

بلادنا فلسطين

Palestine, Our Homeland

FEBRUARY 2025
Issue 2



Credit: Naser Jafari, Al-Quds Newspaper.



OLIVE BRANCH



CHECKPOINT WITH OMAR & FADI

We are grateful to God for this opportunity to share with you the untold stories of Palestine. Whether under the weight of occupation or the shadow of exile, Palestinians continue to rise with the same indomitable spirit, resilience, and graceful defiance. Our sense of duty fuels our spirit with a fierce determination to resist erasure and to stand up against injustice.

The recent ceasefire in Gaza was a historic turning point, marking the first time in 76 years of brutal occupation that Palestinians have been able to return to a home they were forced out of. After decades of exile, dispossession and systemic erasure, this return is not just a physical act, it is a profound declaration of survival, defiance and refusal to be exiled once again.¹ Palestinians in Gaza are returning to lands that have been ravaged by the Israeli occupation's 15-month genocidal campaign, to places where their homes once stood, now reduced to rubble. The world stood by, watching helplessly as Gaza was obliterated before their eyes. Yet despite the devastation, Palestinians in Gaza are returning stronger than ever. This return is not merely a reclamation of land, it is a reaffirmation of their unbreakable bond to their homeland and a bold rejection of the occupation's dream of their erasure.

Since Israel began its genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, its military has killed at least 62,614 people and injured at least 111,588 others. Those who have survived the conflict have lost nearly everything. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, Israel has killed 905 people, injured 7,370 and detained at least 14,400 others.²

After October 7, most Palestinians understood well that Israel will do what it always does, which is kill innocent people and destroy their homes. This reaction by Israel is not by any means special to it. History is full of examples of colonists committing crimes against natives that resist erasure and expulsion.

The history of the past century in Palestine can only be understood by looking at the relationship between a colonizer and the native. Early Zionists such as Theodore Herzl and Ze'ev Jabotinsky made no mistake in understanding this relationship.

In 1923, Ze'ev Jabotinsky wrote what constitutes a seminal text in the history of Zionism titled the "Iron Wall" which outlines the belief that the only way to deal with the Palestinians was through military strength that is so harsh that they give up on resistance.

This was essential to the survival of Zionism because according to Jabotinsky "every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonised."

Jabotinsky notes that there is no misunderstanding between Palestinians and Zionists. Zionists want to colonize Palestine through immigration and to become the majority in Palestine and Palestinians want to preserve their lands and rights from being stolen from them. This is why the colonizer always looks at the native with such indifference because they see the native as a temporary obstacle to reach their objective. The native will always resist this attack on their integrity and security, which is what all natives do.

Jabotinsky summarizes the Zionist project by stating that:

"Colonisation carries its own explanation, the only possible explanation, unalterable and as clear as daylight to every ordinary Jew and every ordinary Arab."

Colonisation can have only one aim, and Palestine Arabs cannot accept this aim. It lies in the very nature of things, and in this particular regard, nature cannot be changed."

Considering the above-mentioned relationship between the colonizer and the native, when Palestinians return to their homes in Gaza after a 15-month genocidal campaign, they have demonstrated a level of resilience that shatters Jabotinsky's Iron Wall

and the natural aims of the colonial regime, which is ethnic cleansing and expansion.

Many people may be confused as to the images of Palestinians in Gaza celebrating after the announcement of the ceasefire. In fact, the reason why they celebrate isn't only because they survived a live aired genocide where the whole world watched as Palestinian children were getting killed daily. Rather, it is because as Palestinians, we understand that our existence is resistance. For Palestinians in Gaza, they understand that living in a tent on top of rubble that was once their home, is a crack in the foundation of the Iron Wall.

That being said, there is a systemic nature to the colonial project. It doesn't end with a ceasefire; Zionism has only ever worked to consistently ethnically cleanse Palestinians out of Palestine and to perpetuate their exile. This attempt at erasure takes different forms such as genocide, apartheid, illegal occupation, discriminatory laws, and international policy with partners that will help maintain the colonial project.



Credit: Osama Qasrawi, Badil.

The genocide in Gaza is a flagrant example of how the Zionist colonial project is immoral and unjust. The settlements in the West Bank are proof of how systemic this injustice is. Moreover, the ceasefire is in no way an end of the ongoing genocide in Gaza where Palestinians still face extreme deprivation of food, health and safety.

In this edition of Palestine, Our Homeland, we will be speaking of Palestinian refugees and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees ("UNRWA"). We will discuss how the Zionist regime is still working tirelessly at ethnically cleansing Palestine by banning UNRWA and how Palestinians are still resisting erasure after 76 years.

¹ The majority of Palestinians in Gaza were already exiled from their homes in 1948 during the Nakba and have been in refugee camps for the past 76

years, holding on to their unalienable right to return to their homes.

² As of February 5, 2025.





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UNRWA BY THE NUMBERS

Fadi



Credit: Naser Jafari, Al-Quds Newspaper.

UNRWA began operations on 1 May 1950 by providing education, healthcare, social services and emergency relief to Palestinians living in refugee camps in Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

In the absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee problem, the United Nations General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA's mandate, most recently extending it until June 30, 2026.

According to UNRWA, it has provided essential humanitarian services to four generations of Palestine refugees, defined as "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 War." The descendants of Palestine refugee males are also eligible for registration.

UNRWA services are available to all those living in its areas of operations who meet this definition, who are registered with the Agency and who need assistance. When the Agency began operations in 1950, it was responding to the needs of about 750,000 Palestine refugees. Today, some 5.9 million Palestine refugees are eligible for UNRWA services.

The mission of the agency is to help Palestine Refugees achieve their full potential in human development under the difficult circumstances in which they live. The agency works towards this mission by ensuring that Palestinian refugees are registered to protect their rights through international law and by providing basic human needs of shelter, water, health and education.³

³ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, Programme Budget, 2024-2025.

UNRWA operates 58 refugee camps including:

- West Bank: 19 camps housing 912,879 people;
- Gaza: 8 camps housing 1.6 million people;
- Jordan: 10 camps housing 2.39 million people;
- Lebanon: 12 camps housing 489,292 people;
- Syria: 9 camps housing 438,000 people;

While other UN organisations such as UNICEF, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, World Food Programme and World Health Organization all provide life-saving services, UNRWA is the "backbone of humanitarian operations" in Gaza, Touma told Al Jazeera that:

"All UN agencies depend heavily on UNRWA for humanitarian operations, including bringing in supplies and fuel. We are the largest humanitarian agency in Gaza"

Within Palestine, UNRWA offers:

- Primary education to more than 300,000 children, 294,086 of which are in Gaza (half of all students of Gaza);
- Primary healthcare, maternal and child health services to 1.2 million people in Gaza and 894,951 people in the West Bank;
- Food to over 1 million people in Gaza and 23,903 people in the West Bank.⁴

UNDERSTANDING ISRAEL'S BAN ON UNRWA

Fadi

On January 26, 2024, the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel must do everything in its power to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza and ordered Israel to ensure the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address adverse conditions of life.

Knowing that, in October 2024, the Israeli Knesset insisted on showing its genocidal intent by adopting two bills targeting the operations of UNRWA. The first bill prohibits

⁴<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/29/wh-at-israels-unrwa-ban-means-for-millions-of-palestinians-by-the-numbers>

UNRWA from conducting activities within Israel's borders while the second makes it illegal for Israeli officials to have any contact with UNRWA.

This ban, which has come into effect on January 30, 2025, will effectively make it impossible for the agency to obtain entrance permits to conduct life saving work in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, both of which are under Israeli control. Moreover, it will make it impossible for the agency to transport assistance through Israeli territory to Palestinians in need.

Israel seems to think that by cutting off UNRWA, the right of return of Palestinians will vanish. This ban, as will be demonstrated below, is another attempt at Palestinian erasure by the Zionist colonial project.

Israel has accused UNRWA employees of involvement in the October 7 attack without providing any evidence to that matter. By making that claim, Israel also convinced some of UNRWA's biggest contributors to suspend funding to the agency immediately without any investigation or question, during an ongoing genocide in Gaza.

Historical Context

Between 1917 and 1948, the implementation of the Balfour Declaration and the subsequent establishment of the state of Israel resulted in the uprooting and displacement of half of Palestine's 1.4 million native population, an event known as the Nakba.⁵

In legal terms, the Nakba refers to the ethnic cleansing of around 78% of historic Palestine where Israeli militias destroyed villages, committed massacres, and forced most of the Palestinian population out of their homes.

