

Writing Gaza during a genocide

Atef Alshaer

The night before October 7, I sent an article I had read in the *Guardian* newspaper to an orthopaedic doctor acquaintance in Birmingham.¹ The article reported on the new techniques that Israeli soldiers were using on the borders with Gaza in order to shoot Palestinian protestors in both ankles at the same time, causing life-long problems to their mobility. As someone who grew up in Gaza and was shot in my own ankle when I was ten years old, I was struck that the technique had advanced from the time of the first Palestinian Intifada (1987-1993). The new automatic rifles which have two triggers now allow for two targets at once, hence the infliction of injury on both ankles. My mind flashed back to 2018, the last and only time I was in Gaza since 1999, when I left to study at Birzeit University in the West Bank. I remembered walking with my wife near the now-destroyed Shifa Hospital in Gaza, and seeing several young Palestinian men on crutches lining one street with amputated legs after being shot by Israeli soldiers during the Great March of Return protests (2018-2023), when Israel intensified its sniper campaign, targeting children, health workers, journalists and people with disabilities, something which the UN at the time described as ‘a war crime against humanity’. It is estimated that more than 6000 unarmed Palestinians protestors were shot by military snipers, targeting sensitive areas that cause life-long injuries and immobility, such as knees and ankles.² One sniper boasted that he shot ‘42 knees in one day’.³

Sending the article was the last thing I did that evening, and I remember a night full of vague dreams, underscored by deep sleep. Upon waking, I checked my phone to find a stream of messages from friends asking me about what was happening in Gaza. At that point, I had zero knowledge. I surveyed the main news channels and settled on listening to Al Jazeera, which was broadcasting live from the surroundings of Gaza (originally

all part of Gaza until the armistice line of 1949 when Israel gulped it all up) that had been penetrated by Hamas fighters and other citizens from Gaza. A few hours later, I received a call from one of the BBC radio stations asking me to comment on the situation. At that point, the magnitude of the event was not clear, so I spoke about the Palestinian desperation in Gaza and described the event as an attempt to break free from the enormous open air prison that Israel had created for Gaza and its long-suffering people. Subsequently, I spoke to BBC TV and felt that my interviewer was actually quite open-minded and, in the immediate aftermath of the event, gave me time to explain Palestinian conditions in order to establish some understanding of what had happened.

Meanwhile, I grew alarmed as to what was likely to unfold for the people in Gaza. The subsequent days and weeks proved catastrophic, and I was catapulted into a strange sort of media world on an almost daily basis, particularly via the various BBC radio stations in the UK. Almost immediately, October 7 became the preamble to every conversation and any departure from this supposed ‘point zero’, accounting for Israel’s massive and unrelenting attacks against Gaza, and the systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure including hospitals, ambulances, schools, mosques, churches, bakeries, restaurants, water supplies, food supplies, medicine depots, and so on, was explained away by what happened on that date. History started then and only then. The horrifying reality imposed on Gaza up to that point was hardly accounted for, while the ‘mighty vengeance’ promised by Netanyahu saw thousands of Palestinian children and homes incinerated with American-made bombs.

Unsurprisingly, by the time I appeared on one of Radio 4’s flagship programmes, the Moral Maze, soon after October 7, the other panellists were thoroughly uninterested in engaging with my point that history did not

simply start on that date, dismissing the argument with remarks that ‘we know the history’, as if this meant that it did not matter. The contributors to the show – who included a priest, a university professor, a well-known pundit and a Rabbi who spoke from Jerusalem – expressed outrage and disgust at Hamas, yet ignored totally that, as they were speaking, Israel was bombarding and killing people in Gaza indiscriminately and relentlessly. ‘Morality’ was invoked as if this resided with Israel alone, despite so many gruesome massacres and deaths of Palestinians at the hands of Israel over the years. Except for the considered and humane discourse of another Palestinian guest and an Israeli speaker who both lost members of their families in the conflict, the tone was one-sided, loaded with dehumanising language directed against the Palestinians, every issue reduced to the word ‘Hamas’. That prior to October 7 Israel was killing Palestinians in the West Bank, as well as Gaza, targeting their livelihoods, that its firebrand minister Itamar Ben Gvir was supervising torture sessions against Palestinian prisoners, that land and resources were constantly confiscated from Palestinians by settlers, worship at al-Aqsa mosque was being restricted and intimidating attacks and abuses by Jewish settlers were routinely faced by Palestinians in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the West Bank, that the 17-year-old blockade of Gaza was deepening the desperation there, and that Netanyahu and his government were sidelining Palestinian demands to such an extent that they were made effectively irrelevant to Israeli discourses – none of this was any kind of explanation for the October 7 attack, but was presented as a barrage of justification for it. Instead, the dehumanisation of the Palestinians was to be doubled down upon, so that bombing and attacks with the most advanced weapons on the planet against their bodies and institutions, against Palestine as a nation and community, could be justified and legitimated.

