of the living examples that embody our historical narrative as Palestinians.

As for Um Fuzi Sha'ah, she is a mother of four children who died in an Israeli bombing that targeted their house in the Tel al-Zaatar neighborhood in Jabalia refugee camp, at the end of the third month of the war. Her attempts for five months to convince her husband to abandon his personal quest for revenge were unsuccessful, and "Abu Fuzi" died while confronting the Israeli army during the second ground operation that targeted the Jabalia camp in May 2024. These stories,

and hundreds like them, when presented professionally and thoughtfully, fill the gap in the narrative that the occupation worked for months to fill with its false narratives.

The challenge I faced in shaping the style and pattern of my reporting is not only related to the harsh conditions of the war, but also to professional and ethical barriers that must be taken into account without exceeding the role of the professional journalist. The problem in our story here is that we cannot be neutral towards the dignity, privacy, and feelings of people. For example, it is not permissible for a journalist to express feelings of helplessness that his guest and hero of the story is unable to express, even if he shares the experience of loss and hunger, and feels all the emotions that they are experiencing. Professionalism requires us to be skilled in asking questions and observing the fine details that can create common ground between the storyteller, the narrator, and the viewer. It is a difficult job and responsibility, but its results are similar to breaking down the "fourth wall" between the characters of the story and the audience, transforming the viewer, in the manner of the famous German playwright Bertolt Brecht, from a recipient to an interactive element in creating, conveying, and adding to the story through his psychological reflections.

A Personal Journey Through Journalism in Gaza

I've come to realize that the traditional institutional approach to journalism – writing, editing, and presenting reports and stories – isn't sufficient to fully convey the personal impact and shared emotions of the people I've encountered. Thus, I've had to forge a new style of writing. Or perhaps, more ac-

curately, the daily situations and observations have shaped a new style of writing and presentation on social media. This style has taken on a life of its own, allowing me to share stories and their protagonists along with my own emotional responses and the impact they've had on me. This style demands the utilization of journalism's most essential tools: meticulous attention to detail, eloquent language that remains accessible to a wide audience, and providing opportunities for readers to add their own interpretations based on the accompanying images and narratives. Alongside these daily posts, I continued to produce reports for the television stations and newspapers I work for.

I must admit that this approach wasn't planned. It was born out of necessity and refined by the abundance of events and the intensity of human stories. Delving deeper into this style has allowed me to reveal the faces that breaking news often obscures, presenting their images, voices, feelings, and our feelings towards them. Moreover, it has created enduring narratives for these individuals, stories that continue beyond the initial publication. We can follow these stories over time, observing the transformations brought about by loss and the ways in which people cope with trauma.

For instance, there's the story of Hamzah Abu Halimeh, whose photo was taken by a journalist embedded with the Israeli army during interrogation. The photo showed a naked Hamzah with bruised feet, exchanging a defiant glare with the soldier cuffing his hands behind his back. When the photo was published earlier this year, it went viral, and people were eager to learn more about the circumstances surrounding it. This image became an icon, transcending the immediate event.

Another example is the story of the mother of Muhammad Bahar²⁹, a young man with Down syndrome who was mauled to death by a dog released by Israeli soldiers inside his home in the Shajaiya neighborhood. Nabila, his mother, bravely shared the horrific story, with all the feelings of oppression and despair evident in her face and voice. Several months later, we learned that she would be organizing a carnival to bring joy to children at the Mawlid ceremony, in memory of her son. The re-emergence of a new image of the martyred child's mother, dressed in a Palestinian peasant's gown and smiling despite her profound sorrow, not only immortalizes her image and story but also gives the narrative a sense of continuity and renewal, making her presence in the minds of the audience more enduring.

The professional reflections of the war experience go beyond styles and methods of coverage, improving texts, images, presentation, and ethics. It's about discovering the importance and value of journalism, not just from a political perspective, but also from the perspective of the victims themselves. Those I interacted with daily have shown me that they need journalists to tell their stories and immortalize them.

Basma al-Khazindar, whose son was killed in the assassination of journalists Ismail al-Ghoul and Rami al-Rifi, angrily shouted at me, saying, "They wrote on my only son's body, 'Unknown martyr.' My son is not an unknown martyr,

²⁹ Muhammad Bahar, a 24-year-old Palestinian with Down's syndrome, was killed by Israeli forces on July 4th, 2024, during a raid on his family's home in eastern Gaza City. According to his mother, Muhammad was innocent and had limited verbal abilities. The Israeli soldiers used dogs during the raid, which resulted in Muhammad's tragic death.

my son is not collateral damage, my son is not a number, my son has a name, and his name is Khaled Sa'id al-Shawwa."

Loss is agonizing, but absence and marginalization are even more so. People need journalists to bear witness to their lives, to tell their stories, to ensure their existence is not erased. The most significant lesson from this war is the vital role journalists play in countering the forces of oblivion – the disappearance of images, stories, narratives, and even statistics. The brutal reality of the Israeli occupation, a 74-year campaign of dispossession and violence, demands that we fight against erasure, against the silencing of Palestinian voices. Our survival is a victory, our stories a testament to our resilience.

Finally, I am grateful to the heroes of my stories, who allowed me to stand beside them, enter their families, and sometimes even share in their heroism. However, the undeniable truth is that they are the ones who make us, and our simple and limited role is to give them a voice. I am also grateful to the Al Jazeera Media Institute, which always excels at transforming a random idea into a methodology suitable for becoming an academic path, and even being immortalized in books.



Our Journalism is What Drives Them Crazy

□ Hamam Hantash



Hamam Hantash

An independent Palestinian journalist from the West Bank, was detained for 310 days for his reporting. His work has made him a target of Israeli authorities.

Our Journalism is What Drives Them Crazy

Hamam Hantash

Two primary accusations converge upon us in this land: one shared by all Palestinians, concerning their steadfastness on their own land, and the other specific to the journalistic profession. Israel has declared an all-out war on truth and anyone who attempts to uncover it with professionalism and objectivity. Consequently, my fate, like that of many others in the occupied West Bank, has led to a bitter experience of imprisonment, some chapters of which I will document in this testimony.

I was arrested on October 24, 2023 around 1 AM. They say the memories of victims and trauma are precise, but the brutality of the occupation during this period made it impossible to forget any detail of the torment inflicted upon us. Occupation forces surrounded the house with a large number of armed soldiers, as if I were a terrorist or a faction leader, despite the fact that none of these measures were necessary. The arrest was brutal. I was seized with a savagery that defied any sense of justice or proportionality. I offered no resistance, had committed no crime that could justify such demeaning and terrifying treatment. But in the eyes of the Israelis, my very existence as a Palestinian, as a journalist, was enough. It was a crime punishable by death, by torture, by endless humiliation.

I was dragged away in the dead of night to a location far from my home, where military vehicles were lined up on either side. During this period, I was beaten and kicked, especially inside the military jeep that transported me to the "Shekef" camp in the settlement bearing the same name. In the jeep, and along the entire route, I was thrown onto the floor of the vehicle, with the soldiers' feet on top of me.

Upon arriving at the camp, I was handcuffed and subjected to a quick medical examination by the doctor present, then tied to a fence surrounding the camp and left near a guard dog that howled fiercely whenever it approached me. I was restrained in a manner similar to the 'shabeh³⁰ position; my hands were raised above my head and tied behind me. I remained in this state until dawn, after which I was transferred to the "Etzion" detention camp, where my suffering continued with various forms of torment and senseless assault – the kind of assault motivated by nothing other than hatred, brutality, and the desire to break the human will.

In the "Etzion" prison, we were met by officers who interrogated us in a humiliating manner. Every step in prison is an opportunity for humiliation. Every change in the prisoners' situation is aimed solely at breaking them and reveling in their suffering. And so it happened; we were severely beaten and completely stripped of our clothes. Afterward, we were put into detention rooms, where we spent two nights in extremely harsh conditions. During this period, they forced us to kneel, raise our hands above our heads, and lower our

³⁰ Shabeh is torture technique in Israeli prisons, and entails shackling the detainee's hands and legs to a small chair, angled to slant forward so that the detainee cannot sit in a stable position. The interrogatee's head is covered with an often filthy sack and loud music is played non-stop through loudspeakers. Detainees in shabeh are not allowed to sleep.

heads. I am a former prisoner and have experience with prison, but even so, this treatment shocked me. I had never witnessed or heard of such terrible treatment occurring so systematically and universally. None of the prisoners were exempt from it, regardless of their status. It goes without saying that my journalistic identity was in no way a protection for me, but perhaps it was a reason for the jailer to single me out, to multiply the torment and intensify the humiliation.

I was then transferred to "Ofer" prison, where I was interrogated by Shabak officers. I was charged with incitement and covering news related to the October 7 attacks. They considered the news I was conveying to be incitement against the occupation. I spent about 15 days in "Ofer" prison, and during that period, special operations units would enter the sections almost daily, storm the rooms, and conduct searches and beatings in the middle of the night. We would suddenly wake up to their voices as they stormed the rooms and counted us. The treatment was abysmal, brutal. Even the food, as is well-known today, was a fundamental part of the torture in prison: one egg that was barely fit to eat, with a tomato or cucumber, and for lunch, some semi-cooked rice, about two spoonfuls, sometimes accompanied by a little beans, peas, or corn, and then four slices of bread. That was all there was, and it caused the prisoners' bodies to literally melt away due to malnutrition, constant torture, and deprivation of sleep.

We were deprived of all means of communication with the outside world; we had no radio, which made us completely isolated from the news and developments. We would talk among ourselves, guessing that the war would last for only one month, betting on this possibility, telling ourselves "we

will endure a little longer." But it dragged on for months and months.

After about 15 or 20 days of detention, a special operations unit, known as "Yamas" came to us and entered our room. For no apparent reason, we were subjected to another violent, naked search, then a round of beatings. On that day, one of the guards approached me with his vicious dog, and he would bring it closer to me whenever I moved or raised my head. They did that to me especially that day, perhaps as punishment for speaking to them in a defiant tone. They decided to teach me a lesson. The sight of the dog, its snarling, its proximity, instilled a different kind of terror within me. I was terrified that they would unleash the dog on me or that it would escape from them, especially since I was crammed into a corner with no possibility of escape. The guards laughed and mocked, and this absurd terror using the dog continued for about half an hour.