After the 1948 war, Palestinians in exile wanted to return home but were denied by the newly created state of Israel. Under international law, the right of return of any person to their native home has traditionally been considered as a fundamental and inalienable individual right. This means that the right of return is fundamental, non-negotiable and cannot be taken away or surrendered.

⁵ Meaning catastrophe in Arabic.





Credit: Drew LeVan, Just Seeds Artists.

On September 16, 1948, Count Bernadotte, a United Nations mediator from Sweden, prepared a report regarding the right of return of Palestinians where he asserted that:

“It would be an offence against the principles of elemental justice if these innocent victims of the conflict were denied the right to return to their homes while Jewish immigrants flow into Palestine, and, indeed, at least offer the threat of permanent replacement of the Arab refugees who have been rooted in the land for centuries.”⁶

On September 17, 1948, Bernadotte was murdered by Zionist terrorists in Jerusalem. The UN General Assembly, however, accepted his recommendations to formally establish the right of return of Palestinians. Accordingly, on December 11, 1948, the UN General Assembly passed resolution 194 (III) which in paragraph 11, specifically mentions that:

“The General Assembly resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors would be permitted to do so at the earliest possible date and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by governments or authorities responsible.”⁷

Israel refused categorically to acknowledge the inalienable right of return for Palestinians and the principles of international law were

not enforced by the international community. As we will see further, many countries even played an active part in attempting to erase the right of return.

Despite international condemnation, the newly established state of Israel consistently refused to comply with international law and did not allow the 750,000 Palestinians in exile to return home. This created what is known as the Palestine refugee “problem”. Since 1948, Israel has been proposing plans for the resettlement and rehabilitation of Palestinians in other Arab states as well as other parts of the world.

Condemnations were insufficient to compel Israel to allow Palestinians to return home, so, UNRWA was established by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programmes for Palestinian refugees until a final solution is found, meaning until they get.

UNRWA and the Right of Return

Recently, proposals “of the day after” the genocidal campaign in Gaza have been floating around by Israel and its allies and they included ideas such as the resettlement of Palestinians in Gaza to the Sinai.

Unfortunately, proposals of resettlement of Palestinians into other Arab states are not new and have a clear aim at eliminating the Palestine refugee “problem” by dissolving them into other populations. For example, in 1954, following constant Israeli attacks on Palestinians in Gaza, Egypt considered a United States – UNRWA plan to resettle the Gaza refugees in Sinai. The plan was later dropped following strong protests by Palestinians and Egyptians.⁸

The same Egypt Palestinian resettlement plan has been recycled recently by Trump and was met the same way it was 70 years ago – rejection of Palestinian erasure by both Egyptians and Palestinians.⁹

On 15 June 1967 the Israeli ministerial defence committee decided to adopt the

following policy line regarding the Palestinian refugees under Israeli control:

“Israel will demand from the Arab countries and the superpowers to start preparing an elementary plan to solve the refugee problem, which would include the resettlement of refugees in Iraq, Syria, (Egypt?), Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, and other countries (in the presentation of this demand emphasis will be made on the fact of population exchange, i.e., that the resettlement of the Palestinian refugees in Arab countries will come in exchange for the Jews who left Arab countries for Israel.”¹⁰

In 1967, Yosef Weitz, former head of the Jewish National Fund’s Land Department and a leading Zionist proponent of Palestinian resettlement published an article in which he quoted his 1940 proposal to expel and transfer all Palestinians:

“Amongst ourselves it must be clear that there is no room for both peoples in this country. ... With Arab transferring the country will be wide-open for us. And with the Arabs staying the country will be narrow and restricted ... the only solution is the Land of Israel, or at least the Western Land of Israel [i.e., the whole of Palestine], without Arabs. The Zionist work ... must come all simultaneously in the manner of redemption (here is the meaning of the Messianic idea); the only way is to transfer the Arabs from here to neighbouring countries, all of them, except perhaps Bethlehem, Nazareth, and old Jerusalem. Not a single village or a single tribe must be left. And the transfer must be done through their absorption in Iraq and Syria and even in Transjordan. For that goal money will be found and even a lot of money. And only then will the country be able to absorb millions of Jews. ... There is no other solution.”¹¹

⁶ September 16, 1948, *Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator on Palestine*, submitted in pursuance of paragraph 2, part II, of resolution 186 (S-2) of the General Assembly of 14 May 1948

⁷ December 11, 1948, *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 (III)*, paragraph 11.

⁸ Masalha, Nur, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Pluto Press (2003), p.68.

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/egyptians-protest-trump-displacement-plan-rafah-border-crossing-2025-01-31/>

¹⁰ Masalha, Nur, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Pluto Press (2003).

¹¹ Masalha, Nur, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Pluto Press (2003), p.107





In 1982, Menahem Begin of the Likud Party¹² tried dealing with the Palestine refugee question by making building or adding to the camp shelters an offence punishable by fines or imprisonment as well as the removal of the building at the expense of the “offender”.¹³ This practice has since become very common against Palestinians living under apartheid regime in the West Bank and Jerusalem.



Credit: Ayed Arafah, Badil.

Reason for the UNRWA Ban

Simply put, Israel is “trying to force down Palestinians throats this idea that they will no longer return home, and this is something the Palestinians have historically refused to accept.”¹⁴

Considering Israel’s failed attempts at dissolving the Palestinian right of return, Israel and its allies have decided that the best thing to do would be to eliminate UNRWA all together.

In 2018, US and Israel tried to get UNRWA to cap the number of officially recognized refugees as only 500,000. By undermining UNRWA’s definition of refugees, the administration is attempting to attack the Palestinian belief in the “right of return”.

In 2018, Israeli Prime minister called for UNRWA to be eliminated and accused it of helping “fictitious refugees” by stating that “UNRWA is an organisation that perpetuates

the Palestinian refugee problem and the narrative of the right-of-return, as it were, in order to eliminate the State of Israel.”

According to an UNRWA situation report, 272 UNRWA team members were killed in 665 Israeli attacks and 205 UNRWA facilities were damaged since October 2023. Israeli attacks on UNRWA have been ongoing for decades. For instance, in 1974, Israeli air raids destroyed the Palestine refugee camp of Nabatiyeh in Lebanon, along with three other camps. In Nabatiyeh alone, 80 per cent of UNRWA concrete-block shelters, home to more than 3,000 Palestine refugees, were targeted and hit by the occupation forces.

UNRWA has played a vital role in providing health and education services to millions of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in Gaza, West Bank and the occupied East Jerusalem. The agency also provided employment opportunities, microfinance programmes and support for revenue generating initiatives.

Israel’s banning of UNRWA aims to the refugee camps of Palestinians, solve the Palestine refugee “problem” by attempting to dissolve Palestinians in other Arab cultures and eliminate the right of return of Palestinians in exile.

As any settler colonial project, Israel has been pragmatically planning the ethnic cleansing of the entirety of historic Palestine. The banning of UNRWA is based on an assumption by Israel that the Palestinian cause is alive because Palestinians in refugee camps, particularly in Gaza and the West Bank have minimal access to food, water, education and medical care. By removing humanitarian aid, Palestinians would be faced with the option to leave or die.

The banning of UNRWA will certainly have extreme consequences on people living in the camps and has the potential to cause a true humanitarian crisis, specially in Gaza, where the majority of the population is dependant on its humanitarian operations.

The assumptions made by the Zionist state are simply inaccurate. While it is true that the banning will have dire humanitarian

consequences on Palestinians, it will not break their resolve to resist injustice.

For years, Israel has dealt with the right of return of Palestinians in a frankly racist and criminal manner. Instead of acknowledging the crimes it committed against Palestinians and paving the way towards an equitable, just and free society for all the inhabitants of the land. Israel introduced an exclusive Zionist agenda and got the western powers to sponsor their racist project.

As Palestinians in Gaza have recently shown, the bond between Palestinians and Palestine is too strong to be broken. Ethnic cleansing, illegal occupation, apartheid, starvation, illegal detention, and torture are ineffective tools at cracking the Palestinian spirit.

The UNRWA ban is a tool of starvation and erasure. Third states have shown an unwillingness to use their political will to ensure Israel’s respect for international humanitarian law and to seek to obtain Israel’s compliance where the means to do so are readily available to them.

As for Palestinian refugees, they don’t hope for the world to feed them through UNRWA, they want to exercise their right to return home, a right that they have been denied of for the past 76 years.