Above all, supporters of Israel from media pundits to the White House and Downing Street could not fathom the possibility that captives might seek to resist their captors, could rise, organise and inflict damage on their occupiers: how dare this heap of human dust form a storm against their occupiers? The few maintaining this self-evident point, such as the remarkable Norman Finkelstein, were a minority in the media, amidst the ceremonial chorus of condemnations and cheerleading for the massacres against the Palestinians in Gaza and

the West Bank. As always, Israel was assured of total impunity. Unlike their Palestinian adversaries, Israeli commanders could order attacks without repercussions, and defy international law by cutting off water and food supplies to the target populations, while western leaders poured into Israel, expressing sympathy with Netanyahu and his government, and ignoring the non-stop devastation that Israel was visiting upon neighbouring Gaza and its people. When Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour Party in the UK (and its Prime Minister at the time of writing), was asked if Israel had the right to cut off water and food supplies from the Palestinians, which Israel controls as part of its effective occupation of Gaza, he simply replied: ‘Israel has this right’. Thus, the leader of one of Europe’s largest ‘left-wing’ parties apparently concurred with the Israeli defence minister, Yoav Gallant, who described the Palestinians in Gaza as ‘human animals’ to justify the cutting off of water, fuel and food supplies to Gaza.

As a humanist, I have always been keen to make clear that I do not justify attacks against civilians. I argued in an article that I published anonymously soon after October 7 that in fact Hamas had miscalculated the Israeli response and did not read the geopolitical situation well. My understanding was that Hamas wanted to exchange Israeli prisoners with Palestinian prisoners and that its attack no doubt exceeded the limits set on it by its leaders in Gaza. Indeed, Hamas itself later admitted as much in a lengthy document. Much of the killing and destruction that took place against the civilian communities in Israel seems to have been undertaken by rogue elements, including from within Hamas itself and other movements that saw an opportunity to avenge the killing of their families or members of the same political groups by Israel. At the same time, as is now widely recognised, at least some of the killings were the responsibility of the Israeli army itself, which shot at Israeli properties to prevent the kidnapping of Israeli citizens; something that has now been admitted by Israeli sources themselves. Part of the picture of that day should also recognise that some Hamas fighters treated some Israeli civilians, including old women and children, well. None of this, however, fit with Israel’s and its allies’ narrative of absolute Palestinian savagery and barbarism, including now widely debunked stories of rape and baby-killing. There is little doubt that utterly inhumane and irresponsible acts were com-

mitted on October 7. I was horrified to see Israeli old women and children wheeled to Gaza, including a young woman with two babies, and was only mildly relieved when the spokesperson of the military wing of Hamas said something to the effect that they were willing to return them to Israel quite quickly in return for the release of Palestinian minors and women in Israeli prisoners. Yet Israel did not respond to the proposal, only to accept it after more than fifty days of unrelenting bombing and destruction in Gaza, which saw over forty Israeli civilians being returned as part of a deal that Hamas more or less suggested in the early days of the Israeli assault. By then, several Israeli captives had been killed by the Israeli bombardment, including the lady I had seen footage of with her two babies. As far as the Israeli civilians taken on October 7 are concerned, the picture is grim and inexcusable. Yet the damage could have been mitigated through negotiations had it not been for Israel's characteristic *modus operandi* of using extreme violence against the Palestinians in general in order to avenge an event which, tragic as it was, has been exploited beyond all reason to justify horrifying crimes against humanity.

I

It is over 250 days since the Israeli genocide began – a genocide effectively evidenced by the Israeli government and military's own statements, which do not hide their intent to render Gaza uninhabitable by unrelenting bombing and by the production of famine throughout the region, described as the fastest man-made famine in modern history by several human rights organisations. My feelings at seeing my birthplace maligned and destroyed to the extent that it has now been have induced daily bouts of suffering and despair. I engaged with this unimaginable situation through almost weekly writing for an Arabic newspaper, *Al-Arabi Al-Jadded*, in which I reflected on the ongoing grief over the tragic loss of doctors, journalists, teachers, children, women, and other devastations that reduced the much cherished Gaza of my memory to rubble. I also lamented the responses of official western governments and inept and corrupt Arab ruling elites, focusing on their discourses about, and disregard for the life of, Palestinian civilians who have borne the brunt of the devastating Israeli attacks. I concluded, as this situation pressed itself against the last vestiges of my mental

well-being, that my faculties are simply not prepared or equipped or qualified to deal with so much senseless death and destruction.