One by one, they called us out. Every time a prisoner left, we heard their screams, understanding that they were being severely beaten. We would say to each other, 'Your turn is coming,' knowing that they would face the same harsh treatment. When my turn came, I was taken to a control room called 'al-makhlul', where prisoners are searched and cameras and communications are controlled. I entered the room, and they asked me to strip completely naked. The situation was humiliating, and they left me exposed while I could hear the screams of the other prisoners in the adjacent rooms. This was a recurring pattern of sexually-charged assaults designed to degrade us, in complete violation of all laws and norms.

During the strip search, I was subjected to another round of beating, without any conversation or question; it was a blind beating for the sake of beating. Five soldiers surrounded me, taking turns hitting me with iron rods, causing me severe pain and bruises. When I told them that I was sick and had back pain, they ignored me and even increased the intensity of the beating. For several moments, I felt like I was about to die, so I began to recite the “Shahadah”, which is the Islamic declaration of faith³¹, clinging to those words as darkness closed in. It was my only solace, the only meaning I could find in that maelstrom of violence.

They continued to beat me, the blows raining down like a hailstorm, batons, plastic sticks, iron rods. My head throbbed, blood streamed from my nose, mingling with the blood of my comrades who had been brutalized before me. It was a massacre, a scene that plays out daily in the occupation's prisons. It is our duty, as journalists, as human beings, to expose these atrocities, to demand an end to this brutality.

They dragged us to another cell, our bodies battered and bruised. Blood still flowed from our wounds – eyes swollen shut, faces split open, limbs twisted at unnatural angles. The cell was cramped, barely 9 meters by 6 meters, yet they crammed 13 of us inside. A few ragged mattresses lay scattered on the floor, not nearly enough for everyone. We collapsed where we could, our bodies aching, unable to move, unable even to reach the empty bunks above. There was no water to wash away the grime, the blood, the humiliation.

³¹ In Islamic culture, a dying person is urged to say the Islamic declaration of faith known as the Shahada. It is believed to be a source of comfort, a reaffirmation of faith, and a way to seek forgiveness and mercy from Allah.

The dog's saliva still clung to my skin, a constant reminder of the terror I had endured. I couldn't sleep, the memory of its snarling jaws and hot breath haunting my every waking moment. It wasn't until the next day, when they finally turned on the water for a single, precious hour, that I could wash away the filth and try to reclaim some semblance of dignity.

After that, a new and agonizing journey of torture began. Whenever the guards came to count us, they would ask us to put our heads towards the wall, sit on our knees, and put our hands above our heads. When counting, the 'Keter' unit³², would arrive. Sometimes they would play a game to choose the room that would be subjected to torture. Sometimes they would enter the rooms one after the other, and other times they would choose a specific room and start breaking everything in it and beating everyone inside without any apparent reason.

They would come almost two to three times a week after the count was over, enter, and start calling out names, followed by a severe beating and destruction. Every time we were afraid of the counting period because we knew it would be accompanied by beating and torture.

Lawyer Visits: Another Opportunity for Torture

Whenever a prisoner was summoned for a lawyer's visit, he would be shackled with handcuffs so tightly that it felt as

³² Keter, the Israel Prison Service Initial Reaction Force, was established in 2010 to handle emergencies and provide an immediate response until other forces arrive, in instances such as prison riots or escape attempts. The unit faced criticism for alleged use of excessive force and torture. Since the beginning of the war on Gaza, its name has been linked to serious allegations concerning the use of extreme and unlawful measures. Palestinian prisoners refer to "Keter" as the "death squad."

if his hands would be severed. Upon reaching the control center or prison administration, the beatings would begin. Prisoners were placed in waiting rooms where they would be subjected to a round of humiliating beatings, regardless of the fact that they were about to meet their lawyers. Over time, the beatings prior to lawyer visits became so severe that young men preferred to avoid court sessions altogether. The reason was simple: the prisoner knew that if he wanted to see his lawyer, he would have to endure a savage beating. The young men would return with their faces and bodies covered in bruises, their hands bearing the deep marks of the handcuffs that cut into their skin, blood flowing freely.

The experience of attending court, typically Ofer court, was dehumanizing. We were subjected to prolonged waiting periods, often an entire day, while remaining handcuffed and blindfolded. The actual court session, conducted via video conference, would be frustratingly brief, lasting no more than five minutes, with a predictable lack of any meaningful outcome.

During this agonizing wait, we were forced to kneel with our heads bowed, enduring the physical discomfort and the psychological weight of powerlessness. Any attempt to alleviate the strain or even an unintentional movement would result in brutal collective punishment inflicted by the soldiers. This tactic aimed not only to humiliate us but also to sow discord among us, fostering suspicion and resentment as we became targets of each other's frustration.

Food as a Tool of Torture

The food in prison during this period was barely enough for one person, yet it was given to ten prisoners. We had to divide what was barely enough for one person among us, so each of us would get two or three spoons of food, or two slices of cucumber or carrot. On some days, we would get a small, spoon-sized container of yogurt. Even the bread had a bad smell, like rotten sausage or cabbage, making it inedible.

Some young men would collect food throughout the week to eat it all on Friday, in an effort to feel full even once a week. But sometimes the food would spoil, which would lead to bigger problems, such as poisoning and terrible stomach pains. Once, I collected my share of yogurt for a whole week, imagining that I would have a 'feast' on Friday. This was an expression we used to refer to a simple celebration that we would have when we gathered a sufficient amount of food. We would do everything possible for a moment that would break the monotony of the prison, despite the warden's cruelty and his excessive collective torture. But the yogurt I had collected spoiled. It was a disaster on two fronts; we deprived ourselves of food for a whole week, only to lose it all, and then we lost that brief moment of happiness, that small victory. We all felt very sad that day.

This was just one experience in prison, and despite the horror of the details I experienced, and whose effects still linger within me today, it is not the worst. The stories of prisoners in Israeli prisons are still largely overshadowed and forgotten.



Covering Palestine After October 7

Mustafa Khawaja



Mustafa Khawaja

A Correspondent and freelance journalist from Ramallah, West Bank. Mustafa was arrested by the Israeli army on October 16, 2023, after soldiers stormed his home, vandalizing it and terrorizing his family. He was held for 10 months due to his journalistic activities before finally being released in August 2024.

Covering Palestine After October 7

Mustafa Khawaja

On October 16, 2023, at 3:00 AM, my wife and I were jolted awake by the violent sounds of Israeli soldiers attempting to break down our front door. Despite my assurances that I was coming to open it, they persisted, ultimately forcing the door open. My wife and I were immediately confronted with weapons pointed at us. After confirming my identity, they demanded my ID, phone, and that everyone in the house be brought forward. I explained that our children, including our nine-year-old autistic son, Ahmed, and four-year-old daughter, Lin, were asleep.

The soldiers informed me I was under arrest. My wife, despite the shock and fear, remained strong and even brought me my medication for a stomach ailment. The soldiers refused to let me change clothes in private, forcing me to change in front of them. They confiscated my glasses and medicine, blindfolded me, and bound my hands behind my back with plastic zip ties. As they led me outside, one soldier struck me on the head, forcing my head down and my back to bend.

Blindfolded and bound, I was thrown onto my back in a military jeep, landing amongst the soldiers' feet. A convoy of six military vehicles then departed from our home.

En route to an Israeli military camp near Rantis, northwest of

Ramallah, a soldier poured hot coffee on me as I lay helpless on the floor of the jeep. At the camp, I was dumped onto the ground, still bound and blindfolded, subjected to a barrage of insults and blows from passing soldiers. One soldier's punch to my left eye caused severe pain and dizziness. I cried out for medical attention, but my pleas were ignored. When I requested to pray, a soldier responded in English, "God is off duty," denying my request.

After sunrise, I was taken to what I assumed was a first aid room. A military medic examined me, speaking only in Hebrew. He confirmed that the blow had caused a cut and bleeding on my left cheek.

I was then transferred to a large bus and transported to the Etzion detention center in the southern West Bank. There, along with another detainee from my village, Majd Nafe', who had been arrested that same night, we were forced to sit on the gravel, hands still bound and eyes covered. We remained in this agonizing position until evening, denied prayer, bathroom breaks, or even the ability to adjust our position.

As evening fell, we were taken inside the detention center, strip-searched, and subjected to further verbal abuse. Finally, I was placed in a cell with nine other detainees, where I spent the night. The following morning, we were transferred to Megiddo prison.

That first night of detention was brutal. The physical abuse was compounded by the anguish of being torn away from my wife and children, especially my autistic son, without warn-

ing. The uncertainty about their well-being and what was happening at home tormented me. The hours felt like days, the days like weeks.

Arrival at Megiddo Prison

Our transport to Megiddo Prison on Tuesday, October 17th, 2023, was a brutal ordeal marked by physical assaults. We were offloaded by the Nachshon Unit³³, a specialized unit responsible for transferring prisoners between prisons and military courts.

Upon arrival, we were subjected to invasive strip searches and thrust into a courtyard teeming with detainees. The scene was chaotic and violent, with prisoners forced to sit on the ground, hands raised, as prison guards brutally assaulted them with blows and insults. I myself was not spared this treatment, enduring attacks to my face and body. The guards then forced me to join the other prisoners on the ground, where I was further subjected to kicks and punches.

Next, I was ushered into a small room and made to sit in front of an Israeli flag for a mugshot. From there, I was taken to another room where two prison intelligence officers interrogated me, focusing on my journalistic work. They accused me of inciting against Israel and promoting Palestinian resistance. I maintained that I was a professional journalist adhering to ethical standards and practices.

³³ The official prisoner transport unit in Israel and the West Bank. The unit transfer Palestinian prisoners blindfolded, in handcuffs, and in most cases in legcuffs, too. They often do not know where they are being taken or how long the journey will take. For a comprehensive account of the grave abuses suffered by Palestinian prisoners within Israeli detention centers and prisons, see B'Tselem's report: "Welcome to Hell: The Israeli Prison System as a Network of Torture Camps."

They questioned me about my social media presence, specifically Instagram and TikTok. When I informed them I had no accounts on those platforms, they exchanged dubious glances. One of them summoned a guard and ordered my transfer to Section 5. Before that, however, I was presented to a medic who inquired about any medical conditions and recorded my weight.