The right of return of refugees is incorporated widely in international treaties and instruments and is one of the strongest existing international state obligations that is entrenched as an aspect of nationality, human rights, and refugee law.

The question remains, do the principles of international law and of equity allow for Palestinians to live free and have full human rights?

The answer to that question is irrelevant, because our humanity and our rights to be free are unalienable, unnegotiable and indivisible. Palestinian refugees will continue to call for that right until they can return to their homeland.

¹² Same party that is currently headed by Benjamin Netanyahu.

¹³ Al-Fajr, 2 December 1983 (English).; Masalha, Nur, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Pluto Press (2003), p.119

¹⁴ Sam Bahour, a cofounder of the Right to Enter campaign (Al Jazeera).



UNRWA EDUCATION

Zeina

Since its establishment in 1949, UNRWA has been a vital lifeline for Palestinian refugees, providing essential services such as education, healthcare, and relief. Yet its role has transcended these basic provisions, evolving into a cornerstone of cultural survival and resistance against the Zionist regime’s ongoing ethnic cleansing. From the Nakba to the devastating bombardments in Gaza, education within UNRWA schools has been at the heart of the Palestinian struggle for justice, identity, and liberation.

The Nakba of 1948, which saw over 750,000 Palestinians violently displaced through ethnic cleansing by Zionist militias, marked the birth of UNRWA. In the wake of this catastrophe, the agency was set up not only to offer humanitarian aid but also to address the immediate needs of refugees. However, the international community’s political decision to prioritize temporary relief over a solution for Palestinian return led to the creation of a system that, rather than resolving displacement, perpetuated it. By establishing refugee camps and providing services within them, UNRWA was tasked with managing the crisis but was not empowered to challenge the root cause—the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes. As a result, Palestinians were left in a state of perpetual exile, their situation maintained by political forces beyond the agency’s control. Amidst this ongoing displacement, UNRWA schools became a vital tool for preserving Palestinian culture, history, and hope for a future of justice and return. These schools were more than places of learning; they became bastions of resistance, where Palestinian identity was safeguarded despite the forces of erasure.

As the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands deepened through the years, UNRWA’s role in education grew even more crucial. In the 1980s and during the First Intifada, schools in Gaza and the West Bank became sites of resistance against the Zionist regime’s attempts to impose a curriculum aimed at erasing Palestinian history and culture. Despite violent suppression, Palestinian teachers and students refused to comply with efforts to rewrite their history. UNRWA schools became spaces where resistance was not just taught but lived. Palestinian youth

learned about their rights, their history, and the ongoing injustice imposed by the Israeli occupation, creating a new generation of resistance.

The violence of the 2000s escalated with the siege of Gaza and repeated Israeli assaults, including the brutal 2008-2009 Operation Cast Lead. UNRWA schools were deliberately targeted, with institutions like the Al-Fakhoura School in Jabalia reduced to rubble by Zionist warplanes. Yet, Palestinian educators and students exhibited incredible resilience. Even in the face of complete destruction, they found ways to continue learning—often in makeshift classrooms, under tents or even the open sky. Education, in this context, became a symbol of survival, an act of defiance against the genocidal policies of the Israeli occupation.

The years that followed saw more bombing campaigns and blockades, but the spirit of Palestinian resistance remained unbroken. In 2014, during another Zionist assault on Gaza, schools such as the Beit Hanoun School were destroyed, yet Palestinian students and teachers refused to be silenced. Amidst the rubble, learning continued in whatever space could be found. Whether in parks, shelters, or the streets, Palestinian children and educators showed the world that education is not just about academics—it is an act of survival and defiance.

In 2023, as the Zionist regime escalated its genocidal campaign, targeting UNRWA schools with even greater intensity, Palestinian children and educators again faced violence, with schools like the Nasser Primary School reduced to rubble. But the destruction only deepened the resolve of the Palestinian people. Despite the immense trauma, children and teachers returned to their lessons, determined to preserve their identity and fight for their right to live. The rubble of their lives became a powerful symbol of resistance—an unwavering refusal to let the Zionist project erase their future.



UNRWA’s educational legacy is a testament to the strength, resilience, and resistance of the Palestinian people. Every destroyed school, every bombed classroom, is a stark reminder of the brutality of the Israeli occupation. Yet every rebuilt school, every lesson taught, is an act of defiance—a rejection of the Zionist regime’s attempt to wipe out Palestinian culture and history. Education in Gaza, even under siege and bombardment, is not just about survival; it is an assertion of Palestinian identity and an act of resistance against a regime built on genocide.

As long as Palestinians continue to learn, to teach, and to dream, the struggle for justice, liberation, and return will never be extinguished. UNRWA’s schools are not just places of learning—they are the very heart of resistance. And as long as that heart beats, the Zionist regime’s efforts to erase Palestine will be nothing but a futile attempt. Liberation is not coming—it’s already unfolding, right now, in every classroom, in every lesson, in every act of defiance.

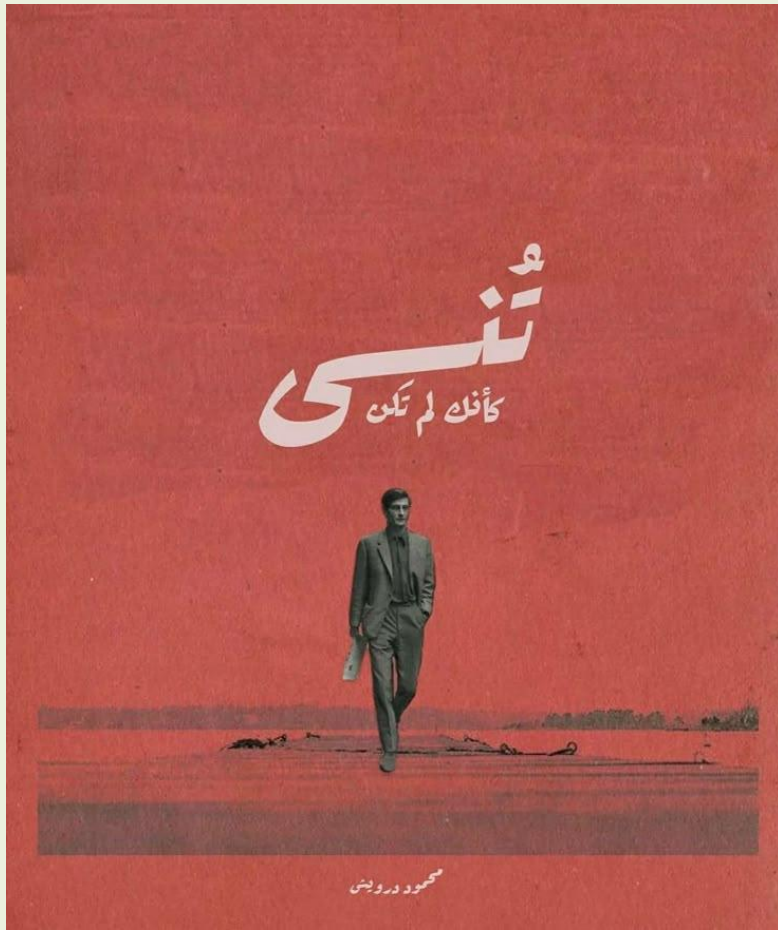


Credit: Justseeds.





“FORGOTTEN” A POEM BY MAHMOUD DARWISH



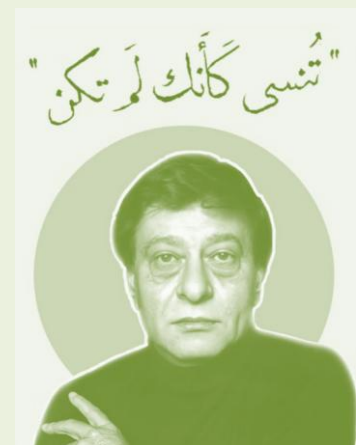
Forgotten As If You Never Were
 Forgotten, as if you never were.
 Like a bird's violent death
 like an abandoned church you'll be forgotten,
 like a passing love
 and a rose in the night . . . forgotten
 I am for the road . . . There are those whose footsteps preceded mine
 those whose vision dictated mine. There are those
 who scattered speech on their accord to enter the story
 or to illuminate to others who will follow them
 a lyrical trace . . . and a speculation
 Forgotten, as if you never were
 a person, or a text . . . forgotten
 I walk guided by insight, I might

give the story a biographical narrative. Vocabulary governs me and I govern it. I am its shape and it is the free transfiguration. But what I'd say has already been said.