It offers no relief here to think of evil, as Hannah Arendt thought of it, as 'banal'; that evil, in this case, is no more than a person simply doing their job. As she famously writes of Eichmann: 'I was struck by the manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the incontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer ... was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous'.⁴ I might concur, difficult as this is, that Israeli pilots and soldiers indiscriminately killing large numbers of people including children, and destroying hospitals to render life impossible in Gaza, are simply doing a job assigned to them. Yet, I find it hard, too, not to see the extraordinary levels of engineering of discourse that entrench ideologies of killing and normalise them to such an extent that they become positively *heroic* actions for the society that conducts such crimes. This discourse-engineering extends from the seats of the Israeli government and media to White House spokespersons to newspaper columns and head-

lines that uncritically support the Israeli state, which often portrays itself as victim and victimiser in the same breath. The default positioning of such discourse is not only to obscure the humanity of the Palestinians, and their reasons for resistance, unsavoury as some aspects of this might be, but to render them invisible under rubrics such as 'terrorism'. To this end, 'evil' is a deliberate system, produced and reproduced to such an extent that it takes on the appearance of banality, of an utterly disturbing ordinariness, which reflects an extraordinary level of historical concealment of its gruesome, abnormal and inhumane character. Yet, the 'doers' who uphold this system are neither simply ordinary nor commonplace. They are well-informed and well-trained, using the latest technologies of killing through devastating weapons to cause untold suffering and destruction against a civilian population with very little to nothing to defend itself.

It is noticeable in this regard that since October 7, so many Israeli figures in the Hebrew media in Israel have called openly for the massacring of Palestinian people in Gaza and happily expressed their delight and pleasure at seeing the destruction and death in Gaza. Equally, of course, there are always people who dissent from and reject such positions, including brave Israeli youth, limited as their numbers are, who prefer to go to jail rather than take part in the occupation and violence Israel routinely deploys against the Palestinians. Nonetheless, what is clear is that Israel has grown more callous and reckless about its image, with its settlers and their leaders frequently broadcasting their crimes in a newly heightened state of sadistic glee and confidence in their own unaccountability, while protestors take part in preventing essential supplies from getting into Gaza and soldiers post pictures on social media celebrating their cruelty. Israeli soldiers blow up houses and schools, terrorise doctors in hospitals, destroy hospital wards, trample upon dead Palestinian bodies with tanks and bulldozers, humiliate minors and old people, execute unarmed civilians, all while broadcasting their crimes to the world. Such crimes have been committed since 1948 when Israel was established, but the scale, and the shamelessness, with which they have occurred since October 7th have been extraordinary, inaugurating a new sense of dread and fear of a coming world where grim practices of torture and killing come to be regarded and accepted as normal and even necessary.

Dehumanised and brutalised, portrayed as irredeemably irrational fanatics, the Palestinians are, at the same time, entirely excluded from normative politics as determined by the United States and its allies. Terms such as 'the peace process' or 'the two-state solution', which are bandied about on every occasion, become meaningless gestures in a discourse over which the Palestinians themselves can have no say. As the Palestinians' conditions have worsened over the years, so too has any horizon whatsoever for their legitimate rights to be recognised further receded. Tareq Baconi, writing in the *New York Times*, has expressed the matter succinctly:

Repeating the two-state solution mantra has allowed policymakers to avoid confronting the reality that partition is ... illegitimate as an arrangement originally imposed on Palestinians without their consent in 1947. The concept of the two-state solution has evolved to become a central pillar of sustaining Palestinian subjugation and Israeli impunity.⁵

II

Over the last few months, I have taken part in fundraising activities to help families related to mine and others staying with them in Rafah to survive. I felt moved by the protests in which I took part in London, where hundreds of thousands marched against the genocide in Palestine, expressing solidarity and feeling heartbroken by the mounting humanitarian disaster that Israel has engineered with the help of its allies. If nothing else, the situation has clarified the stark distance between many governments and political elites and the majority of their populations, whether in the West or in many Arab countries. There has rarely been a case where basic humanity and decency should so obviously have prevailed as this one. Yet in official media, Palestinian commentators and others have almost always found themselves pressed to argue even this most basic of points. In one of the interviews I had with BBC Five Live, I found myself puzzled, sensing that my interviewer demonstrated personal decency, giving me ample time to respond to his questions and develop my point, as the matter at hand required. Yet his questions were loaded with the mindset and culture of the institution he represented, repeating back to me the distorted narratives of the Israeli and American official bodies as if they were holy rites not to be

doubted, from claims of hospitals in Gaza being used as human shields to the number of children killed being justified as part of the ‘horrors of war’, to commenting on antisemitism as if this was the main motivation of the Palestinian struggle rather than liberation from a brutal occupation. So much distraction, twisted moralisation and justification to wash away blatant crimes against humanity being committed daily.