As I was escorted to Section 5, still bound, three guards assaulted me along the way. Upon reaching the entrance, one guard struck my legs with an iron rod, leaving lasting marks. My earlier assertion to the intelligence officer that I was a journalist was met with disdain and mockery. When I requested my glasses, confiscated during the arrest, he scoffed, claiming I had no need for them.

Section 5

The conditions in Section 5 of Megiddo Prison were deplorable, mirroring the harsh realities throughout the facility. Cells designed for six inmates were crammed with over ten, forcing many to sleep on the floor. Raids and assaults on prisoners were commonplace.

I spent a month in Cell 11. The guards confiscated all our belongings, including electrical appliances, food we had purchased before the war, clothing, shoes, and even hygiene products and cleaning supplies. With fifteen inmates crammed into the cell, the situation became unbearable, especially since we were often denied showers for days on end.

One day, the guards came to our cell and ordered us to approach the door for shackling (they typically restrained us within our cells through a small opening in the door). In a threatening tone, they commanded us to remove our shoes and limit our attire to a single layer of clothing. We were then marched to the showers amidst a torrent of insults. Upon arrival, we were forced to sit on the floor, where the guards unleashed a brutal assault, spewing profanities and specifically targeting Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar with vile language. Their objective was clear: to strip us of our possessions and dignity in the most degrading manner possible.

Throughout my detention, I repeatedly requested my confiscated medication or an appropriate substitute from the prison medic, but my requests were consistently denied. Similarly, my pleas for the return of my glasses, held in the prison's possession, proved futile.

During one of the frequent prisoner transfers, aimed at disrupting any sense of stability, a guard confronted a fellow journalist. When asked about the charges against him, he replied that he was a journalist. This simple statement triggered a savage beating, which then extended to several other detainees.

Among the journalists imprisoned alongside me in that section was my colleague Sabri Jibril. Also held in Megiddo prison were fellow journalists Nawaf al-Amer and Muath Amarnah³⁴, who had tragically lost an eye in 2019 due to Israeli gunfire while covering events in the West Bank.

³⁴ For Muath Amarnah's firsthand account of his experiences, see page 140

Timeline of Abuse

- **October 17th:** The day I entered Megiddo Prison, I was subjected to beatings in a small courtyard where dozens of prisoners were held. The guards punched us across our bodies in front of the other detainees. While sitting on the ground with my hands raised, I was kicked in the lower back.
- **During Transfer:** During my transfer from the prison entrance to Section 5, I was continuously assaulted by three guards. At the entrance to the section, I was struck on my legs with an iron rod, leaving marks that lasted for weeks.
- **October 20th:** On a Friday, I was transferred with dozens of prisoners to Ofer Prison for interrogation and then returned to Megiddo. We were subjected to beatings during this transfer.
- **October 30:** I was taken from Section 5 with other prisoners for a video court appearance. We were placed in a communal cell outside the main sections to await our turns. While there, I witnessed a young prisoner (no older than 18) being severely beaten, resulting in fractures. A female officer present urged the guards to inflict even more violence.
- **November 7:** A month after the war began, the section I was in underwent a comprehensive search. Upon reaching our cell, the guards bound us and forced us to the showers after making us remove our shoes. There, they unleashed a savage attack, accompanied by a torrent of insults and

profanities aimed at degrading our humanity and honor. They also hurled insults at leaders of the Palestinian resistance.

- **Transfer to Section 8:** After a month in Section 5, I was summoned along with other prisoners. We were bound, forced to bow our heads, and transferred to Section 8.
- **Punishment for Prayer:** In Section 8, I witnessed a prisoner being dragged to solitary confinement and brutally beaten for reciting the call to prayer (adhan). He was returned to the section in a horrific state, covered in bruises.
- **Religious Restrictions:** From the first day of the war, Friday sermons and prayers³⁵ were prohibited. Later, the call to prayer was also banned, and our wristwatches were confiscated.

Witnessing Tragedy

One of the most harrowing experiences during my ten-month detention amidst the war on Gaza was witnessing the death of fellow detainee Omar Draghmeh³⁶, who was held in the same section. When his health deteriorated, exhibiting symptoms of a heart attack, the other prisoners frantically

³⁵ Friday sermons and congregational prayers are fundamental to Islamic practice, obligatory for Muslim men and a cornerstone of communal life. Yet, testimonies and reports reveal a systematic suppression of Palestinian prisoners' right to worship, often accompanied by deliberate insults to their faith. This suppression includes prohibiting group prayer, denying access to water for ablution, banning prayer recitation, and confiscating Qurans.

³⁶ On October 23, 2023, Palestinian political prisoner Omar Hamza Daraghmeh, a 58-year-old father and prominent member of Hamas, was tragically left to die in Israeli custody. His death occurred mere hours after a video court hearing where he appeared to be in good health, raising grave concerns about the circumstances surrounding his passing. He and his son Hamza were swept up in a mass arrest of over 1,000 Palestinians following October 7th, amidst Israel's brutal war on Gaza.

called for the guard. He delayed responding for agonizing 15 minutes. They pleaded with him to bring a medic or doctor urgently. When the medic finally arrived, after further delays, Omar was led out on foot, still shackled. We didn't know if they provided him with any aid or assistance. The next day, news of his death reached us. Words cannot describe the profound despair and sense of helplessness that gripped the section. We were consumed by grief, compounded by the inability to express any protest or outrage.

Witnessing a preventable death is devastating. This incident deeply affected me, and like most of the prisoners, I still grapple with the psychological scars from those dark days surrounding Omar's death. Perhaps my perspective as a journalist amplified the impact. I found myself reflecting on Omar's life, his family before and after his passing. How would they receive the news? How would his son Hamza, imprisoned in another section of the same facility, cope with this tragedy? These thoughts inevitably led me to worry about my own family. How would they react to news of a prisoner's death in the very prison where I was held? How would such news impact them, given the isolation imposed on detainees, the lack of communication, and the ban on visits? As I later learned upon my release, the news had indeed terrified the families of all the prisoners, including my own.

Legal limbo and administrative detention

From the day of my arrest on October 16, 2023, until October 30, I remained in the dark about the legal grounds for my detention and the charges against me. After two weeks, I was summoned, shackled, and taken for a court appearance.

Two guards led me into a room near the entrance of Section 5 and instructed me to sit in front of a computer screen. I found myself facing the Ofer military court via video conference. My family-appointed lawyer was present and informed me that I had been placed under administrative detention for six months. This meant that my detention was authorized by an Israeli intelligence officer, rendering the court proceedings a mere formality. This was my only court appearance for the next six months. I was not brought before a judge again until April 2024, when my administrative detention was renewed for another four months.

Transfer to Shata Prison

On December 14, I was transferred along with twenty other prisoners from Megiddo to Shata Prison.

Before the war on Gaza, Israeli prison authorities would inform prisoners of transfers a day or more in advance. This allowed us to prepare, pack our belongings (clothes, personal items, family photos, books, etc.), and know our destination.

All that changed after October 7. The new procedure involved guards arriving at our cells, shackling us, and taking us to a holding cell at the prison entrance. We were then loaded onto the transport vehicle with no knowledge of our destination.

This is what happened to me on December 14, 2023. Guards came to Cell 2 in Section 8 of Megiddo Prison, where I was with ten other prisoners. We were ordered to the door, shackled, and then taken to the prison entrance. There, we

joined other prisoners from Megiddo. We could only speculate where we were being taken. Some prisoners overheard the guards whispering that we were headed to Shata Prison.

We were thoroughly searched, some of us assaulted, and then loaded onto the vehicle. The journey to Shata Prison wasn't long – perhaps 40 minutes at most.

Even before we disembarked, we could hear the loud barking of dogs. The sound was terrifying, especially since we were blindfolded and unable to see. In that state of sensory deprivation, with our knowledge of the guards' brutality, anything was possible.

We were taken off the vehicle and into a holding cell at the entrance of Shata Prison. As always, we were shackled and forced to keep our heads bowed, unable to see. As each of us entered the holding cell, we were met with kicks from the guards waiting inside. Then they entered, forced us to sit on the floor (still shackled), and continued the beatings while spewing a torrent of insults and profanities.

One moment I'll never forget: A prisoner from Jaba', near Jenin, lost consciousness from the brutal beating, which seemed focused on his upper body. We desperately called for the guards to take him to the prison clinic, but our pleas were met with silence. They ignored us completely. The man remained unconscious until he eventually regained some awareness. It was heart-wrenching to see and hear him in that state, his voice trembling with pain as he begged us to look after his children if he died. It was one of the most difficult moments in those first hours in that holding cell.

The beatings continued as they started calling us out of the holding cell one by one. My turn came. I was subjected to another round of beatings in front of the cell. Then two guards led me down a long corridor, my hands shackled behind my back, forced into a painful, humiliating bent-over position. The pain was so intense that I struggled to breathe and collapsed to the ground at least twice. Finally, I reached the new section of the prison, which had opened on December 3, 2023 – just eleven days before my arrival. It was the only section for Palestinian political prisoners; the other sections were for those convicted of criminal offenses.

Entering Section 7 in Shata Prison

I arrived at the section door in a pitiful state, the result of the brutal beating I endured at the prison entrance and the agonizing position I was forced into during the transfer through the prison corridors. At the entrance to Section 7, a guard slapped me so hard across the face that I felt dizzy and my vision blurred. The beating and the forced bending had left me utterly degraded.

They led me into a room where a doctor, dressed in a guard's uniform, sat behind a computer screen. He asked if I had any medical conditions. I told him about my stomach problems and that I had brought medication, but the soldiers had thrown it away. He promised to get me the medication and send it to my cell, a promise that, of course, was never fulfilled.

I was struggling to keep my pants up, aware that I had lost weight. But the scale at the "clinic" revealed a shocking truth:

I had lost 20 kilograms (44 pounds) in just two months at Megiddo Prison!

As for the living conditions in Shata Prison, I was surprised by the makeup of the prisoners. Upon entering my cell (Cell 7), I found six other prisoners, two of whom were serving life sentences. I learned that a number of prisoners serving life sentences were housed in this section, including the world's longest-serving political prisoner and the dean of Palestinian and Arab prisoners, Nael Barghouti, as well as other prominent figures in the prisoner movement like Abdullah Barghouti³⁷, Bilal Barghouti, and Mohammed Arman.