A passing tomorrow precedes me. I am the king of echo. My only throne is the margin. And the road is the way. Perhaps the forefathers forgot to describe something, I might nudge in it a memory and a sense Forgotten, as if you never were news, or a trace . . . forgotten

I am for the road . . . There are those whose footsteps walk upon mine, those who will follow me to my vision. Those who will recite eulogies to the gardens of exile, in front of the house, free of worshipping yesterday, free of my metonymy and my language, and only then will I testify that I'm alive

and free
 when I'm forgotten



A LETTER TO THE PALESTINIAN MOTHER OF AN AUTISTIC CHILD: I SEE YOU

Danielle



Credit: The Palestine Poster Project Archives.

Our path as mothers is different from others. A littler harder, a little lonelier. As I write to you, I know our daily lives could not be more different, one under siege, under occupation; the other free and liberated and yet we are connected. Our hearts beat to the same beat for our children, our sons and daughters who need that extra hand in life. Our children's needs are no less deserving than all children, but access to support is not always there and so we fight for them. But our fight is not the same, what you endure is beyond what anyone can bear, and yet you endure.

I see you.

As you watched your baby grow, blissfully unaware, celebrating every giggle and laugh. As larger milestones didn't arrive, a worry in your heart, but all children are different, not to worry they told us. Access to preschool screening is vital to early diagnosis and intervention. In Palestine, healthcare services for autistic individuals are provided by 4 main sectors (1) the public sector (healthcare facilities of the Palestinian Ministry of Health), (2) the private sector (for-profit healthcare facilities), (3) non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and (4) healthcare facilities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). As public healthcare services in Palestine are woefully underfunded, diagnostic support is dependant mainly on the private sector and NGOs, access to which are not consistently available or above the means patients are able to afford. My son was 2 years old when the word Autism first entered our world, officially diagnosed, and identified. But for

you, how many doctor visits and follow ups, only to be met with empathy but insufficient tools for diagnosis and treatment. Palestinian universities and medical training institutions are not the culprit here, the educational system and the advancements that have been made in education under brutal occupation and siege are nothing short of remarkable. But the pace at which a society can build educational and medical frameworks from literal rubble is limited. And so, our Palestinian mother, you endure, learning what you can, taking what appointments are available, advocating for your child. It will take years to receive a diagnosis, many children well into their primary school years. While diagnosis brings some relief in understanding our children better, with limited pre-school intervention strategies; it marks only the beginning of the challenges ahead in an existence under occupation.

I see you.

We all want to protect our children, shelter them from harm, protect their dignity at all costs. As moms of autistic children, watching our children process their environment, often with intense difficulty is a tough one to bear. As parents we do everything to avoid dysregulation and the behaviours that can come with it. Control of the environment and routine becomes our main source of action. In Palestine, your very environment is weaponized against you, drones buzzing overhead day and night with no relief. Routine is fruitless against an Occupation that has disruption and displacement at its core. My one refuge in the face of raising a child so at odds with his environment has been *home*. When things become too overwhelming, we can go home. When he needs a break and time to reset, we can go home. Since 1948, Palestinians have faced a relentless attack on their home, stolen from them over and over, displaced again and again. I wish for you, our Palestinian mother, I wish for you and your children to return *home*.

I see you.

Autism and the educational system, a topic that binds all special needs parents together. What should be an exciting milestone of starting school, is often a time of distress for families with neurodivergent children.

Starting school for my son, he was equipped with a diagnosis and 2 years of early intervention therapy. Even so, there was much unknown about his rights to access to support services in school, nothing was a given and everything had to be advocated for, underfunding for special needs education is a constant issue we face. In Palestine, many children with Autism face exclusion in education due to lack of funding and infrastructure to support their needs. In Palestine, education, like healthcare, is provided by different sectors, public education, private; and education for Palestinian refugees through UNRWA. My dear Palestinian mother, I know you see the advancements in the education system but are still at a loss as to how this will serve your child. In the West Bank, communities advocated to allow for an aid to accompany neurodivergent children in the classroom, but these aids must be paid for by the families, many of whom simply cannot afford them. In UNWRA schools, there are now mandatory screenings for all children in grades 1, 2, 4, and 7; serving to diagnose learning and other developmental disabilities; but services after diagnosis continue to be scarce and not readily accessible. All these struggles to advance education continue to occur under the backdrop of apartheid, occupation, and genocide. The destruction of schools either through indiscriminate bombing in the Gaza strip or their demolition due to the apartheid policies in the West Bank, undermine efforts for inclusion, pushing them to the backburner. The intentional targeting and scholasticide of higher education institutions in Gaza this past year will only exacerbates the extreme shortage of trained professionals in disability and neurodivergent fields. And yet you endure, you remain steadfast in a brighter future. There are among you those who have risen and taken matters into your own hands, opened centres, opened tents, anything to help meet the distinct needs of our children.¹⁵

I see you.

Life after school, a time for independence and flourishing adulthood. While adulthood for autistic individuals and those with other development disabilities can look different, with the right supports and services it can and should still be a life full of hope and purpose.

¹⁵ Palestine: Leave it to a Mom to Create Infrastructure from Dust — Global Autism Coalition





For parents, worry and concern for the future continues into adulthood, many of us worry about what will happen to our children with more significant needs after we pass on, a valid concern. In Palestine, worry comes in many forms in a life under the Occupation. As my son grows into adulthood, his childhood features will fade, and he will become a man. This, manhood, is in and of itself a threat to Israel, men are routinely targeted and detained, innocence is never presumed. I see you, worried about how you will keep him safe, through the checkpoints, staying on the right side of the road, in a moment of crisis. And yet you endure, through all the suffering there will always be resilience, communities providing meaningful work and creative opportunities for our adult children.¹⁶

I see you, Rana, Um Eyad

Rana loved her son Eyad, raising him in East Jerusalem, going through all the stages of raising an autistic child, advocating for his education, and searching for a suitable program for him to grow into as an adult. For 31 years she poured herself into her son, proud of the young man he was becoming and on the morning of May 30, 2020, everything she loved was cruelly ripped away from her. Eyad was walking to his special needs school inside the Old City of Jerusalem when he was shot and killed by Israeli police. I think about how many times Eyad practiced walking that route to school, his parents and caregivers patiently plotting out the steps. Repeatedly he walked that route, I imagine the pride his parents felt when he began to navigate his way to school independently. Eyad was prepared, he had his papers stating his disability and school information safely with him. While his communication was limited, he knew how to identify his caregivers for assistance, to keep him safe. But Eyad could not have prepared himself for the danger that presented himself that morning, there was an alert of an armed terrorist in the area and Eyad being a man, being a Palestinian man was enough to mark him a suspect. He was pursued by border police as he cried out for his caregiver, he spotted just a few meters ahead of him. But as Wardeh ran to his aide, her cries out to the police in his defense, stating his disability fell on deaf ears and he was pursued and brutally murdered. He did everything as he was

taught, he tried his best, but in a world under Occupation, where you are presumed guilty, when they shoot first and ask questions later, a life like Eyad's can be stolen in an instant.¹⁷ To this day there has been no justice for Eyad, but keeping his memory alive is a form of resistance that they cannot erase. I don't allow myself to dwell too long on the fears I have for my son as he grows, I see in his eyes the hope of a brighter future. A future that belongs to all the children of Palestine.

"We travel like other people,

but we return to nowhere

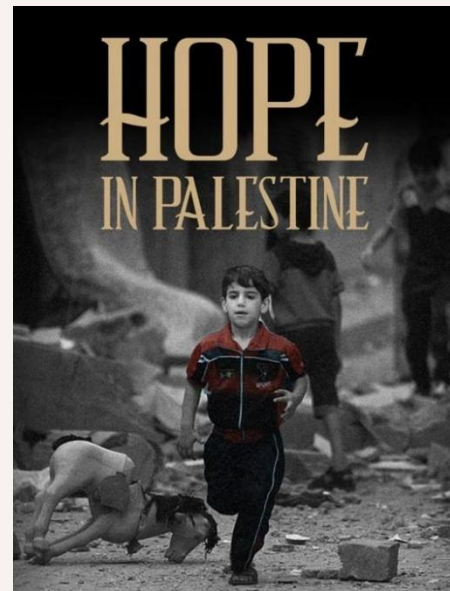
We have a country of words;

speak speak so I can put my road on the stone of a stone.

We have a country of words.

Speak speak so we may know the end of this travel."

