

The Phantom of Gaza

By Ahmed Masoud

This article was first published in February 2009. The reason we decided to republish it is to show that the agony of the people of Gaza began well before July 2014. In fact, Gaza has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967, and the people of Gaza have endured other vicious attacks in 2008-09 and 2012. We pray that this current war on Gaza would be the last one.

Phone always busy. Al Jazeera online playing images of the destruction around. Bombing in Jabalia Camp, Al-Kholafa Mosque, Al-Qerim Square, the police station, and on and on. Seven people were killed, many were injured; the UN condemns, the Red Cross accuses, the Arab League worries - about their own people revolting against them. My small TV has never been used as much as these days; I could almost write down the names of all the people interviewed on the BBC, mainly Israelis venting their propaganda. " Hamas is cynically using civilians as a human



Photo by Eduardo Soteras Jalil.

al-Dirawi, 27, Male-Ala Nahid Ibrahim Matar, 24, Male-Asam Abd al-Karim Halyan Abu Sahada, 45, Male-Jalila Farah Abdullah Hiad, 70, Female-Iman Anwar Salim Breeham, 39, Male-Mohamed Maher Ibrahim Abu Jarrad, 20, Male-Akram Ahmed Tawfiq al-Shanbari, 23, Female-Yusuf Jameel Sabhi Hamouda, 15, Male-Fadi Sami Salam Baraka, 4, Male-Hasam Ibrahim Hussein Abu Shab, 42, Male-Saheela Abd al-Qader Mohamed al-Jahal, 70, Male-Aza Abd al-Karim Abd al-Haman al-Faleet, 44, Female-Ramzi Hussein Ahmed al-Far, 23, Male-Salem Mohamed Badawi al-Far, 24, Male-Hasan Hussein Hassan al-Huwari, 38, Male-Mohamed Mousa Musalam al-Hashash, 20, Male-Mohamed Ahmed Saheed al-Hashash, 19, Male-Azat Salama Mahmoud Dahir, 23, Male-Maria Amar Salama Dahir, 12, Female-Tarkia Khalil Hamid Dahir, 66, Female-Tasnim Mohamed Salama Dahir, 4, Female-Yasmin Ahmed Hamad Dahir, 24, Female-Mariam Marzouk Abd al-Karim Abu Zeid, 31, Female-Falestine Mohamed Saheed Abu Zeid, 26, Female-Ahmed Abdullah Hassan Abu Zeid, 24, Male-Abdullah Nadal Abdullah Abu Zeid, 5, Male-Abd al-Samad Mahmoud Ahmed Ramadan, 16, Male-Ayman Adnan Mousa Shukar, 25, Male-Isa Kamil Mousa, 59, Male-Saheeb Atif Suleiman AbuJuzur, 6, Male-Mohamed Ahmed Harbi Siyam, 7, Male-Sabreen Khadar Saeed Abu Zeid, 31, Female-Bisan Iyad Abdullah AbuZeid, 12, Female-Shama Wa'il Darawish al-Salibi, 15, Female-Mashud Ahmed Sahid al-Hashash, 19, Male-Hana Ali Habur al-Hashash, 47, Female-Omar Salama Mahmoud Dahir, 38, Male-Ala Baha al-Din Kamil Gharib, 17, Male-Baha al-Din Kamil Mohamed Gharib, 58, Male-Mohamed Omar Salama Dahir, 10, Male-Sabreen Mustafa Mohamed Dahlan, 27, Female-Mousa Ahmed Musalim Abu Sahada, 40, Male-Suleiman Mohamed Khalil Qadih, 73, Male-Mohamed Tawfiq Mohamed Qadih, 64, Male-Akram Suleiman Mohamed Qadih, 42, Male-Yahia Mohamed Abdullah al-Aqad, 48, Male-Mohamed Jama Ahmed Shahat, 30, Male-Mohamed Fadal Ata al-Agha, 25, Male-Ahmed Nadir Ata al-Agha, 20, Male-Marwa Nadir al-Agha, 54, Female-Dalia Nadir Ata al-Agha, 17, Female-Shadi Nasser Shahada al-Madhoun, 24, Male-Saheeb Mustafa Mahmoud Oukasha, 22, Male-Abdullah Abdullah Abd Abu Faul, 24, Male-Tamir Muheen Ibrahim Naseer, Male-Mohamed Shahada Abdullah Lawz, Male-Fatima Mahmoud Mohamed Abu Sultan, Female-Samih Jabril Rizq Janeed, Male-Mohamed Mousa Marzouk Alwan, Male-Hind Amad Mohamed Qadoura, Female-Yussef Mohamed Abd Abu Khalifa, Male-Samih Walid Abd al-Latef Abu Sharar, 35, Male-Mohamed Abd al-Karim Diab Abu Jarrad, 65, Male-Mohamed Amad Mohamed Baroud, 12, Male-Jamal Saleh Jamal Alian, 8, Male-Hassan Jamal Sha'ban Kart, 27, Male-Uthman Majid Yussef Dahir, 11, Female-Sabhy Awd Ahmed al-Hilou, 62, Male-Narmeen Majid Yussef Dahir, 11, Female-Ali Abd al-Aziz Abdullah Siyam, 22, Male-Faiza Ahmed Abd al-Fatah al-Nadi, 54, Female-Ibrahim Yasser Ibrahim Hamad, 18, Male-Hanan Ramadan Mustafa Dahir, 50, Female-Majid Yussef Mohamed Dahir, 53, Female-Dana Mohamed Majid Dahir, 1, Female-Mahmoud Abd al-Jalil Tawfiq Abu Kweik, 30, Male-Rahaf