The prisoner count was conducted differently here. In Megiddo, we stood at the back of the cell, facing the officer and guards during the count. In Shata, we sat on the floor facing the wall, our backs to the door where the officer stood, with our hands raised above our heads.

The searches, cell raids, and assaults were more frequent in Shata. They also kept the lights on all night, depriving me of sleep in darkness for eight consecutive months. The call to prayer was completely banned in Shata, as was Friday prayer. For ten months, I was unable to perform Friday prayers and was deprived of hearing the call to prayer for eight months.

Being a journalist didn't afford me any special treatment. In fact, it sometimes seemed to intensify the brutality. On

³⁷ Abdullah Barghouti (52) is a prisoner in Israeli jails and one of the most prominent leaders of Hamas. He is also one of the prominent leaders of the Second Intifada that erupted in 2000. He is currently serving one of the longest sentences in history: 67 life sentences plus 5,200 years.

March 14, 2024, during a cell search, I was assaulted while handcuffed from behind. A guard kicked my leg, causing me to fall. From that day until a month after my release from prison, I could only pray while seated on a chair, unable to bend my knee. I'm still undergoing treatment for the injury.

Denied Care and the Cruelty of Deprivation

From the moment I was arrested, I made it clear that I suffered from a chronic digestive condition and required medication. Yet, throughout my ordeal in both Megiddo and Shata prisons, my pleas for proper medical attention were met with indifference.

The brutal assault on March 14 left me with a severely injured knee, unable to pray without excruciating pain. Despite repeatedly alerting the prison medic and eventually seeing the doctor, my condition was dismissed with mere painkillers. Even though surgery was deemed necessary, it was never provided. I was left to endure this agonizing pain until my release.

Adding to this physical torment was the cruel deprivation of my eyeglasses. As someone with severely impaired vision, being denied this basic necessity for six and a half months was incredibly debilitating. The constant dizziness and headaches were relentless, a cruel reminder of my vulnerability and the guards' complete disregard for my well-being. Despite my repeated pleas to prison officials, medics, and even guards, my glasses remained confiscated. It took a desperate appeal to a judge during a court hearing, with my lawyer's intervention, to finally regain this essential aid.

The Anguish of Isolation and Information Deprivation

Beyond the physical hardships, the psychological torment of complete isolation from the outside world was profound. As a journalist, I was accustomed to being connected to the flow of information, both locally and globally. Yet, within the prison walls, I was cut off from the news, unable to follow the unfolding war or even learn about my family's well-being.

This enforced ignorance was a constant source of anxiety. My parents suffer from heart conditions, and my eldest son, Ahmed, is autistic. The inability to know how they were coping, especially Ahmed, filled me with dread. I had been deeply involved in his therapy and understood his unique needs, making this separation even more agonizing.

To cope with this isolation, I often sought refuge in memories. Lying on my thin prison mattress, I would lose myself in thoughts of my family, especially Ahmed. These moments of mental escape offered a brief respite from the harsh realities of confinement.

Ironically, our only source of news came through a transit point in Ramla, known as the "Ramla Crossing," where prisoners from various prisons were temporarily gathered during transfers for interrogation. This chaotic space became our "newsroom," a place where whispers of information were exchanged between new and old prisoners.

It was through this channel that we learned of the assassination of Saleh al-Arouri, a high-ranking Hamas official, and

later, the death of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. Receiving such significant news weeks after the fact was a jarring experience. As a journalist accustomed to disseminating news in real-time, this delay felt like a cruel distortion of reality. This disconnect from my work and the flow of information was incredibly taxing, a constant reminder of my powerlessness and isolation.

The deprivation of information, coupled with the inability to engage in my profession, was perhaps the most psychologically damaging aspect of my imprisonment. It was a unique form of torture, amplified by my journalistic identity.

The Lack Thereof

As a journalist, I spoke with dozens of prisoners who had been detained when the war began. The issue of food deprivation was a universal experience. On October 7th, repressive prison units stormed our cells, confiscating everything, including all food items, canned goods, olive oil – everything. Even the "canteen," where we could purchase necessities, was raided and emptied.

We were left with only the meager and substandard food provided by the prison. The already poor quality deteriorated further, and the portions shrunk drastically. Throughout my ten-month detention during the war, my daily breakfast consisted of a meager spoonful and a half of labneh with half a cucumber or tomato. Occasionally, we were given a single bell pepper to be shared among three prisoners. Only on Saturdays did our breakfast improve slightly, with two slices of processed cheese, a small carton of milk, and a few ol-

ives. Lunch and dinner consisted of two plates of rice, two plates of watery soup (chickpeas, lentils, or beans), and a plate of vegetables (usually cabbage, beets, or bell peppers) – all meant to be shared among ten or more prisoners in a single cell. Only five days a week were we given an egg with dinner.

But the problem wasn't just the quantity; the quality was abysmal. The rice was often undercooked, especially in Megiddo, and the soups were completely devoid of salt. We were denied any hot beverages, and fruits, sweets, and anything containing sugar were strictly forbidden. As the months passed, I noticed a marked decline in our physical strength and energy. During our allotted hour outside the cell for showers, we used to walk around the designated area in the section yard. But eventually, we became too weak even for that.

We grimly joked about our weight loss, as our physical appearances changed drastically. Prisoners lost tens of kilograms. Almost everyone I encountered in Shata Prison had experienced significant weight loss. Some lost 20 kilograms, others 30. I myself lost 37 kilograms, the effects of which I still suffer from.

This combination of physical weakness, inadequate nutrition, and unsanitary cell conditions created a breeding ground for disease. Scabies became rampant³⁸, further compounding the misery of our imprisonment.

³⁸ Scabies is a skin infestation caused by a microscopic mite. It is widespread among Palestinian prisoners due to the punitive measures imposed by Israeli prison authorities since October 7, 2023. These measures include deprivation of basic human rights, such as access to showers and water, confiscation of hygiene products, denial of haircuts, and restrictions on obtaining clothes.

In mid-July, as temperatures soared, a fellow prisoner in my cell (Cell 3, Section 7, Shata Prison) developed an incessant itch, followed by bumps all over his body. Within three days, most of us in the cell exhibited the same symptoms. We alerted the guards, who promised to bring a doctor but imposed a lockdown on us, preventing any contact with other prisoners. The doctor finally arrived days later, but only spoke to us from a distance, without examining us – another stark reminder of our dehumanization.

The prison administration provided us with ointments after the doctor, based on our descriptions, suspected scabies. However, they still allowed us to use the same showers as other prisoners, despite the risk of spreading the highly contagious disease.

Beatings and More Beatings

Perhaps the most harrowing aspect of my ten months in Israeli prisons during the war was the relentless and arbitrary violence inflicted upon us. Prisoners were subjected to beatings, assaults, and a constant barrage of insults, often without any justification or provocation. This brutality was amplified by the ever-present threat of cell raids, designed to keep us in a perpetual state of fear and psychological distress.

The guards would storm our cells at any time, day or night, destroying our meager possessions and shackling us. They showed no regard for sacred times, raiding our cells during Ramadan, on Laylat al-Qadr, and even on Fridays. After October 7th, it seemed there were no limits to their cruelty.

One of the most agonizing experiences was being forced to listen to the screams of fellow prisoners being brutally beaten. Those sounds still haunt me, echoing from Cell 3, then Cell 1, where elderly prisoners were mercilessly attacked by the guards. During one such raid, prisoner Abdullah Barghouti suffered a broken rib, and prisoner Lili Abu Rujaila had his nose broken. Both men were serving life sentences.

Even the seemingly mundane act of attending court hearings was fraught with peril. As I mentioned earlier, merely leaving the cell meant risking assault. This is precisely what happened to me during a court appearance on April 25th, 2024.

I was taken from my cell, blindfolded, and shackled – both my hands and feet. Upon reaching the room where the video conference was held, the blindfold was removed, but the shackles remained. I was made to sit in front of a computer screen and speak with my lawyer, who informed me that my administrative detention had been renewed for another four months.

³⁹ Lili Abu Rujaila was arrested in 2006 and sentenced to life imprisonment. Israeli authorities denied him visits with his infant son, Ayoub, despite repeated attempts. Ayoub was also arrested in 2021, and the following year, they were finally allowed a brief reunion. Lili Abu Rujaila documented this encounter in a testimony relayed to his lawyer:

"I met my son Ayoub in a cell in Jalameh Prison. I heard my son's heartbeat for the first time in my life. I put his socks on, fed him with my own hands, slept beside him, drank tea with him for the first time in my life... I reaped the fruit of 17 years in this meeting... Ayoub was more beautiful than I had dreamed, a kind, calm, conscious young man, with sweet words. When I was arrested, he was 25 days old. He lived away from his father, and I away from him. He was looking for his father, and I was looking for my son... I arrived before him, cleaned the cell, and at 11:30 the door opened. He entered and hugged me tightly, lifting me off the ground. This broke the barrier of 17 years. I tried not to waste a minute, so we talked all night, and when he got tired, I allowed him to sleep for 3 hours, and I stayed by his side, contemplating his features. When I woke him up, he rode on my back like a child... At 8:15 in the morning, the cell door opened, and the officer came to inform me that they had come to take Ayoub. He disappeared in front of me, and I felt like they had ripped a piece of my heart out and taken it... A meeting I waited 17 years for was reduced to only 20 hours."

When given the opportunity to speak, I expressed my outrage at being unjustly imprisoned without charge or evidence, a journalist denied his freedom for simply doing his job. The hearing lasted a mere two minutes, during which my lawyer relayed greetings from my family and assured me they were well, despite rumors of my hands being broken (which I denied).

As soon as the hearing ended, I was blindfolded again and taken back to my section. Upon my return, I found a prison unit raiding Cell 8, assaulting the prisoners inside. The unit commander approached me and struck me across the face. Then a masked guard joined in, beating me on my head, neck, and body. Finally, they ripped off my blindfold and shoved me back into my cell.

Messages of Love and Longing

The day before my release, I spoke with several prisoners serving life sentences. With communication with their families severely restricted during the war, my release was an opportunity for them to send messages to their loved ones.

One prisoner asked me to kiss his only son and tell him it was from his father. Another entrusted me with a message for his wife, asking her to buy a meaningful gift for the son of a martyred relative on his behalf. Yet another requested that I convey his congratulations to his father, who had safely returned from Hajj, and to his brother, who had passed his high school exams. Another asked me to congratulate his sister, who had gotten married while he was in prison. A young prisoner, recently sentenced to life, simply wanted me to tell his

mother that he had memorized a chapter of the Quran and completed a course on Tajweed (Quranic recitation). Another wanted me to convey his wishes to his children to take care of their grandfather.