Franseca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, did not mince her words when she stated that ‘the world now sees the bitter fruits of the impunity afforded to Israel. This was a tragedy foretold.’⁶ If the ongoing tragedy in Gaza, stemming from ‘the impunity afforded to Israel’, was indeed foretold, the question persists as to why Israel is afforded such leverage and clout in western capitals that it feels immune from accountability, with so many of its officers and soldiers feeling free to broadcast their grisly crimes.⁷ The Republican Party in the US, buoyed up by elements

of the Christian Right, is so closely aligned with Israel today that its leaders attend meetings and gatherings with the likes of the Meir Kahane movement, previously proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the US and at one point described as racist by the Israeli parliament but which is now represented in the current Israeli government by the ministers Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich – a movement whose expressed ideology calls for the forced deportation of the Palestinians or even their enslavement.⁸ Such meetings have called, among other things, for the destruction of Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and its replacement with the Jewish Temple. To some extent, this is replicated by the Democratic Party side of American politics, where a large component of that party has grown up sentimentally attached to Israel and to Zionism as redeeming of the guilt of Europe from the Holocaust inflicted on world Jewry during World War II. They are also attached to Israel, having built a state which on the face of it subscribes to western normative values, including electoral democracy and civil institutions that they recognise as akin to theirs. And they do not have much sympathy for the lives of Palestinian Arabs, who are seen through a civilisational prism developed from nineteenth-century orientalist and colonialist tropes. Put simply and crudely, the civilisational measure does not accord the same value to the life of a Palestinian or Arab or Muslim as it does to a western life of white European origin, and Israel is represented as part of that civilisational ideology in terms of life-value.

This absolute support for Israel is a significant achievement of one of the key intellectual figures of Zionism and the founder of the extremist Likud Party at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ze’ev Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky’s strategy for Zionism, to which the ultra-right in Israel, including Benjamin Netanyahu, subscribes, consisted of two main considerations. First, for Israel – described by Jabotinsky as ‘a bulwark against Asia’ – to survive in the Middle East, it must ensure that it is literally and figuratively protected by an iron wall that keeps any potential enemies away. Accordingly, it is sheer power, not peace or political compromises, that matters. Second, Israel must be connected to the international power of the day, aligned with a major power that considers Israel’s security its own; this was Britain in the past, and since the 1950s has been the United States. Jabotinsky’s wish was ultimately fulfilled after the 1973 war between

Egypt and Israel when the United States made sure that Israel was secured against its (Arab) enemies, and that it would always have an advantage over them through 'iron-clad American support'. So has the 'impunity afforded to Israel' been established and guaranteed, with all that follows from this. A tragedy foretold.

III

My brothers in Europe and I have often analysed the situation at night, when we all returned from our work, despairing about the complicit parties, while taking refuge in each other's shared feelings. Sometimes the situation has got the better of me. I have found myself quietly crying, occasionally in front of strangers, while impulsively asking them 'what do you think of what is happening in Palestine-Israel?'.
Days are burdened by fears: is the family still there? Is my nephew Hassan still there? (He is my regular contact to check up on everybody.) Is my brother Saeed still smiling? How is my mother-in-law with her phobia of loud noise, and her vivacious five-year-old grandkid who speaks the language of adults now, coping with all this? Do they all have enough water? Enough food? Pointless to ask. Pointless to answer. Pointless to imagine. But we live in a pointless world right now.

To grieve it all, I occasionally write poetry, perhaps the most pointless master of all grief:

They prepared for their weddings

Those who die now
from my country
with the sun on their faces
and a horizon betraying them.
Those who die
with the bullets of Israel
and die from the promises of Israel
they die at the gatherings of roads
and from the weightless burden of the sky
they die
in houses bereft of light
in hospitals emptied of cures
they die.
Death visits them more than poetry,
hunger aethers their children,
and they prepare for their weddings
under collapsed roofs
over dead bodies under the rubble.
They die without mirrors

and walk in roads unashamed of their narrowness
those who die now
from the youth of my country
they are
without a doubt
concealing in their bodies
the barest sparks of a fire.

The body is a bounded space, bounded by its biological dynamics and psychological horizons. Short of death, it adapts. Suffering gives way to despair, where the mind flutters in aimless spaces.