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shield," a comment made by all the interviewees. And I wonder how long it took during their intensive training courses to drill that line into their brains.

I go out into the street and find that life still carries on in the little corners and bars of London. Some coming back from work, some talking about the credit crunch, and some just looking miserable. Back to the flat as fast as I can, eager to finish my day and switch on my screen again. "The death toll in Gaza has risen to 930, and more than 4,000 have been injured." Back again to the phone. Still no connection. Cigarette lit and a hand that shakes so uncontrollably it's about to fall off my body. Then it connects. My mum's voice is very shaky. The fear surrounds her voice like a cloth that's trying to silence her. "How are you?" now means "Are you still alive?" But she wants to remain defiant. She still wants to play the mother's role to make me feel safe. Sometimes I want to tell her that I am not a child anymore. But I never do. I think she makes me feel safe even though she is under attack and I am thousands of miles away from her.

Dad picks up the phone and gives a political analysis. I listen. I offer no opinion. I just want him to speak, to express everything that he has been thinking in his own world, all the debates that he is having as he sits on the roof watching Israeli aircraft

spitting more flames. My little brother takes the handset and tells me about all the places that have been bombed. All the places we used to go to have been bombed. All the corners that I chased him into are now gone. The market, the club, the school we played football in, the trees we climbed together, our favourite fishing place on the beach, our hidden corner where no one ever found us ... all is gone. I listen to him as he talks passionately, telling me news of more destruction. I want to shout at him to stop, but I wish him well instead, and I hang up. Another cigarette while my brother's descriptions still play in my head. I compare them to what I used to know. But everyone in my family is still alive, and this is the most important thing.

When is this going to end? Will it ever? Six years ago, I packed my bag and set off to Rafah Crossing. I kissed the family goodbye and waited for three days at the border to be allowed to leave. Hopes of a better future were running in front of me: the gentleness of life, the excitement of a young man going off to see the world were pushing me to go to complete my studies in one of London's best universities. I looked back at my family and waved goodbye, but they were expressionless, motionless. They knew that they wouldn't be able to see me for a long time. They knew that I could not go back whenever I wanted because there was a guard at the border who sealed the gate after I left.