These simple messages and heartfelt wishes filled me with sadness, a stark reminder of the immense suffering and the profound disconnection imposed upon these men. The brutality they endured, especially after October 7, was a testament to the depths of cruelty inflicted upon Palestinian prisoners.

As one prisoner aptly put it, "Anyone who hasn't been imprisoned during this war hasn't truly experienced Israeli prisons." The brutality had reached unprecedented levels.

This sentiment resonated deeply with me as a journalist. Those who haven't covered Palestine during this genocidal war haven't truly covered Palestine.



The Burden of Bearing Witness in a Time of Genocide

□ Marah Wadi

A black and white photograph showing a scene of destruction. In the foreground, there is a large pile of rubble, including broken concrete blocks, twisted metal rods, and debris. A prominent metal rod runs diagonally across the upper part of the frame. The background is filled with more rubble and the skeletal remains of a structure. A red rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing text.

Marah Wadi

A Palestinian journalist from the Gaza Strip. Marah works in the digital newsroom at Al Jazeera, where she manages Al Jazeera Palestine's platforms and produces visual and written human-interest stories for various Arabic-language outlets.

The Burden of Bearing Witness in a Time of Genocide

Marah Wadi

It was a bloody night, bearing no resemblance to the dawn that would eventually break. The sun's rays, forcing their way through the window, seemed to mock us, announcing another day in the war on Gaza.

Lying on the thin, worn mattress, barely 80 centimeters wide, I could hear my bones creak as I turned to face my four-year-old son, Omar. He was fast asleep, oblivious to the horrors of the "apocalypse" he had just endured, the earth-shaking bombardments that had terrorized our neighborhood.

Omar had been sharing this mattress with me for months. The house we had fled to, along with my husband, was overflowing with relatives seeking refuge. We were all huddled together, seeking safety in numbers, or perhaps clinging to the grim notion that if death came, it would take us all at once.

I looked in the mirror for the first time in what felt like ages. I had lost at least 12 kilograms, my face pale and covered in blemishes. The sunlight seemed to scorch my skin, but who cared about appearances in this hellscape? My mind was consumed with the pain and suffering of others.

The people of Gaza deeply appreciate the work we journalists do. They call us "knights of truth," some even likening us to "soldiers on the battlefield." But these accolades feel more like a burden, especially as we lose colleagues every day, directly or indirectly targeted by Israeli bombardments – in the field, in their homes, in media vehicles, and in makeshift shelters.

In this time of genocide, Israel not only targeted media offices but also barred the entry of foreign journalists and essential equipment like cameras and protective gear. We were left with a stark choice: continue working without press credentials, without helmets or flak jackets, without the basic protections enshrined in international law – protections that had proven to be nothing more than empty slogans in the face of overwhelming power.

What did international law do for Shireen Abu Akleh, assassinated in cold blood months before this war? What did it do for Yasser Murtaja, sniped during the Great March of Return years ago? Can we expect any justice for Roshdi Sarraj and Ismail al-Ghoul this time? Certainly not.

Amidst the genocide, Palestinian journalists were forced to abandon their offices and set up makeshift newsrooms in tents. Our phones became our primary cameras, and those with cars abandoned them, collecting dust or crushed under the rubble, due to the fuel shortages. We now navigate the streets in donkey carts or taxis running on cooking oil, its fumes filling our lungs. Our clothes are saturated with the stench of death, and our ears ring with the cries of the bereaved. How many times have those who lost loved ones

vented their anger at us, demanding, "Where is the world?" while we mutter in despair, "Shame on the world."

We are not from another planet; we share their suffering. We die as they die, endure hunger and weight loss, our clothes hanging loose on our emaciated frames due to lack of options. Yet, we persist because exposing the truth is our mission and our duty.

People bury their dead – martyrs and victims of diseases exacerbated by the suffocating Israeli siege – while we march alongside them, cameras raised, documenting hundreds of funerals, each one a fresh burial in our own hearts. We suppress our grief, burying it deep within, for there is no time for breakdowns. The events are relentless, overwhelming.

At the war's onset, I felt fortunate to have left home with my equipment and my husband's, ready to document everything. But that feeling quickly turned into a curse.

Every day, my microphone betrays me. After every human-interest story I capture, every life shattered by Israel's massacres, just when I feel I've given that story the voice it deserves, the device seems to mock me. It's as if the phone itself screams, "Enough! How can you bear all this pain?" And when I review the recording, the bitter truth hits me: an hour-long interview, the voice lost... the microphone has failed me again, as if conspiring with the cruel reality to silence the truth.

The microphone always seems fine during the initial tests, but then it cuts out mid-interview, just as I'm deeply engrossed in

the story, living every detail with the interviewee. I hesitantly ask if they would mind re-recording. Some understand, others reluctantly agree, and some postpone to another day. I understand their hesitation, feeling ashamed and filled with respect for their emotions. I refuse to exploit their pain for the sake of a story and quietly withdraw when I sense they cannot bear to relive their trauma.

This happened repeatedly, and each time I fought the urge to smash the microphone in frustration. But I couldn't afford to. This \$30 device was all I had. With no equipment available, no replacements, and no room for surrender, I clung to it, my only tool in this fight for truth. I forced myself to be patient, to endure.

I often wonder how my husband, photojournalist Anas Abu Diya, and I managed to reach all the locations we covered in southern Gaza. We traversed the bombarded towns of al-Bureij, al-Nuseirat, Deir al-Balah, al-Qarara, Bani Suheila, Khuza'a, Abasan, Mirag, Rafah, and the neighborhoods of al-Junaina, al-Shaboura, and Tel al-Sultan.

How did we walk for miles under the pouring rain, unable to find an umbrella? And even if we had one, would it have shielded us from the torrential downpour in a city whose skies seemed to weep for the departed souls, a city constantly under the roar of warplanes? How I hate those planes and their inventors.

Throughout this genocidal war, I tried to suppress everything that threatened to crush us. I no longer flinched at the sight of unexploded ordnance scattered across the streets. But

I discovered that this courage wasn't just "brave talk in a moment of grief." It was a visceral reality that hit me when a "quadcopter" drone chased us during the first hours of the Israeli army's withdrawal from Khan Yunis in the first week of April 2024, after four months of brutal ground invasion and relentless fighting.

Khan Yunis: A City Ravaged Beyond Recognition

How can words possibly capture the devastation inflicted upon Khan Yunis? To say an earthquake struck it would be an insult to nature, even in its most furious moments. Israel's actions were far more destructive. The scenes in the city were apocalyptic, a heavy weight on the heart and soul. The streets were utterly deserted, littered with decaying corpses. Not a single house – not one – had been spared from the bombardment. The destruction seemed indiscriminate, a blind, vengeful rampage bearing no resemblance to Israel's claims of targeting "military objectives."

There were three of us: Anas, me, and a driver we had met by chance who encouraged us to enter the ravaged area. We stepped out of the car, surveying the landscape, a place rendered unrecognizable by the sheer scale of destruction. As we raised our phones to document the scenes, a drone suddenly appeared, firing at us. We scattered in panic, each running in a different direction until it retreated. We regrouped in an area we deemed relatively "safe," having spotted other people there.

We found a family trying to salvage belongings from the rub-

ble of their home. We approached them, exchanging greetings with the women. After ensuring they were alright, I asked one of them if she would agree to an interview. She refused, her words sharp with bitterness: "We were trapped in this house for days, besieged by the Israeli army. We pleaded with the whole world, with the Red Cross, with every aid organization, with journalists, with every media outlet. No one came to save us! We survived by a miracle. We don't need anyone who wasn't with us then. You are welcome here as a human being, but not as a journalist. Neither you nor any aid worker is welcome here."

I felt a wave of helplessness wash over me, adding to the weight already pressing down on my heart. I remained silent, words failing me, and quietly withdrew. I remember her every time we receive desperate pleas from trapped families. I carry her pain, and that feeling of helplessness returns to bury itself deep within me. "How have you become a mass grave, my heart?" I often wonder.

Encounters with Drones and the Ever-Present Threat of Death

The "quadcopter" drones have become a terrifying symbol of this war. I remember one night during a particularly intense bombardment of Khan Yunis, during what must have been my fourth displacement. Exhaustion had finally overtaken me, and I had collapsed onto the floor, drifting off for a brief half-hour. I was jolted awake by a terrifying sound: a rush of air as the curtain flew open, revealing the shattered window, a casualty of the relentless shelling. And then I saw it, the drone hovering outside, circling the house like a predator,

its ominous buzzing sending shivers down my spine. I desperately wanted to capture a photo, but I knew that doing so might be the last thing I ever did.

In the house across the street, my husband and other male relatives were sleeping on the roof, having left the apartment to us women. The drone hovered over them, its shadow a grim omen. They lay there, eyes closed, reciting the Shahada, feigning death until it moved on, seeking victims elsewhere.

The next day, we shared our terrifying encounter with colleagues who were staying in tents. They recounted their own experiences with these menacing drones. One described how a drone had "visited" his family's home, circling it while they lay frozen on the floor. Another shared how her children had blamed her for being a journalist, believing that the drones were targeting journalists for "exposing Israel's crimes." "As if Israel cares about being exposed anymore," I remarked bitterly.

Finding Solace in Shared Grief and Frustration

The tent set up by the Filastiniyat organization, where my friend and colleague Shrouq Shaheen, a correspondent for Syria TV, was staying, became my refuge. Not for crying, but for sharing our grief – though most times, we found solace in silence. We knew each other too well; words were unnecessary. We were drowning in the collective suffering we witnessed daily. We remembered Salsabil, Malak, Mohammed, and Sabreen, the protagonists of our stories, the victims of this genocide.

Occasionally, we would break the silence, reminiscing about decent meals we had enjoyed in Gaza, about our homes, about the scent of clean clothes. We would laugh at our disheveled appearances, the exhaustion etched on our faces, acknowledging that we no longer cared about such trivialities.