[Mahmoud Darwish - We travel like other people]



rebuild and rebuild again. They have seen homes turned to rubble and families torn apart, only for those same families to rise, sweep the dust from their hands, and start anew. Adaptability is not just a skill...it is survival.

Aid as Both a Lifeline and a Condition

For over seventy years, Palestinian lives have been entangled with the work of aid organizations like UNRWA, the agency created to provide relief and support to Palestinian refugees. Its blue-and-white flag has become a symbol of both sustenance and stagnation. The food parcels, the schools, the healthcare centers, they sustain millions, but they also serve as a constant reminder of our dispossession. What was meant to be temporary relief has become generational reality.

Children in Gaza do not know a world without food rations. Students in refugee camps do not know a world without UNRWA schools. The hospitals that care for our sick, the job programs that keep our youth employed, these are the systems that sustain us. And yet, they are also a sign of the world's failure to restore our rights, to give us the dignity of self-sufficiency. Palestinians rely on aid, not because we are helpless, but because the systems that created our displacement have

PALESTINE: A PEOPLE IN CONSTANT MOTION BUT ROOTED IN STEADFAST FAITH

Dana

"Everyone upon the earth will perish, and there will remain the Face of your Lord, Owner of Majesty and Honor." (Quran 55:26-27)

Palestinians have learned to live in motion. Movement is not always a choice, but a condition forced upon us by history, by war, by occupation, by borders drawn without our consent. We move from city to city, sometimes within our own land, sometimes across distant shores, always carrying Palestine in our hearts. We are refugees in our own homeland, displaced yet deeply rooted, uprooted yet unshaken.

To be Palestinian is to be adaptable. Not because we want to be, but because we have no other choice. The streets of Gaza, Nablus, and Jenin have known generations who

¹⁶ L'Arche – Bethlehem

¹⁷ How a Palestinian man with autism was killed by Israeli police | Human Rights | Al Jazeera





made it nearly impossible for us to reclaim what was lost.

“Indeed, with hardship comes ease. Indeed, with hardship comes ease.” (Quran 94:5-6)

Palestinians know this verse well. It is whispered by mothers who rock their hungry babies to sleep. It is recited by fishermen in Gaza whose waters are patrolled by warships. It is the prayer of students who walk miles to attend schools that might not be there tomorrow. The ease may not come in the form of stability or certainty, but it comes in the strength of our people, in the resilience passed down from one generation to the next.

The Mental Toll of Constant Change

But what does it mean to always be in flux? What happens to a people when home is never permanent, when safety is never guaranteed? To always move is to carry the weight of impermanence. It is to rebuild the same home three, four, five times over. It is to live knowing that the life you create today might not exist tomorrow. The psychological burden of this instability is immeasurable. And yet, we see Palestinian children still drawing their villages in notebooks, still speaking of a future where they will return, still believing that change does not mean forgetting.

“O you who have believed, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient.” (Quran 2:153)

This patience ‘sabr’ in Arabic, some say may define us. It is not passive. It is not weakness. It is the endurance of a people who refuse to surrender their identity to exile. It is the patience of farmers who plant olive trees they may never see grow, of shopkeepers who sweep the glass from their storefronts after every raid, of families who teach their children the names of villages that maps no longer acknowledge.

I watched as Palestinian prisoners were released, men who had been locked away for years, punished not by any law, but by the simple fact of their existence. I saw families who had spent decades waiting for this moment, standing at the gates of freedom, their hands trembling with anticipation. And then, I saw a woman, waiting for her brother, Louay, who was in jail for 23 years, to step

into the light of a world he had not seen in years. She whispered a prayer, her voice breaking:

“Ya Allah, bind patience around my heart.”

As if what she had already endured was not patience enough. As if the waiting, the unanswered letters, the stolen years, had not already been the very definition of sabr. She was not asking for justice. She was not even asking for relief. She was asking for the strength to carry the weight of her own grief.

“And be patient, for indeed, Allah does not allow the reward of the righteous to be lost.” (Quran 11:115)

Palestinians know patience. But sabr is not a passive virtue. It is not just waiting for ease to follow hardship; it is surviving through the hardship itself. It is what allows a mother to bury her son and still rise the next day to care for the others. It is what keeps families returning to rebuild the same home for the tenth time. It is the kind of patience that turns suffering into resistance, loss into faith.

“And be patient, for patience is beautiful.” (Quran 12:18)

But what is beautiful about pain? About loss? About a lifetime stolen by occupation, by exile, by prison bars? Perhaps the beauty is in the way Palestinians hold onto their humanity despite it all. They are not superheroes. They are not invincible. They are humans; mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, enduring hardships most of the world cannot fathom. They feel the weight of it all, they break, they cry, they plead with Allah to make their hearts strong.

And yet, they endure. Because to be Palestinian is to know that sabr is not just waiting for a better future, it is believing, without a doubt, that it will come.

Adapting, But Never Surrendering

The world may see Palestinians as victims of change, but in truth, we are masters of adaptation. We have learned to build from nothing, to find joy in the smallest things, to create beauty even in the darkest places. But make no mistake, adapting does not mean surrendering. We may move from city to city, from refugee camp to refugee camp, but our direction is always the same: home.

“And do not weaken and do not grieve, for you will be superior if you are [true] believers.” (Quran 3:139)

Palestine is a story of forced movement, but it is also a story of faith. In a world that constantly shifts beneath our feet, we remain rooted in something greater. Borders can be redrawn, buildings can be destroyed, and the world can change around us, but what remains is our unwavering belief in our right to exist, our right to return, and our right to a future beyond exile.

And so, we continue to move. Not away, but forward. Not as victims, but as people who know that nothing remains except the face of our Lord, and in that, we find the strength to keep going.

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Yasmine

The current genocidal campaign conducted by Israel against Palestinians in Gaza can be analysed through Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, offering insight on how individuals adapt during such extreme conditions.

According to psychologist Abraham Maslow, humans must meet their basic physiological needs (oxygen, sleep, shelter, warmth, food, and water) before fulfilling their needs for safety, belonging, esteem, self-actualization, and self-transcendence. This concept is known as *Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs*.

In a genocidal environment, access to basic essentials such as food, water and shelter becomes severely limited. The focus of many individuals may focus purely to finding enough resources to sustain life on a day to day basis.

Further, physical safety is constantly threatened during military assaults and bombings. With hospitals being targeted in Gaza, medical care becomes precarious. Emotional safety also deteriorates as families live in perpetual fear for their lives.

Community ties have been highlighted and been shown to be the strength of Gaza. We have seen that displacement and separation from loved ones disrupts social connections, but resilience emerges as communities





band together to share limited resources and provide emotional support.

For Palestinian refugees who have been forced out of their homes since 1948, UNRWA has been a lifeline, not only by providing the basic physiological needs that form the

brief. What, then, can be said for the millions of Palestinians whose rights have been infringed upon for the past 76 years?

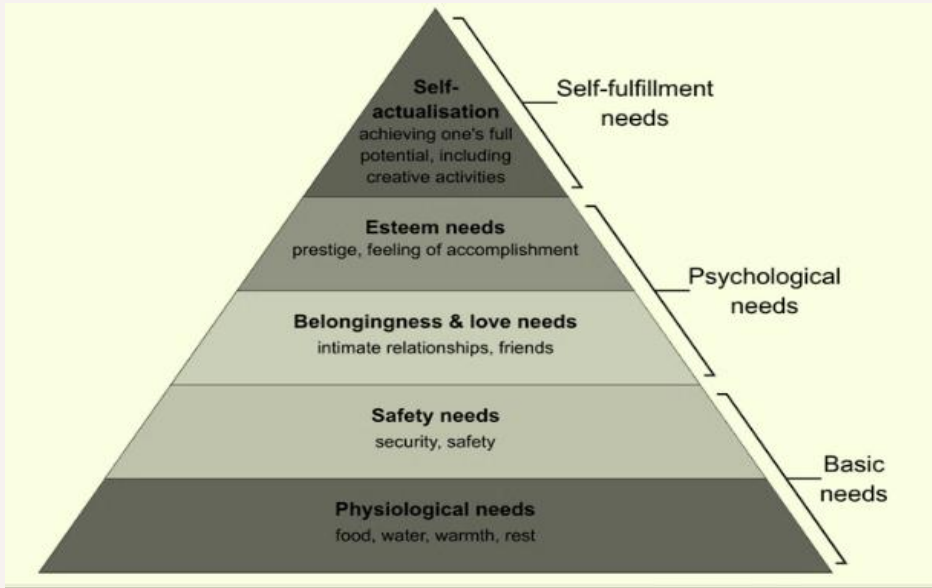
Over the past 15 months, the world has witnessed Palestinians endure some of the most unspeakable horrors known to

grandchildren. He modeled humility by spending his final days cleaning refugee camps and distributing humanitarian aid to his community. Palestinians in Gaza single-handedly managed to uphold their “pyramid of needs,” despite Israel’s relentless attempts to destroy its foundation.