It has been quite strange to hear the name of my city Rafah being repeated endlessly in the media and the mouths of politicians, including President Biden, as the next station for Israeli ground invasion and destruction. My city has become a cause celebre for all the wrong reasons. Rafah, this sleepy city, kissed and lashed by the Mediterranean Sea, has suddenly become a point of forced gathering for Palestinian civilians from the north and middle of the Gaza Strip, fleeing the horrors of Israeli invasions there. Rafah is now a site of immense suffering and hardship, teeming with refugees from the north in overcrowded tents and little to no means of sustaining life. As Israel now systematically destroys my city, I lament the fate of my family in tents. All hemmed in with thousands of other families, struggling all day long to provide food, water and other necessities of life for their families. There are not enough words of lamentation to express my sadness over you my beloved city.

More than one hundred people, mostly children and women, from my immediate and extended family have been killed in the ongoing Israeli genocide, as well as houses destroyed, livelihoods decimated and festering traumas created. My uncle's wife, Intisar Alshaer, who normally lives in Egypt and was visiting her family in Palestine, was killed along with scores of others in one gruesome Israeli bombing, where eight people, including an old man, two of his daughters and his three children, were killed. Ten other cousins were killed; one of them because of the unavailability of medicine for the minor injuries he sustained from an Israeli bombing. Another child was killed, while his father – a friend of mine – was at the oil presser. My nephew tells me that 80% of the neighbourhood of Hayy As-Salaam in Rafah where I grew up has been destroyed. Hundreds of houses were destroyed for no reason, other than to make the city un-

liveable for its inhabitants. I know of no family in Gaza that has not suffered the terrible and barbaric carnage Israel has been inflicting on them.

I remember looking at the face of a new friend I met at a meeting organised by a Palestinian family in London. He looked withdrawn and in utter despair. Upon asking about him, he told me that he had lost all his family members in Deir Al-Balah in the middle of Gaza in one Israeli bombing where twenty-one family members were sheltering. Such immense losses. Such immense consequences that mountains could not bear.

When I hear Israeli leaders say repeatedly that they are waging a war of civilisation in Gaza against barbarism, I see the images of all those innocent relatives, all the beautiful children, and can only think: 'fuck your civilisation'.

Yet, while I despair, I also remember my childhood in Gaza, and the children with whom I used to play on the beach of Gaza, many of whom have doubtless already been killed. I look closer and there I refuse to surrender to despair. As an act of will, in honour of my people and my childhood friends in Palestine, I hope for hope.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy power which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
from its own wreck the thing it contemplates
Life may change, but it may fly not;
Hope may vanish; but can die not;
Truth be veiled, but still it burneth;
Love repulsed – but it returneth.⁹

Atef Alshaer is Reader in Arabic Language and Culture at the University of Westminster. He is the author of Language and National Identity in Palestine: Representations of Power and Resistance in Gaza (2022) and Poetry and Politics

in the Modern Arab World (2016), as well as co-author of The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication (2014).

Notes

1. See Bethan McKernan and Hazem Balousha, 'Gaza Strip protesters received bullet wounds to ankles, medics report', *Guardian*, 4 October 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/04/gaza-strip-protesters-received-bullet-wounds-to-ankles-medics-report>.
2. See 'UN: Possible Israel crimes against humanity in Gaza', *Al Jazeera*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/28/un-possible-israel-crimes-against-humanity-in-gaza>.
3. See "'42 knees in one day": Israeli snipers brag about deliberately crippling Gaza protesters', *The New Arab*, 7 March 2020, <https://www.newarab.com/news/israeli-snipers-brag-about-deliberately-crippling-gaza-protesters>.
4. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest/HJB Books, 1978), 4.
5. Tareq Baconi, 'The Two-State Solution is an Unjust, Impossible Fantasy', *New York Times*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/01/opinion/two-state-solution-israel-palestine.html>.
6. 'Rights expert finds "reasonable grounds" genocide is being committed in Gaza', *UN News*, 26 March 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147976>.
7. On the US's support to Israel, see the most comprehensive book on this topic by Ilan Pappé, *Lobbying for Zionism on Both Sides of the Atlantic* (Oneworld, 2024). See also Nasim Ahmed, 'MEMO launches Ilan Pappé's book Lobbying for Zionism', *Middle East Monitor*, 11 June 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240611-memo-launches-ilan-pappes-book-lobbying-for-zionism/>.
8. See 'Fact Sheet: Meir Kahane The Extremist Kahanist Movement', *Institute for Middle East Understanding*, 17 May 2024, <https://imeu.org/article/fact-sheet-meir-kahane-the-extremist-kahanist-movement>.
9. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* [1820] (Cambridge University Press, 2013).