We talked about the "opportunities" this war had created, and how easily people could gain followers on social media. We lamented how some prioritized their personal accounts over the quality of their reporting and the sanctity of the victims' lives. We discussed how the number of followers had become a measure of a journalist's worth, granting opportunities to those who might not deserve them. Sadly, even this had become a perverse metric of "heroism," even when the content contradicted the very ethics we had been taught for decades.

Exhaustion, Frustration, and the Constant Struggle

One day, after an exhausting day covering human-interest stories in displacement camps, my husband Anas and I couldn't reach the Al Jazeera tent to upload our footage. We decided to head home, a journey that took over two hours due to the lack of transportation. This war had forced us to accept that we couldn't be everywhere, know everything, even when the events were unfolding around us. With Israel cutting off communication lines and internet access, it became impossible to know where the strikes were hitting, except by chance. And sometimes, we would discover, tragically, that those strikes had targeted our own hearts.

This is how I learned of the death of our colleague, Samer Abu Daqqa⁴⁰, a cameraman for Al Jazeera, on December 15, 2023. It was by pure chance.

On a small TV screen in a street corner, its light piercing the darkness caused by the power outage, the news scrolled across the breaking news ticker: "Al Jazeera cameraman Samer Abu Daqqa killed, correspondent Wael al-Dahdouh injured."

I rubbed my eyes, thinking my vision was blurred from walking through the rubble and smoke, despite the clarity of the image. My limbs went numb as I reread the news, gasping for air. Some men around us thought he must have been a member of my family.

I didn't cry. My tears had long since dried up. My heart was shattered, but this time, I couldn't find the words to express my grief. Even you, Samer? Even you, they killed? The handsome, life-loving man who dreamed of reuniting with his family abroad, murdered by Israel in front of the whole world, while Al Jazeera, ever resilient, continued its mission.

All the praise and accolades showered upon journalists covering this genocidal war feel hollow, at least to me. Words are meaningless now; we need action. We need the resources to continue our work, the equipment, the clothes, the basic necessities we have to fight for, enduring long queues and humiliation to obtain "coupons" for essential supplies.

⁴⁰ For more on the tragic death of Samer Abu Daqqa, see the footnote on page 16

In the face of such loss, we are unable to console each other. We wander aimlessly, as if prematurely aged by the weight of our grief, silently gazing at the sky until passersby, recognizing us as journalists, interrupt our reverie with questions: "Will the war last much longer? What's the latest news?"

Those living in tents near our makeshift media camps gather around us, eager for any news from the outside world. Without access to TVs, radios, or the internet, they rely on us to tell them what's happening.

The truth is, the praise we've received since the war began feels like a cruel burden, a constant reminder of the world's expectations. We are seen as mere tools to satisfy their need for information, despite our deep belief in our mission. While the world applauds our efforts and shares our stories, they expect us to fend for ourselves, to find food, shelter, clothes, and even firewood to cook our meals. We are the first to wake and the last to sleep, carrying on our work in silence and bitterness.



Cultural Activism in the Face of Genocide

□ Hamza Aqrabawi



Hamza Aqrabawi

A Palestinian journalist and researcher from the West Bank, specializing in folklore and Palestinian national memory. He has written for numerous Arabic websites and magazines, including the Journal of Palestine Studies, Al Jazeera, Ultra Palestine, and Metras.

Cultural Activism in the Face of Genocide

Hamza Aqrabawi

The genocidal war that has intensely gripped Palestinian society since October 7th, 2023, particularly in the Gaza Strip, has placed a new responsibility on those involved in documenting and understanding the Palestinian situation. This unprecedented colonial brutality is fundamentally reshaping Palestinian society, disrupting its structure, and shattering the foundations of its stability. As the past is buried and the present destroyed, the very nature and future of Palestinian society hang in the balance.

As a journalist and cultural activist dedicated to documenting Palestine's heritage and the stories of its people, I felt compelled to respond to these momentous events unfolding every day, every hour. The sheer speed and magnitude of this catastrophe demanded immediate action, a departure from the usual practice of collecting and archiving stories after a conflict ends. We were driven to document, in real-time, the daily experiences and struggles of Palestinians caught in this maelstrom. This was not merely for the sake of archiving and preservation; it was a personal quest to find my place in this struggle, to determine what role I could play in this pivotal moment in our history.

Gaza: Daily Monitoring and Documentation

During the initial months of this genocidal war, my focus as a documenter and archivist shifted. Living in the West Bank, I was a witness to the unfolding carnage in Gaza through the lens of media, both traditional outlets like Al Jazeera and social media platforms where journalists and activists provided firsthand accounts.

However, not being directly involved in breaking news coverage, I sought a different approach. I delved into the narratives within the news reports, searching for the raw, human stories embedded within the broader coverage. I was determined to capture the essence of these individual experiences, to preserve the voices and memories that might otherwise be lost in the overwhelming tide of war.

Unearthing Stories Amidst the Rubble and Ruin

The relentless stream of news from Gaza, filled with unimaginable suffering, loss, and bloodshed, also carried powerful human stories and messages of resilience. From the mouths of the grieving, the wounded, and their families emerged poignant words and phrases, encapsulating the depths of their pain and loss.

There was the journalist Wael al-Dahdouh, who, upon seeing his young son and family killed in an Israeli airstrike, uttered, "They take revenge on us through our children... it's okay." There was the elder who urged a grieving man, "Don't cry, be strong." And the young woman who identified her martyred mother by her hair, saying, "This is my mother; I recognize

her by her hair." Hundreds of such heart-wrenching phrases resonated deeply with those who heard them.

Behind every scene of devastation in Gaza lay stories of flesh and blood, lives and legacies shattered by Israeli bombs. It was crucial to capture these stories, to document their raw authenticity. We sought out these narratives, sometimes piecing them together from the accounts of writers, poets, and activists who had crafted them into compelling tales. We relied heavily on our colleagues in Gaza, who generously shared their experiences and the stories of those around them.

Documenting these narratives became my primary focus. But the sheer volume of material was overwhelming, even with volunteers helping to gather videos and images. Storing, transcribing, and categorizing this vast archive required immense time and effort, resources we lacked. The sheer scale of suffering in Gaza was staggering, the attacks relentless, the enemy's intent to kill undeniable.

As various initiatives emerged to document the stories of martyrs, the missing, and others, we narrowed our focus to capturing impactful quotes and narratives. We amassed hundreds of stories and testimonies that served our purpose, all while continuing my research and fieldwork in the West Bank.

Beyond Stories: Documenting the Details of War

Beyond the individual narratives, there was a wealth of crucial information to be documented. I meticulously tracked de-

tails emerging from the field, particularly from live coverage. Despite the overwhelming volume, I tried to disseminate this information, including reports on the weapons and munitions used by the Israeli military to target Palestinian civilians and their homes.

We sought to understand the Israeli military's structure and tactics through their own media and broadcasts. We also documented the weapons used by the Palestinian resistance, their names, and the significance behind each designation.

But our primary focus was on the language of war and resistance. We meticulously collected terms and phrases used to describe the conflict, compiling a lexicon of confrontation and resilience. We also explored popular conceptions of victory and defeat, capturing how these concepts were articulated in the media and everyday conversations.

We paid close attention to Palestinian symbols and figures that gained prominence in the media, analyzing the discourse surrounding them, the slogans, chants, writings, and even jokes.

Throughout this process, we sought to map the geography of the conflict, documenting the significance of locations featured prominently in the media, before the war expanded to encompass both Palestine and Lebanon.

Documenting Resilience: Food and Survival Under Siege

The siege and starvation of Gaza, the deliberate targeting of food supplies to force displacement and surrender, could not be ignored. People in Gaza, both in the north and south, faced severe food shortages and a desperate struggle for survival. Finding ways to sustain themselves and their children became a daily preoccupation.

Documenting their resilience, the alternative foods they found, and the innovative ways they prepared them became essential. This was particularly challenging in the early stages of the war, but through a network of friends in Gaza, we managed to conduct dozens of interviews, capturing their experiences and struggles through audio recordings and written testimonies. These accounts provided invaluable insights into Gaza's pre-war cuisine, the diversity of their food culture, and the heartbreaking challenges they faced in simply staying alive during a year of relentless conflict.

An Eye on the West Bank

While Gaza burned under the weight of Israel's relentless assault, a silent war of attrition continued in the West Bank. Settler colonialism intensified its relentless campaign of land theft, establishing illegal outposts, attacking Palestinian villages, and killing their inhabitants. Emboldened by the war in Gaza and the international community's muted response, settlers escalated their violence, exploiting the chaos to further their expansionist agenda.

With hundreds of checkpoints fragmenting the West Bank, major roads blocked, and access to towns and villages restricted, it was crucial to remain vigilant and document these escalating abuses. My own village, Aqraba, southeast of Nablus, has long been a target of settler violence and systematic oppression. We were denied access to our olive groves during the harvest season in October and November 2023 and faced immense challenges in reaching our lands for cultivation due to the closure of agricultural roads.

Soon, the violence escalated. Settlers from nearby illegal outposts launched attacks, seizing thousands of dunams of grazing and agricultural land, particularly in the Jordan Valley area near Khirbet al-Tawil. We documented a series of attacks that claimed the lives of three villagers from Aqraba alone. We also monitored the escalating violence in neighboring villages like Huwara and Qusra, south of Nablus, which bore the brunt of settler attacks during this period.

Throughout this time, I traveled across the West Bank, conducting interviews and documenting the experiences of farmers and residents in various areas. These journeys were fraught with risk, as settlers roamed freely, attacking Palestinians on roads and in their workplaces. Many of these areas, designated as Area C under the Oslo Accords, are particularly vulnerable to settler violence and Israeli demolition orders, as the colonial enterprise seeks to forcibly displace Palestinian communities.

In Khirbet Yanun, for example, the village elder, Rashid Murar, urged us to visit only on Saturdays, to keep our visits brief, and to avoid wandering around or filming. He explained

that any visible presence would likely trigger a settler attack shortly after our departure, a grim reality we had witnessed numerous times in previous years.

Documenting Resistance and Cultural Expression

In addition to documenting settler violence and land theft, I also focused on capturing the cultural expressions of resistance that emerged during the war. This volunteer work centered primarily in Ramallah, where large demonstrations erupted in solidarity with Gaza during the early days of the war. As the conflict dragged on, these protests became more sporadic, often in response to specific massacres or assassinations.