As Palestinians triumphantly return to their homes in Gaza to rebuild, rejoice, and properly mourn, we must ask ourselves: how many times do they have to transcend the foundations of this pyramid before being free? Moving forward, what are the repercussions of eliminating UNRWA—Palestinians’ lifeline—and its already limited psychological resources?

The genocidal campaign against Palestinians in Gaza stripped them from their fundamental needs. Yet, they were able to demonstrate incredible levels of human resilience and adaptation. The psychological toll is immense, but the enduring spirit of those affected offers a testament to survival in the face of unimaginable hardship.

As Canadians, we have a responsibility to ensure that our government and corporations are not part of the genocide of the Palestinian people (or any other people). We must ensure that we are not part of the physiological and psychological anguish of another people.



foundation of this hierarchy, but also by offering psychological resources such as one-on-one and group counseling, psychosocial interventions, and leisure-based activities for students.

In 2005, UNRWA established the Community Mental Health Program (CMHP) to support Palestinian refugees in Gaza, particularly children and youth facing deteriorating conditions caused by Israel’s blockade. Children are taught coping mechanisms by mental health counselors to treat severe trauma experienced from continuous assault on Gaza. Although these services do not address the core issues that led to their establishment in the first place, they provide safe spaces for Palestinian refugees to receive support from professionals and from one another.

Can you think of a time when you were deprived of some of these basic needs, even if it was just for a moment? Perhaps when you were gasping for air because you choked on a morsel of food, or when you felt intense hunger because you skipped a single meal. Can you recall the terror of being threatened with danger or the emotional pain of losing a loved one? The psychological impact of being deprived of basic needs can be overwhelming, even if the deprivation is

humanity. In November 2023, scenes and accounts emerging from Al-Shifa Hospital resembled a horror film—but they were reality. Medical professionals risked death and imprisonment for refusing to abandon their patients. Babies were left to die in incubators while their parents were forced out of the hospital at gunpoint. Despite the initial international shock, Israeli forces continued to raid other hospitals.

The chilling phone call of five-year-old Hind Rajab, who sat amid her family—martyred right before her eyes—pleading to be rescued shortly before she herself was martyred with 335 bullets, shook the world.

Despite their traumatic reality, Palestinians continued to show up for one another in every possible way: they laughed, prayed, and cooked together; they celebrated Eid together when nothing seemed worth celebrating; they expressed gratitude and hope whenever they could. Even as Israel destroyed UNRWA establishments, each individual became a source of psychological support for others. Khalid Nabhan—whose beard and turban have long been weaponized by the West—became a symbol of hope through his faith in God. He exemplified affection by providing toys for children and playing with them, despite losing his own



FIGHTING FOR TWO: THE STRUGGLES OF PREGNANT WOMEN IN GAZA

Rihane

The plight of pregnant women in Gaza is a profound humanitarian concern, exacerbated by the ongoing genocidal campaign by Israel.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), there are approximately 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza, with over 5,000 expected to deliver each month. These women face sever obstacles in accessing safe delivery services due to Israeli attacks on hospitals and the disintegration of the health system, compounded by shortages of life-saving medicines, fuel and electricity.¹⁸ These dire circumstances, intensified by Israel's blockade on Gaza, led to a sharp increase in reported miscarriages over recent months.

Hunger and malnutrition are pressing issues in Gaza. More than 17,000 pregnant women are on the brink of famine, and nearly 11,000 are already experiencing it. This chronic malnutrition is not only taking a toll on mothers but also making breastfeeding more difficult. Among breastfeeding mothers, 55% report health issues that are preventing them from nursing, and 99% are struggling to produce enough breast milk, putting their infants at serious risk.¹⁹ For those who rely on milk powder or formula, the situation is even worse. Soaring inflation and the collapse of local markets have made these essential products increasingly unaffordable. For many women in Gaza, pregnancy has become a time of overwhelming stress and fear for both mothers and newborns.²⁰

The destruction of health facilities by Israel has left many women without essential maternal care. Reports indicate that midwives are delivering more than 70 babies per day in makeshift birth centers—whether in displacement camps, homes, or small clinics—often without trained healthcare workers or adequate supplies. This increases

the risks of maternal death from complications like hemorrhage, high blood pressure, infections, and prolonged labor.²¹

But amid these extreme conditions, the body does everything it can to prioritize the fetus's survival. Let's think about how extraordinary the body's response is in such circumstances. When the mother is deprived of food, her body adapts to ensure the fetus gets the nutrients it needs. The placenta, the organ that connects the mother and baby, becomes the lifeline, supplying the fetus with oxygen and nutrients even when the mother is malnourished.

If the mother isn't getting enough food, her body starts breaking down fat stores for energy, releasing fatty acids and ketones that can fuel both her and the fetus. If this continues, muscle tissue is broken down to provide amino acids, which are crucial for the baby's growth.²²



Unfortunately, this process leads to muscle wasting in the mother, which is a sign of serious malnutrition. In extreme cases, the body may even start to break down bone tissue, including the mother's teeth, to ensure the baby gets the calcium it needs. Calcium is essential for fetal development, especially for bone and teeth formation. If the mother isn't getting enough calcium through her diet, her body will pull it from her bones. This can lead to weakened bones, tooth decay, and conditions like pregnancy gingivitis. While the body doesn't directly "break down" teeth in the way it does bones, it does pull calcium from them, compromising the mother's dental health over time. The body is doing everything it can to protect the fetus, but this prioritization can have serious

consequences for the mother. The blood supply is directed toward vital organs like the heart and brain, and less blood is sent to the skin, extremities, and muscles. This can cause cold extremities, low blood pressure, and even fatigue. The body also slows down its metabolism to conserve energy, which means the mother will feel more depleted, while every available resource is directed to the baby.²³

The incredible resilience of the human body is evident in these circumstances. However, the toll this takes on the mother's health is immense. Malnutrition during pregnancy can stunt fetal growth, lead to complications like intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR) and cause long-term health issues for both mother and child. The risks are far too high for both the mother and her baby to survive on minimal resources alone.²⁴

The genocide in Gaza highlights how crucial it is to provide pregnant women with the care, nutrition, and support they need to survive. The body's ability to protect the fetus in times of severe deprivation is extraordinary, but it shouldn't come at the expense of the mother's health.²⁵ Without urgent international assistance, both maternal and infant mortality rates will continue to rise, with long-lasting effects for future generations.

The international community must prioritize the provision of comprehensive support to address the challenges faced by pregnant women in Gaza. Ensuring access to adequate nutrition, clean water, and essential healthcare services is crucial to safeguard the health and well-being of pregnant women and their babies in Gaza.



¹⁸ International Rescue Committee [IRC]. (2024, October 30). What is happening to children and pregnant mothers in Gaza?

¹⁹ International Rescue Committee [IRC]. (2024, October 30). What is happening to children and pregnant mothers in Gaza?

²⁰ International Rescue Committee [IRC]. (2024, October 30). What is happening to children and pregnant mothers in Gaza?

²¹ Rondi Anderson (2024, August 7) A nightmare for pregnant women in Gaza | Think Global Health.

²² University of Rochester Medical Center. (n.d.). Blood Circulation in the Fetus and Newborn. Health Encyclopedia.

²³ National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (2023, May). Pregnancy, breastfeeding, and bone health.

²⁴ Maternal Nutrition Preventing malnutrition in pregnant and breastfeeding women. (n.d.). Unicef.

²⁵ Naaz, A., & Muneshwar, K. N. (2023). How maternal nutritional and Mental health Affects child health during pregnancy: A Narrative review.



SHORT FICTIONAL STORY – ASHES OF CHILDHOOD

Imane



Credit: Naser Jafari, Al-Quds Newspaper.

I hadn't moved since they pulled me out.

I was sitting on the sidewalk, in front of my house. Or at least, what was left of it.

