

GAZA

"THE ONE MOST WORTHY OF LOVE"*

By Nadine Saliba

Let me tell you a little bit about Gaza...

The Gaza Strip is a narrow piece of land that lies on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, surrounded by Israel from the north, east and southeast and Egypt from the southwest. It is a 140 square-mile-area, about twice the size of Washington DC, with 2.3 million residents, making it one of the most densely populated places on earth. Of these residents, 50% are children and 80% are refugees expelled from their historic homeland by Israel in 1948 when it was created on the ruins of Palestinian cities and villages.

In 1967, Israel illegally occupied Gaza, along with the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Under international law, these areas - which amount to 22% of historic Palestine - are supposed to constitute a Palestinian state if a two-state solution were to be implemented. However, Israel has refused to comply with international law and end its occupation. As such, the Palestinian struggle for self-determination continues, employing both non-violent resistance and armed struggle, a right given to all occupied people under international law. However, the laws of war, which should apply to both Israel as the occupying power, and the Palestinian resistance, prohibit attacks on civilians.

In 2005, Israel withdrew its soldiers and colonial settlers from Gaza in an attempt to solidify its occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and because the cost of keeping a military presence to protect Israeli settlers in Gaza was too high. However, Israel maintained control over the enclave from the outside. After Hamas won legislative elections, Israel imposed a suffocating siege in 2007, sealing Gaza off from the rest of the world and trapping its inhabitants. Israel continues to exercise exclusive control over Gaza's airspace and territorial waters, just as it had since it occupied the Strip in 1967. It also continues to control most of the land border except for one crossing with Egypt called the Rafah Crossing. The Egyptian government, alas, has been complicit in Israel's deadly siege policy, repeatedly closing the Rafah Crossing for long periods of time.

Israel has exercised complete control over the movement of people and goods in and out of Gaza, including food, water, medicine, electricity and fuel, allowing only a trickle of essential needs to go in and shutting off that trickle whenever it wants. This has led to a growing humanitarian crisis ranging from "severe food insecurity," as humanitarian organizations warned, to the absence



of life-saving medications for cancer patients and others.

During that time, Israel also waged several wars on Gaza, or "mowing the lawn" as Israeli officials like to call these periodic wars, in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021 and 2022, massacring thousands of people and devastating Gaza's already meager economy and infrastructure. It is this 16-year-old medieval siege, illegal under international law as it amounts to collective punishment, that has earned Gaza the title of the world's "largest open-air prison."

On October 7, Palestinian fighters were able to breach those prison gates. The "smart" border wall surrounding Gaza with state of

the art military and surveillance technology was built by the Israeli company, Elbit Systems, which is headquartered in Fort Worth, Texas and has presence in many US cities, including San Antonio. I'd be remiss if I don't mention that Elbit Systems has served as the prime contractor for the militarization of the US-Mexico border.

Hamas fighters attacked military bases and towns inside Israel, killing about 1,200 people, including about 800 civilians. They also took about 240 hostages with the aim of reaching a prisoner exchange deal. Thousands of Palestinians languish in Israeli prisons under horrible conditions, including children, whose imprisonment is a breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention. About 40% of Palestinians in Israeli prisons are held under so-called "administrative detention," which allows Israel to extend their imprisonment indefinitely without charge or trial.

But Israel was not interested in a prisoner exchange deal. Disregarding the lives of Israeli hostages, it instead waged its deadliest war on Gaza so far. Its stated goal is to destroy Hamas but its scorched earth policy and carpet bombing have targeted a besieged, stateless and defenseless population, hunkering down with nowhere to run and no place to hide. Israel continues to bomb even the areas where it directs civilians to flee to. The result has been killing on an industrial scale. The number of children arriving at hospitals without any surviving family members prompted medical professionals in Gaza to coin a new acronym "WCNSF," which stands for "Wounded Child No Surviving Family." In some cases, entire families are being wiped out, completely removed from the civil registry.