My dear family, do you still remember me when I was with you at dinnertime? Do you still remember the jokes I used to make? The troubles I brought you, the worries, the smiles, my foolishness, my love, my fear? Is my room still tidy? Or has anyone taken it?

Six years without being able to visit. Rafah Crossing is always closed. Security reasons. New agreement. European monitors are upset about something. Hamas takes over

Gaza. More reasons are born every day to render this small crossing permanently closed. Yet the waiting continues to be my daily ritual, always looking for news of the border, always wondering whether Israel would allow me to go in to see my family.

During the first Intifada, the border used to be open two days a week. During the Oslo years, between 1994 and 2004, it started to open daily but only for four hours. Maybe the doors and machines have become too rusty and therefore are inadequate for use by ordinary people. Maybe they're only for soldiers now - to stand, rifles pointing, fingers on the trigger ready to aim at anyone who attempts to cross. Maybe the long electric fence that stretches along the tiny Strip would be safer for Gazans than those rusty metals; maybe this Warsaw Ghetto is safer than being chased by soldiers in the Sinai Desert.

When I took the train from London to Scotland for the first time, I took my passport with me in case I met a police officer who would ask for my ID. The train started. My face was almost glued to the window. I never imagined that freedom could be so beautiful. I could never have imagined being able to travel on a train for five hours without being stopped, without having to show my ID, without being questioned about the reason for my journey, without being thrown into a waiting room for hours at the Crossing. I did not want my train journey to end. I wanted the driver to continue until we reached the end of the universe.

If only I had done this before. If only I had been able to go to the West Bank whenever I wanted. If only I had been able to go to Cairo or Amman or any other place without being stopped, without having to wait for three days for the border to open, without fearing that I would never see my family again. If only anyone in Gaza could go out for a small holiday, to take their kids to the beach in Alexandria or to see the Pyramids. If only commercial planes were allowed to go in and out of Gaza, would there be any room for the primitive homemade rockets to fly through Gaza's sky?

"Breaking news: An Israeli air strike kills a man and his three children in a car while they were going out to buy some bread for the family." "Jawwal Marhaban" is the automated response that I receive when I try to phone again - a response that indicates that there is no phone service available. I still can't connect. More cigarettes and a feeling of hollowness slowly growing inside me. The fear is beginning to drum into my veins, louder and louder. I look up at the white ceiling of my empty white room. My mum is there, my brothers are there, they are all there. I feel better until I connect. "Your cousin Manal's three children and her husband." And the phone just falls from my hand. Mahmoud Al-Kahlout and his young children are gone. I will never see them again. Not even kiss them goodbye.

Mum's voice is still coming from the phone's speaker, shouting at me to pick it up again. I try but somehow I can't reach it. I stand up and leave, slamming the front door behind me, and I walk and walk through the freezing streets of London. The frost on the cars makes me shiver even more. My breathing becomes heavier when I think of my cousin's children, all lying there, burned bodies stacked on the floor like some cheap crops that have failed.

The next day I'm on the way to a demonstration, Palestinian scarf wrapped around my neck; on the bus a woman asks me about what the Palestinians want! She had been reading an article in the newspaper that had the word Gaza in the headline. I reached over to her paper and flicked the page she was reading: "We want this word not to be in the newspaper anymore because life is just normal." She looks at me and smiles. "I am sorry for your loss." Tears start to run down my face. I look away to hide them. People around me are staring. Manal's children are gone. Manal is lonely. Is she crying like me right now?

My dear family, you have not received any letter since I have moved here; it is not my fault. I have written and sent many, but they never reached you. The post office returns everything I send: Undeliverable. If you read this, please look after yourselves and don't leave me alone, not before I see you. I want to see what you look like now. Have the years changed you? Or do you still look as young as I remember you? Please don't die; I want to make up for the six years without you! I know that no one is safe there, but just wait for me a little longer!

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