They struck in the middle of the night; I was startled awake by a long, high-pitched whistling noise that ended in a deflagration. Then, there was nothing left but silence and darkness.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was crushed underneath a pile of bricks, my face covered in dust. I was pulled out by two men in uniform who assured themselves that I was alright. Then, they left me alone. I couldn't blame them; the entire neighbourhood was hit, and from what I could see, the damage was extensive.

"Hala!"

My brother's voice was shaky, like he was trying hard to stop himself from crying.

So I did the same.

"Hamza", I rasped out.

He rushed in my direction and I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tight.

"We're going to be okay", I said, "we're safe now."

It was a lie. I wasn't okay, I wasn't safe, and neither was he.

But then again, no one in Gaza ever is.

Everything else happened in a blur; I know Hamza and I were led to a camp for refugees, which is nothing more than a fancy term for "people who have nowhere else to go because

their entire neighbourhood just went up in flames". I remember a woman with skin that crinkled at the corner of her eyes asking me about my parents, where they were when the house was hit, and if we had any family that could take us in.

I knew she was only doing her job, but I hated that she kept asking me questions instead of leaving me alone. I remember answering anyway because Hamza's seven and I'm twice his age, which means I have to take care of him, and he looked ready to drop to the ground.

So I told her that my parents went out when they heard bread was being distributed three streets over, and I didn't know where they were now.





“Okay. But can anyone else care for you and your brother until your parents find you? Grandparents, an uncle, an aunt?”

I wanted to scream at her that I didn’t know, that the family I had left had either fled to Egypt a long time ago or evacuated towards the South. But Hamza had started crying, so I just answered her questions.

But then, she looked pityingly at Hamza, put a sympathetic hand on my shoulder and said that she knew it wasn’t easy, but until my parents found us, I was responsible for my little brother.

I knew that, of course. I just didn’t need her to say it.

We were led in an old school building, that I was told belonged to UNRWA. We weren’t completely alone, at least.

As I explored the building, I realized it was quite the opposite, actually.

Thousands of people had found refuge in vacant classrooms, offices and hallways. Children were playing in the courtyard, running and laughing despite the early hours of the morning.

Hamza stopped walking for a moment, studying them. I gripped his hand tighter and tugged him behind me as I kept walking.

We were led into what looked like an old classroom, emptied of its desks and chairs.

Hamza and I claimed a corner near the cracked, dusty blackboard as our own. There, some families shared their food with us and gave us a mattress and blankets. I learnt pretty quickly that things in Nuseirat worked in a very specific way; it seemed like everyone here was always ready to help with what they could. Even if they too were displaced people.

People who had lost everyone and everything over and over again.

Rewa, a woman in the space next to me, had four children of her own; her husband was killed in an airstrike a few months ago, she said, and she’s done her best to take care of them ever since. These days, there’s barely enough food for one, so I had no idea how exactly she managed.

But Rewa never complained.

“Everyone here has their troubles. It helps to be patient if you remember just how lucky

you are”, she had told me during my first few days in Nuseirat. I remember scowling and hating her a little for what she said. *Lucky?* I wanted to scream at her.

War was everywhere around us.

My parents were gone, and I had no idea when they would find us. *If they would find us.*

I had to take care of my little brother when I barely knew how to take care of myself.

My house, my neighbourhood, my entire *life* had nothing left of it but rubble and dust.

If this is lucky, then I don’t want to know what unlucky is.

I told her all of that when I was certain that Hamza was asleep and that he couldn’t hear me.

She smiled, and I wondered how anyone in her situation could smile so bright, so sweet.

“You’re young”, she told me. “But you’ll see what I mean soon enough.”

And she was right: some people have been living here for far too long. Hamza and I met *‘Am Bilal*, a man in his early seventies who was born in Nuseirat and had lived there his entire life.



Credit: @marmech.art

He was practically as old as the camp, which made him one of the most beloved people around; adults enjoyed his wise advice, and children were fond of his games.

But what I liked the most were his stories.

‘Am Bilal had lived through 70 years, during which the landscapes around him changed again and again. Despite his age, he could recall every single bombing in the area for the last fifty years. He told me of the produce merchants down the street who used to compete over who could sell the most fruit in a day. He told me of the mosque he visited for every single one of the five daily prayers.

He painted the picture for me; how Nuseirat looked and changed and changed and changed, as buildings collapsed and new ones were built over the rubble, until I knew the place like the back of my hand. But the best stories he told were of his trade.

He used to own a little bookstore, over which he lived with his wife and children. It was a magical place, he said, full of tales and stories and poems, ready to flood the minds of those who dared come inside. He painted such a vivid picture that I could see it when I closed my eyes.

The shop was small, the walls lined with shelves filled to the brim with books and novels. *‘Am Bilal* had carved those shelves himself, after he chose the sturdiest wood he could find. He couldn’t stop the shelves from bending slightly, however.

“Is it because the books were *very* heavy?” asked Hamza when he heard the old man’s tale for the first time.

‘Am Bilal ruffled his hair and smiled.

“You’re right, dear boy. The wood bends, because it carries a heavy burden, but it is not the books. Rather, it’s the weight of our words and our history that strains it. Just like all of us here”, he gestured.

I don’t think Hamza understood what the old man meant, but it hardly mattered. He had a way of captivating his audience in the very way he spoke.

“There was nothing to be done for the bending”, he repeated, “but I knew the shelves wouldn’t crumble. Our people are similar in that way; we might carry the heaviest of burdens and might bend at times, but *we will not break.*”

His words struck me like lightning.

“*How do you know*”, I whispered. His eyes were kind as he turned to me.



“Because God doesn’t test us with a burden we cannot carry.”

He lost his store and his house to an airstrike ten years after he built them. So he rebuilt what was destroyed. And again, when another strike collapsed the house and the bookstore once more. And again.

And one last time.

He lost his wife to the first strike, his children to the second. By the time the third one hit, he didn’t have many books left to salvage.

By the fourth, he didn’t have the strength to build again.

“I was old and frail already, but I could still share the words”, he said. And so he did, and his stories were like a light in the darkness for me.

Hamza and I spent day after day, night after night, in the same routine. I would look after Rewa’s kids while she went to find food and clothes, I would sweep our corner of the classroom while listening to ‘Am Bilal’s stories, and I would keep Hamza with me at all times.

It was wearing on him, and I could see it.

He would sit at the balcony overlooking the courtyard where other kids were playing after their usual Qur’an lessons. His eyes were empty.

Rewa was right; I was lucky. If you looked hard enough, you were bound to find someone worse off than you. I understood that quickly, and that notion was reinforced when Hamza bumped into an old acquaintance.

“Hamza?”

A young boy stood a few paces away, the UNRWA woman who had helped us holding his shoulder. My brother, who was sitting in a corner of the courtyard, perked up at the sound of his name.

He barely had time to look up before he was tackled to the ground.

“Yusuf,” my brother grunted, “get off me!”

The boy, Yusuf, did as he was told with a broad smile. I got a good look at his face and recognized him; he had lived with his family, across the street from us, back in Deir al



Credit: Naser Jafari, Al-Quds Newspaper.

Balah. He and Hamza were each other's shadows, always following one another and getting into some kind of mischief.

But now, he was missing an arm.

The UNRWA worker told me he was pulled out of the rubble shortly after us, but had spent some time in the hospital because a good part of his right arm was blown off.

“Where are his parents?”, I asked, looking around.

The woman shook her head; the rest of the Baydans were still buried under the ruins of their own house.

I nodded, and it was settled. Yusuf stayed with us from there, even though I wasn’t sure how I could care for two little boys when one was already too much.

A part of me wanted to ask Rewa, or anyone else, to take him in, as much for his sake as mine. But I knew I couldn’t; they wouldn’t refuse if asked, but people here don’t generally wait to be asked.

They give and give and give, and I knew in the deepest of my soul that someone else would have already taken him in if they could.

Besides, some light had returned to my brother’s eyes when he saw his friend.

As it turned out, Yusuf proved himself to be quite a handful. He was always laughing and running all over the place, and he soon grew on everyone in the building. I often wondered at him; he needed help with most basic tasks,

like tying his shoes or eating, because he had always been right-handed. Yet, he was always smiling, and that energy seemed to spread to everyone around him.

On some nights, though, when Hamza was fast asleep, it seemed like Yusuf was restless.

“Do you think Mama and Baba forgot about me?”, he would ask quietly.

I thought about his parents, who were still under the rubble.

“I’m sure they’ll come to find you as soon as they can”, I said, rubbing his shoulder.

I didn’t tell him how unlikely it was that the rescue team would find anything other than a corpse. Soon after that, he was asleep, and I was crying.

