

## **Gaza from afar**

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From the emergency room in Lewisham Hospital in London on Wednesday evening, I called my parents to inform them of a sudden allergic reaction I had to something that remains unknown.

I wanted to hear their voices which never fail to comfort me in exile whenever I experience moments of uncertainty – even though I know that they experience an extreme level of uncertainty at their end, in Gaza.

At that moment, around 11pm Palestine time, my parents would usually be asleep, but I called anyway, and to my surprise, my mom Halima answered quickly. She sounded troubled as she offered a list of instructions to avoid such allergic reactions.

The radio was playing in the background and my dad would interrupt the conversation, and both sounded distracted. Something was wrong.

“Bombings are everywhere. May God protect us and have mercy upon us. If you were here, you would have thought it was the beginning of another full-scale attack,” my mom said.

“The sky lights up and then a massive bombardment is heard, and within seconds another one, and another one, shaking the ground underneath us. The walls feel like they’re falling down.”

### **Parallel realities**

My parents just celebrated the arrival of their first grandchild. They called her Eliya, one of Jerusalem’s ancient names. Ever since, she’s been the focus of our conversations.

“Eliya, bless her, is crying non-stop as if she senses the danger. We can hear her screams from here as your brother Muhammad and Asma [his wife] are trying to comfort her,” my mom said in distressed tones. “We are panicking ourselves. Imagine how kids are feeling this terror.”

The anti-allergy injection given to me in the ambulance was making me drowsy, but the impact of her words made me switch back on.

This experience seemed to sum up the parallel realities I’ve lived since since I left Gaza.

Growing up in Gaza, the world’s largest open-air prison, uncertainty defined everyday life. Death is always present, even as you do your most mundane activity in your most secure place.

And yet we learned to face our worst fears and continue to live without internalising this horror as if it were normal.

That is why resistance was a necessity in the face of this life of uncertainty and dehumanisation.

Gaza is only a part of a much larger system of violence, displacement and confinement designed by Israel, and funded and normalised by the so-called international community.

The reality in Gaza is the product of settler-colonialism, ethnic cleansing, sadistic militarism, supremacist ideologies and moral hypocrisy. It is a showcase of not only Israel's inhumanity, but that of the world as a whole.

Ever since I was old enough to understand the injustices that surrounded me as a child, I woke up every day questioning how despite its enchantment with human rights slogans, the world allowed this situation to continue.

### **Troubled silence**

Thursday morning, I called my family as soon as I woke up. My brother and his wife had a sleepless night with their 2-week old daughter.

My mom, who just got home from work, was eager to have a nap after a restless night. She works as a nurse in Beach refugee camp, at a children's clinic run by UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestine refugees.

But instead she sat on the tiles by the garden door to let her body soak in the coolness, as the lack of electricity in Gaza, except for a few hours per day, means that the air conditioners my family had installed cannot be used.

As she sat there, she told me stories of the mothers who came to the clinic.

"Several women told me that they had a sleepless night with their children crying out of fear," my mom recalled. "They were clinging to them."

Others said their children, including older ones, wet their beds.

"May God help them," my mom said shaking her head. "I raised you all in extraordinary situations, and I worry Eliya is going to grow up in similar conditions, if not worse."

I was looking at my mom on the phone with one eye, the other glancing at London's modern skyline from the 11th floor apartment of a friend that looked out on a city and world that seemed entirely undisturbed by what is happening in Palestine.

Our conversation was interrupted by a troubled silence that indicated there was more to be said.

I perfectly understood her without a word being spoken, however. I remember how we barely expressed our emotions as individuals when we were all in the same boat, experiencing the same violence.

We had no choice but to be strong for each other, and support one another to keep moving forward.

Then my mother spoke about how most families in Gaza had lost a loved one, or had someone suffer a permanent disability due to successive Israeli attacks. Amid

the catastrophic humanitarian and economic situation caused by Israel's siege, people are exhausted.

"Our situation is heaven in comparison to other families who are completely dependent on UN aid and do not have even one member with a regular income," my mom observed.

In addition, cuts to UNRWA funding by the US and the Palestinian Authority's withholding of salaries from civil servants, are making people's lives even more precarious.

**"We did not stand idle"**

My mother sounded agonised as she spoke about the overwhelming situation and reflected that the challenges of wartime seem almost bearable compared with the grinding aftermath.

"Precisely!" I said, in an effort to bring some hope into the conversation. "What makes people go to protest near the fence with Israel is that they have nothing to lose but a life of misery."

"Confronting and throwing stones at Israeli snipers lined up behind the fence is a means of survival to escape this cycle of powerlessness," I said. I told my mother I thought it was an act of defiance and dignity.

At least 120 Palestinians have been killed during the Great March of Return protests that began on 30 March, more than 20 of them children.

"If only the world outside knew how we experience life. If only they put themselves in our shoes for a second," I added.

"The times when we lived under physical military occupation were much better," my mom said, interrupting me. She was referring to the years from 1967 until 2005, when Israel maintained soldiers and settlers deep inside the Gaza Strip, instead of besieging it from the perimeter.

I was confused and asked her to explain.

"We had confrontations then, similar to what we have experienced at the Great March of Return, but from even closer," she said. "They would use their military power on us but we would have a brief window to express resistance, which was somehow consoling."

"We would stand in their faces without any fear, despite our knowledge that they would eventually do what they are indoctrinated to do – imposing roadblocks, curfews, house raids and detention campaigns," my mother explained. "We would stand tall in front of them as they attempted to kidnap your father, or one of your uncles, scream at them and curse them, eye to eye."

"The Tamimis were every family in Gaza, during the first intifada," she said, referring to the West Bank family of the teenager Ahed Tamimi, renowned for its role in the village of Nabi Saleh's unarmed resistance to Israeli occupation and colonisation.

"I remember when the army broke into our house in the middle of the night, soon after your birth, looking for your father. They turned everything upside down and stole your father's pictures and notebooks," my mom said. "We did not stand still as they ruined

everything. We resisted. We pushed them and threw our belongings which they had broken back at them.”

“But now they just drop missiles at us from their warplanes, gunboats or tanks as we sit in our homes unable to confront them.”

My mother mentioned the pregnant mother and her young daughter killed in their home in an Israeli airstrike Wednesday night.

“They could have been any of us,” she said.

Whenever I talk anyone in my family, they say nothing much has changed, as if time has forgotten about their corner of world.

But time did not forget them completely. They experience time differently: through an innovative form of military occupation which has turned Gaza into a caged laboratory for lethal technologies to be sold later to other countries as “battle tested.”

They experience the progress of time as a regression, with resistance – not accepting their abnormal situation as normal – the only way to break free.

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*Palestinians inspect the rubble of a building following an Israeli air strike on Gaza City, on 9 August.*

*Mahmoud Khattab – APA images*