From the first day of the war, I documented these demonstrations, recording the chants and slogans, with the help of volunteer field documenters. Others joined in, capturing similar expressions of resistance in other West Bank cities like Nablus, Tulkarm, and Jenin. We continue this work today, recognizing the historical significance of these chants and slogans, which reflect the evolving dynamics of the war, its key figures, and defining moments. These are not just words; they are a testament to the Palestinian people's unwavering spirit of resistance in the face of overwhelming adversity.

From the Field to the Stage

Documentation and cultural preservation are vital tools in our struggle against erasure, genocide, and the enemy's attempts to steal our heritage and deny our existence. As the

writer Salman Natour eloquently stated, "The hyenas will devour us if we remain without memory."

Driven by this conviction, I dedicate myself to documenting the stories, experiences, and traditions of our people. But for me, documentation is not merely about archiving or providing sterile news reports. It is the first step in a broader process of transforming these narratives into powerful tools of resistance and cultural expression.

I utilize this material in my work as a storyteller, weaving these narratives into live performances. As a researcher, I incorporate them into my writings on Palestinian memory and heritage. And as a tour guide, I share these stories with young people as we journey through our land. These collected narratives become a rich resource for others working in these fields, providing valuable insights and enriching their own creative endeavors. These are the stories of our people, their experiences, memories, and reflections on their homeland, identity, and heritage.

Earlier this year, I completed a study on the northern Jordan Valley titled "Wadi al-Maleh: Memory of the People and the Land." This research, based on extensive fieldwork and interviews, focuses on communities facing the threat of displacement in this brutal war. Last year, I also published a book titled "Resistant Steadfastness: Palestinian Communities Confronting Coercive Displacement," which employed a similar methodology of fieldwork, interviews, and documentation.

Sadly, some of the communities I documented in various parts of the West Bank – in Wadi al-Maleh in the northern

Jordan Valley, in Masafer Yatta in the south, and in Wadi al-Siq and al-Ma'arjat between Ramallah and Jericho – have been forcibly displaced since October 7th. Their stories, captured in my work, now serve as a poignant reminder of their resilience and a testament to the ongoing struggle against erasure.

This underscores the urgency of our documentation efforts. It also highlights the importance of grounding our journalistic work in rigorous research and analysis, creating a counter-narrative to the colonial narratives that seek to rewrite the history of our land, justifying its theft with fabricated biblical tales.

Breathing Life into Stories

But perhaps the most crucial aspect of our work is breathing life into these stories, transforming them into powerful narratives of resilience and resistance. The testimonies we gather from the field, social media, and live broadcasts should not be relegated to dusty archives, rarely seen or heard. We must actively work to bring these stories back to life, for they are intrinsically linked to the survival of our people and our nation. They carry within them a message of hope and defiance, a testament to our enduring spirit.

The Gazan poet Rifat al-Areer⁴¹, in his famous poem, captured the essence of this endeavor:

If I must die,

⁴¹ Refaat Alareer was killed by an Israeli airstrike on Friday 8th December. He was one of the leaders of a young generation of writers in Gaza who chose to write in English to tell their stories, one of the co-founders of the “We are not numbers” project, which pairs authors from Gaza with mentors abroad who help them write stories about their experiences. Alareer was a professor of English literature at the Islamic University of Gaza.

you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings,
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze—
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself—
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up
above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love
If I must die
let it bring hope
let it be a tale.

This is what we have strived to do throughout this year of war. We have transformed dozens of stories and testimonies into compelling performances, brought to life by storytellers across the West Bank and the Arab world. These performances center on the suffering of Gaza, its people's resilience in the face of genocide and colonial brutality. Some performances, like those in Amman and Baghdad, have even featured testimonies from 1948 refugees who sought shelter in Gaza.

In Amman, in February 2024, we concluded a performance titled "Fly, Oh Bird" with readings of testimonies from Gaza,

recounting the stories of martyrs killed in Israeli massacres. Taking this a step further, we, the Hakaya Network (Jordan, Egypt, Palestine), have integrated these narratives into our storytelling workshops. These contemporary stories of suffering and resilience, rooted in the lived experiences of Palestinians in Gaza, offer a powerful alternative to traditional folktales. They carry a message of hope and resistance that resonates deeply with Arab audiences.

We have conducted workshops in Ramallah "I am the Story" and Amman "The Art of Storytelling", empowering participants with diverse backgrounds to share these narratives of survival and resilience.

Preserving Our Heritage in the Face of Erasure

In the face of Israel's systematic attempts to erase Palestinian identity and history – through the destruction of cultural institutions, libraries, archives, archaeological sites, and the targeting of intellectuals, academics, and community leaders – our work takes on even greater urgency.

We must view our archives not just as repositories of information but as living testaments to our history and heritage. As the saying goes, history that is not told is often forgotten. With this in mind, I have curated performances based on excerpts from memoirs like "The Sun Rises from the Mountain" by prisoner Musa al-Sheikh, personal letters from the archive of Ali Shaath, and photographs and fragments from family archives. These performances, presented in Amman and Ramallah, breathe life into these historical fragments, ensuring that our collective memory is kept alive.

Swimming Against the Current

"Killing and persecution... bans and arrests" – this is the reality for those working in media and cultural activism in Palestine. Israel relentlessly seeks to silence Palestinian voices and suppress images of its crimes and brutality. The targeting and killing of journalists in Gaza, the closure of Al Jazeera's offices in Jerusalem and Ramallah, and the arrests of activists and journalists in the West Bank are all part of this campaign to control the narrative and shield Israel from accountability.

This repression compels us, as cultural activists and storytellers, to swim against the current. We must stand shoulder to shoulder with our colleagues on the front lines, amplifying their work, transforming their images and words into powerful artistic expressions. We must utilize all forms of media and artistic expression to disseminate these stories, ensuring that their message of resistance and resilience reaches a wider audience. By doing so, we honor the sacrifices of those who have paid the ultimate price for the truth.

This is my commitment in this ever-expanding war, where the pain, loss, and our collective responsibility continue to grow.

This year-long documentation effort has also led to opportunities to share my work at conferences. I presented a paper titled "Popular Culture and Patterns of Thinking in Palestine" at the "Intellectual Palestine" (فلسطين تفكير) conference. I also participated in the Second Bethlehem International Conference, "Palestinian Archaeology and Cultural Heri-

tage: Towards Preserving Our Heritage from Appropriation and Destruction," where I presented a paper titled "Gaza Cuisine: Food Culture and its Role in Preserving Memory and Shaping National Identity." Both papers drew heavily on the testimonies and observations I had gathered during the war.

In conclusion, this brutal war, with all its suffering, loss, and pain, has redefined my purpose and strengthened my resolve in our struggle against this occupation. Our existence in this land is inextricably linked to the dismantling of this oppressive system of the Israeli occupation. While our immediate priority is to end this war in Gaza and the senseless killing of innocent civilians, we, as Palestinians, envision a future free from occupation, where our land and the entire region can finally enjoy peace, security, and prosperity.



The Assault on Humanity in Palestine: A Journalist's Testimony

□ Amir Abu Aram



Amir Abu Aram

A freelance Palestinian journalist from the West Bank. On November 5th, 2023, Israeli forces raided his home in Ramallah and arrested him as part of a campaign that targeted dozens of journalists and media professionals following October 7th. Amir Abu Aram was released in early May 2024.

The Assault on Humanity in Palestine: A Journalist's Testimony

Amir Abu Aram

At the outset of the Jerusalem Uprising in October 2015, I was working on my first-ever television report as a newly graduated journalist. The report focused on the role of student movements in resisting the occupation. During filming, we were attacked by the Israeli army. Our press credentials offered no protection as we were chased along with the protesters, choking on tear gas. This was my harsh introduction to journalism in Palestine, where reporting is considered a form of resistance, or in Israel's eyes, a form of terrorism.

Exactly two years later, in the early hours of October 3, 2017, I was jolted awake by the sound of my front door being blown open. Within seconds, Israeli soldiers stormed into my bedroom, dragging me from my bed. They beat me, shoved me, and hurled insults before arresting me as if they had accomplished some great feat, despite the fact that I was a civilian and a journalist.

Thus began my first unjust and unwarranted detention, lasting two months. I endured nearly 20 interrogation sessions and court hearings. They scrutinized episodes of the television program I hosted, dissecting every word. They seized upon words like "martyr" and "prisoner," twisting their context

to fabricate charges of incitement against me. Even interviews I conducted with families of martyrs and Palestinians whose homes and lands had been confiscated were used against me.

In late November, the court finally ordered my release pending trial. After seven months of hearings and legal proceedings, I was convicted of incitement and sentenced to a fine and a one-year suspended prison sentence.

Despite the trauma and humiliation of that experience, I had almost managed to put it behind me. I had naively believed that my journalistic identity would afford me some protection, that the international community would offer support, or that there would be widespread condemnation of Israel's repeated attacks on journalists. But just as I thought that chapter of my life was closed, the occupation forces returned, once again breaking down my door and taking me away.

Seven years later, in October, as Israel launched its all-out war on Palestine, we began our comprehensive coverage. We spent long hours in the field, sometimes working 20 hours straight, documenting protests, events, and clashes in the West Bank, collaborating with local and international media outlets.

During these confrontations, we faced the usual harassment and restrictions on our work. On several occasions, we were directly targeted by Israeli forces, who fired live ammunition and tear gas canisters at us, often launched directly overhead from drones.

I continued my work, juggling fieldwork and news updates, until the early hours of November 5th, when Israeli forces stormed my home and arrested me. They sentenced me to six months in prison. Those dark months, with their endless minutes, hours, and days, were the most difficult and brutal of my life.

The Dehumanization of Palestinians: A Journalist's Ordeal

Moments after my home was invaded, my hands were bound, and my eyes were covered with a blindfold. I pleaded with the soldiers to let me say goodbye to my three young children sleeping peacefully in their beds, but they refused, dragging me outside. A military official approached, confirming my arrest and the suspension of my journalistic activities. He briefly removed my blindfold, raised his hands, and declared, "From this day on, no more journalism."

The soldiers took me to a nearby military base for a swift interrogation. They focused on my media work, accusing me of "inciting violence" by filming protests and demonstrations. I asserted that I was simply doing my job as a journalist, like my Palestinian, foreign, and even Israeli colleagues. But my explanation was cut short. "You're going to prison now," the officer stated, "and there you'll have plenty of time to rethink this journalism business."