The next morning, while helping Rewa with laundry, I could hear the boys arguing.

“Ask her yourself”, Hamza whispered to Yusuf as I approached.

“No, you do it”, the boy whined in answer. “Hala scares me sometimes.”

“Ask me what?”, I intervened, raising an eyebrow.

Yusuf grinned sheepishly, then shared a hesitating look with Hamza.

“The others are going to play soccer outside, in the square” the latter blurted out. “Yusuf wanted to go play with them.”





Credit: Naser Jafari, Al-Quds Newspaper.

The boy nudged him with a look that clearly said Yusuf wasn't the *only* one who wanted to go play with them.

I sighed and shook my head. "Hamza, it's dangerous. Stay with me here. Rewa needs our help."

The boys argued and pleaded, following me around as I went about my tasks for the day.

'Am Bilal, who had heard everything, eventually put an end to their misery.

"Let them go, Hala", he chuckled, exasperated.

That was all it took for Hamza and Yusuf to run off to join the other kids. I sighed as 'Am Bilal sat down next to me.

"It's not safe for them, 'Ammo", I started, but he cut me off with a raised hand.

"Nothing ever is, Hala. It hasn't been since before I was born, and we have no way of knowing when our land will become safe again."

I took in his wrinkled face, frail hands, and wooden cane. Would I look the same before we finally got to be free?

"I guess you're right", I sighed again, unconvinced.

"Kids want to play, and people want to live," he remarked wisely. He stood up and grinned. "I, for one, am going to check if they need a referee." He gazed at me and added in a soft

tone. "You're fourteen. You get to be a child too, Hala. Don't forget that."

He left for where the children were gathered and I followed from a distance, hearing them welcome him with joyous cries. I stayed on the side for a bit, watching Hamza run and laugh with Yusuf. I didn't think I would ever get to hear that laugh again.

I smiled and headed inside, back to my sweeping.

Looking back, I probably should've seen it all coming.

We were happy. It was foolish of me to think it would last. I didn't realize anything was off, but Rewa did. She frowned and stood outside on the balcony.

"What is it?" I asked, following her.

"Something's wrong", she said. "Listen."

So I did. I could hear the children's laughter in the distance, 'Am Bilal's voice calling out points, and the usual bustle of the camp. Nothing else.

The air itself was silent as if holding its breath. The ever-present buzzing of enemy planes in the sky, the sound we had grown so accustomed to we barely heard it anymore, had stopped.

Rewa only just had the time to call her children in a frightened voice, that a long, familiar whistle shook the air around us, before ending in a terrible, loud explosion.

I looked to the distance and saw the flames.

Everything else happened quickly.

Rewa brought her kids inside, and civil defense were running towards the impact. I don't remember leaving the balcony, but I was somehow running towards the square, too.

I looked and looked and looked, searching desperately for Hamza or Yusuf amid the chaos.

The closer I got to the wreckage, the more smoke stung my eyes, until everything around me was blurry. I could hear people screaming, fire crackling, sirens blaring.

And that terrible, awful buzzing was back, as if to taunt us.

Hamza, where are you?

I rubbed at my eyes to clear the tears that I told myself were provoked only by the smoke.

I have no reason to cry.

Hamza is okay. Yusuf is okay. 'Am Bilal is okay.

Everyone is okay.

I knew the last part wasn't true, because if everyone was okay, then there was no reason for the ambulances and the civil defence to be here. But they were.

I heard cries behind me, and when I turned, I saw a familiar form on the ground, trying to stand.

Yusuf. I ran to him.

"Are you okay?", I let out urgently, picking the young boy up and running to the school.

"People took him", he stammered. "People took Hamza."

"Who, Yusuf? Medics?"

He nodded shakily, and I let out a breath.

I dropped Yusuf off to Rewa's care and ran towards Al Awda hospital.

I pushed my way inside, navigating through the crowd and asking about Hamza to anyone who would listen.

Eventually, I found him, and I had to bite back a sob.



“Hamza”, I choked, kneeling to cradle his head on my lap.

He was lying on the hospital floor, his face covered in dust and streaked in tears.

I looked him over, checking for injuries. I took in his curly brown hair, his arms that were crossed tightly over his chest, his legs —

I inhaled a shaky breath.

Where his right leg once was, I could only see lacerated, charred flesh, from his knee to his foot.

“Hala, it *hurts*”, he whimpered, and it took everything within me not to break down in a thousand pieces.

“I know, *habibi*”, I whispered. “I know.”

A dishevelled doctor examined Hamza for a while, then gently led me aside.

The doctor explained that his leg was crushed and had suffered severe burns. They wouldn’t be able to save it.

“We’re going to have to amputate”, he stated in a soft tone. I was shaking but nodded anyway.

“He’ll be fine, right?” I croaked, and the look on the man’s face made my blood run cold.

“We’re out of a lot of supplies”, he started hesitantly and paused for a beat. “Anesthesia is one of them.”

I couldn’t hold back the sob this time.

I was still crying when they gave Hamza something to bite down on, and when he gripped my hand.

“It’s okay, Hala,” he said, and I nodded, his face distorted through the water pooling in my eyes.

“It’s okay,” I repeated, crying and shaking, partly because my little brother was the one comforting *me* when it should be the other way around.

“Okay,” the doctor said, surrounded with a surgeon and a few nurses. “*Bismillah*.”

Hamza screamed as they cut through what was left of his flesh.

He screamed and screamed and screamed, piercing through the heavy silence until it was but a memory.

He screamed and screamed and screamed to the point where we couldn’t hear anything else.

He screamed and screamed and screamed and it resonated through my mind, bouncing around until my thoughts were drowned out, until I thought I would never be able to hear anything else, until he finally stopped.

I stayed with Hamza on the hospital floor until we had to give up our spot on the floor for an injured man who was bleeding out of his head. I scooped my brother up in my arms and carried him back to the school, his head propped against my chest. I laid him down on our mattress.



Credit: Naser Jafari, Al-Quds Newspaper.

Rewa was waiting for us with Yusuf. She clasped her hand over her mouth and muttered a prayer under her breath when she saw Hamza.

Yusuf, on the other hand, didn’t make a sound. He simply stared at what was left of his friend’s leg, a tremor shaking his body.

“Is everyone else okay?” I asked Rewa, my throat dry.

She shook her head and said a lot of people hadn’t made it back yet.

“*Am Bilal wasn’t back yet.*”

It was my turn to murmur a prayer, and I stepped outside, away from Yusuf’s now haunted, broken gaze.

I couldn’t escape his strangled whisper in time, though.

“*I’m sorry, Hamza.*”

“*It’s my fault, I’m sorry.*”

Restless, I went back to the square to find someone, *something* that I could still save.

There wasn’t much left.

People were picking up what they could find in bags, weighing them until they reached 70 kilograms.

One full person.

Then, they took another bag and started over, again and again.

Around me, there were only mangled bits and pieces, the smell of smoke and burnt flesh.

Not enough to identify anyone by, not enough to get closure.

A few paces away lay burnt wooden pieces of what was once a cane. And because I couldn’t cry anymore, because I couldn’t do *anything* anymore, I did the same as anyone else.

Take a bag, fill it up, weigh it. And pretend that’s whoever you lost, pretend that picking up bits of charred flesh and bones from the ground is the usual way of honouring our dead.

Pretend your grief wasn’t stolen from you along with everything else.

I gripped the broken cane in my hand and thought about the bookstore.

I thought of the man who lost everyone and everything over and over again, but rebuilt what he lost for as long as he could. The man who had lived in this camp until his very last breath.

He lost his wife to the first strike, his children to the second. By the time the third one hit, he didn’t have many books left to salvage.

By the fourth, he didn’t have the strength to build again.

Now had come the fifth, and ‘Am Bilal was no more.

I walked, cane in my left hand, flesh-filled bag in my right, bumping against my leg every step I took.

I thought of my parents who, if they were still alive somewhere, would come back to find only half a son and a broken daughter.

I thought of happy, cheery Yusuf with his haunted stare; I thought of Rewa and her four children and how they would grow up. I thought of Hamza, whose screams hadn’t left my ears.

‘Am Bilal was wrong.

I don’t think I’ll ever be a child again.



SANABEL OF PALESTINE

This section highlights the love and affinity our young Palestinian Canadians have for their homeland. These expressions of belonging are engrained in the DNA of every Palestinian worldwide. If you wish to submit your kid's Palestinian artwork in future publications, please send them to our attention:

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