I was thrown onto the floor of a military bus crammed with soldiers, landing at their feet. They began harassing me verbally and physically, even attempting to shove a small object into my ear, seemingly intent on causing harm. From the very

beginning, I felt completely dehumanized, my body treated as an object to be violated at will. I'm not using this term lightly. Just as the occupation forces seize our land, they also "seize" our bodies, subjecting us to unchecked brutality.

The concept of "dehumanization," often used in the media to describe Israel's actions in Gaza, is a pervasive reality for Palestinians under occupation. The Israeli soldier sees no value in the Palestinian body; it is merely an obstacle to be controlled or eliminated. This sense of "seizure" and dehumanization is central to the experience of detention, especially since October 7. It was my reality, and it is the reality for thousands of Palestinians languishing in Israeli prisons.

Less than an hour later, the bus arrived at a military camp. I was dragged out, along with another detainee, and thrown onto the ground under the scorching sun, blindfolded and hands bound with plastic ties. A torrent of insults and verbal abuse followed, hurled at us by every soldier and settler who passed through the camp's gates. This ordeal lasted for nearly eight hours before we were transferred to Etzion detention center, north of Hebron.

By the time we arrived at Etzion, nearly 12 hours had passed since my arrest. I had not eaten a single morsel of food or had a sip of water. We were denied bathroom breaks and even forbidden from speaking or adjusting our position. Those were hours of intense suffering, but it was just the beginning.

The detention center serves as a holding facility for detainees before they are transferred to prisons run by the Israel

Prison Service. We were dumped onto the ground, hands still bound, in an open courtyard where the sounds of prisoners being brutally beaten echoed through the air. I felt like I was standing at the gates of hell, bracing myself for the inevitable torture, my own screams soon to join the chorus of suffering.

They took me to an interrogation room for a strip search, meticulously recording my personal information and confiscating my phone, which they had already searched after arresting me at home.

As I was being transferred to the detention section, I saw a young man covered in blood, his white underwear stained crimson. The guards had been taking turns beating him relentlessly.

I spent three days in that camp, unable to stomach the atrocious food. The guards would bring leftover scraps and dump them on the floor for over 70 detainees. We ate only out of sheer necessity, to avoid complete collapse. The food was repulsive in every way – its appearance, smell, and taste. The only constants during those days were the beatings, insults, and screams. In the evenings, the guards would enter the section, shouting and cursing. I witnessed prisoners being dragged out and beaten, including one incident where a female soldier joined in, hurling insults and profanities while striking the cell doors with batons to prevent us from sleeping.

On the morning of our transfer to Ofer Prison, we were subjected to another invasive strip search, accompanied by the

usual physical and verbal abuse. We were then loaded onto the "posta", a windowless transfer vehicle with iron seats, essentially a mobile tomb where prisoners are held for hours, hands bound.

Upon arrival at Ofer, the abuse continued. We were beaten by the guards, the handcuffs tightened to the point of causing our hands to swell for days. We endured another strip search, and my clothes were confiscated, replaced with a brown prison uniform – pants and a shirt. I was not allowed to change these clothes throughout my six-month detention. I wore them day and night, able to wash them only a few times.

While this might seem like a minor violation compared to the other forms of torture we endured, its impact was profound. The constant feeling of filth prevented restful sleep and caused both physical and psychological distress. The forced habituation to this degradation was particularly horrifying.

The Israelis understand that dignity is at the core of our humanity, a value we cherish. Their relentless efforts, both within the prison walls and beyond, aim to crush our spirit, to force us to abandon this fundamental aspect of our being. But their brutality only exposes their ignorance and desperation. Their relentless pursuit of our annihilation stems from a deep-seated fear: our unwavering commitment to our dignity and our land will ultimately prevail.

Starting in mid-October 2023, the prison authorities implemented new punitive measures. They confiscated all electrical appliances, food, blankets, and extra clothing from our

cells. Each prisoner was left with only a pair of pants, a shirt, and a single piece of underwear.

Upon entering Ofer, I was weighed in the prison clinic, a place I would not see again due to the denial of medical treatment. When I was finally released in early May 2024, I had lost 32 kilograms (70 pounds) due to food deprivation and sleep deprivation.

Every day, we were given a meager portion of food, barely enough to sustain a human being. It consisted of 50 grams of yogurt or labneh, some bread, three spoons of rice, an egg, and a small amount of vegetables or legumes. This starvation diet led to rapid weight loss, fainting spells, and constant exhaustion, a shared experience among all the prisoners.

A week into my detention, I was summoned for interrogation at the police station to be presented with an indictment. The interrogator didn't ask me any questions; instead, he shouted, cursed, and deliberately humiliated me. He placed a document before me containing dozens of questions with pre-filled "no" answers and demanded I sign it. He argued that if I didn't sign, he would sign it on my behalf. The questions were general, some relating to my journalistic activities and social media presence.

That same night, after being returned to prison, I was brought before a judge via video conference. The judge issued a detention extension, the length of which I was unaware of at the time. My lawyer later informed me that this was a prelude to an administrative detention order.

On November 19, I was taken from my cell along with over 70 other prisoners. We were shackled, blindfolded, and herded onto the “posta”. We had no idea where we were going. What followed was the most harrowing experience of my life.

I was repeatedly and brutally beaten throughout the journey. At one point, I was crammed into an airtight compartment on the vehicle with five other prisoners. We nearly suffocated from lack of oxygen. During another beating, I was struck with an iron rod on my back, an injury that continues to cause me pain ten months later.

I was then taken for another interrogation, where they focused on my journalistic work. They asked about my methods, my contacts, everything. I answered truthfully, providing information that was already public knowledge. But it became clear that there was no real reason for my arrest, no genuine charges against me. The primary reason for my detention was the war itself. They didn't want me reporting on the reality on the ground.

I questioned the blatant double standard. Israeli journalists were allowed to work freely, embedded with the military and reporting from the front lines. Foreign journalists accompanied the Israeli army during its operations in Gaza, enjoying their protection. Why was I, a Palestinian journalist with international press credentials, denied this right? Why was I imprisoned and prevented from doing my job? Again, I received no clear answers. It became evident that my arrest was an act of reprisal, meant to intimidate Palestinian journalists and silence our voices.

That same day, the Israeli court issued an administrative detention order against me for six months, citing the usual pretext: "danger to the security of the region." This is the catch-all justification for the arbitrary detention of Palestinians. We are imprisoned without charge, subjected to the whims of the military authorities. No evidence is needed, no due process followed. We are simply thrown into prison without recourse or accountability.

Ten days later, during another court hearing, I demanded to speak to the judge, an Israeli military officer. I asked him why I was being detained, why I was being denied my freedom to be with my family and to practice my profession as guaranteed by international law. I pointed out that I had provided footage to foreign media outlets whose correspondents were currently embedded with the Israeli army in Gaza, operating under their protection. Was my only crime being Palestinian? Was that enough to justify my imprisonment and the suppression of my work, despite holding international press credentials that should have afforded me the same rights as my foreign colleagues?

These comparisons only fueled my anger and frustration. We are the indigenous people of this land, entitled to a life of freedom and dignity, regardless of our professions or beliefs. We yearn for a life where the occupation no longer suffocates us and our children.

The court reduced my sentence from six months to three. However, before those three months were up, the Israeli Supreme Court, the highest judicial authority in the country, overturned this decision and renewed my detention, ulti-

mately keeping me imprisoned for a full six months.

Throughout my detention, I was subjected to further harassment and punitive measures. I was placed in solitary confinement for extended periods and transferred between cells for possessing a list of contact information for the families of fellow prisoners. I had intended to give this list to my lawyer so he could reassure the families about their loved ones' well-being. Since we were denied any communication with our families, the lawyer's visits were our only lifeline. I was only allowed three such visits during my entire detention, meaning I was completely cut off from my wife, children, parents, and siblings for months. Those days were filled with agonizing uncertainty and fear for their safety. Many prisoners were denied even these limited visits.

On the third Friday of Ramadan in 2024, we were awakened by the sounds of shouting and banging on the doors. A repressive prison unit stormed our section, attacking the prisoners. They targeted my cell, unleashing their attack dog on me. The dog lunged, biting and mauling me violently, leaving me with painful bruises on my ribs that lasted for days. After the dog attack, the guards joined in, beating us mercilessly. They confiscated our blankets and threw them into the tiny bathroom, a tactic designed to make our already cramped cells even more unbearable. The cell I shared with 11 other prisoners was a mere 35 square meters, including the bathroom. We ate, slept, and spent every minute of every day crammed together in this suffocating space.

After serving my full sentence, I was finally released in early May 2024. I was able to embrace my family for the first time

after those long months of absence. Videos of that emotional reunion circulated widely, capturing the raw joy and pain of returning home after an unjust and unwarranted imprisonment.

But my release left behind many journalist colleagues who remained imprisoned. Some were eventually freed, while others were arrested in my place. Israel continues to hold dozens of journalists in its prisons, most under administrative detention or facing charges of incitement, simply for doing their job.

Writing this testimony, at the request of the colleagues at the Journalism Review published by Al Jazeera Media Institute, has reopened old wounds. The memories of that dark period came flooding back, including horrific details I chose to omit, too painful to recount or see in writing.

But this experience has also raised profound questions about the realities of Palestinian journalism. We operate under constant threat and intimidation, facing the same state-sanctioned terrorism that has plagued our people for decades. This repression has only intensified since October 7th, reaching new levels of brutality.

During my nine years as a journalist, I have narrowly escaped injury and death countless times. My colleagues and I have been shot at by Israeli forces during protests, raids, and clashes. We have been harassed and attacked by settlers who try to prevent us from reaching isolated Palestinian communities facing displacement and hardship. Despite the risks, we have traveled long distances, often taking treacher-

ous routes to reach the scene of events. I remember trekking through the scorching Jordan Valley, navigating treacherous terrain to reach isolated communities where children and the elderly were desperate for someone to amplify their voices, to show the world their suffering, to offer a glimmer of hope that someone still cared about the human rights being systematically violated in occupied Palestine.

The journey has been arduous and painful. But we have managed to tell the stories of thousands of Palestinians, sharing their struggles and amplifying their voices. And there are still thousands more waiting for someone to tell their stories, to remind the world that Israel has not triumphed, that the Palestinian narrative, woven with truth and justice, will ultimately prevail.



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