I checked the news this morning, the death toll in Gaza has reached 18,400 in a period of 2 months and 5 days. The overwhelming majority of those killed are civilians. Not to

mention the thousands missing, believed to be buried under the rubble. By the time this article gets published, a lot more Gazans would have been killed, as every new day without a ceasefire will push this figure higher and higher.

A month into the fighting, rights groups had pointed out that Israel dropped the equivalent of two nuclear bombs on Gaza. UN annual reports issued in the past three years demonstrate that the number of children killed in Gaza since October 7 is higher than the total number of children killed in all major conflict zones in the world. UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, warned that "Gaza is becoming a graveyard for children." Military experts have noted that "Israel dropped more bombs in a week than the US dropped in Afghanistan in a year." Experts also told the New York Times that civilians are getting killed in Gaza more quickly "than in even the deadliest moments of US-led attacks in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan."

Israel has targeted hospitals, claiming they are Hamas headquarters but failing to provide serious evidence after taking control of them. Hospitals across Gaza have run out of space to treat the unrelenting flood of injured people. They have also run out of medications. Doctors have had to operate without anesthesia. They have run out of fuel to operate life-saving machines. Decomposing bodies of babies were found in al-Nasr Hospital still attached to wires and tubes after the Israeli military forced the staff and patients to leave on foot while preventing ambulances from reaching the hospital. Israeli bombing has not spared UN-run schools, where refugees take shelter, or universities. They have killed aid workers, medical staff, poets, journalists and many more.

A public health disaster is afoot in Gaza. The U.N.'s World Food Programme warned that half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million is starving and that 9 out of

10 people are unable to eat every day. The scarcity of clean water has exacerbated diseases like diarrhea, skin infections, acute viral hepatitis, scabies and measles. The World Health Organization has warned that untreated diseases could kill more than bombings in Gaza. In response, an advisor to the Israeli defense minister named Giora Eiland wrote in an op-ed: "We must not shy away from this... After all, severe epidemics in the south of the Gaza Strip will bring victory closer and reduce casualties among IDF soldiers." This is one of many genocidal statements made by Israeli officials. Unfortunately, I don't have room to include a tally of them here but they can be googled.

Aid agencies warn that the humanitarian crisis is worsening

in Gaza, not by the day, but by the hour, as the majority of the population has become homeless and are pinned down in a tiny bit of land with no secure shelters, deprived of food, water, fuel and medical care. At least 81% of Gaza's population has been displaced from their homes.

As my Gazan friend Rami, who escaped his destroyed family home in northern Gaza and went to the south, told me in his last WhatsApp message, "there is no fire wood, no wood, no papers,

no manure left in Gaza. People have used everything to light up fires... Cabinets in the classrooms (where people seek shelter), chairs, desks, bathroom doors, door frames, they have all been pulled out and used to light

fires to stay warm... Nothing is left. It's hard to describe." He tells me they barely have anything to eat or drink. They don't even have enough blankets to stay warm.

All this is made possible courtesy of our very own US government that supports Israel unconditionally, funds it, provides it with weapons, protects it diplomatically from any semblance of accountability and vetoes resolutions that attempt to stop this madness.

It is our tax dollars at work that enable this unprecedented level of suffering and torture to befall the people of Gaza.

It's easy to feel helpless but there are things we can do to affect the situation. Our strength lies in numbers. We can demand that our representatives, at all levels of government, support a ceasefire to save lives and end this slaughter. A ceasefire is a necessary first step but it is not enough. The ongoing Israeli occupation, dispossession, siege and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians is at the root of this violence. Providing the historical context, which our corporate-funded media and politicians fail to do, is necessary to pave the way for a just resolution.

Continuing to wage wars against an occupied, dispossessed and besieged population will not end the conflict, it hasn't in the past and it will not in the future. Only ending the occupation and guaranteeing the Palestinian people the right to self-determination will. Preserving the status-quo, whereby Palestinians continue to experience the daily violence and oppression of the military occupation and the brutal siege, will not bring about peace and security. There can be no peace without liberation and justice for Palestine.

Free Free Palestine!

Bio: Nadine Saliba, born in Lebanon, immigrated with her family to San Antonio. She has an MA in Political Theory and International Relations

*A line from Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Silence for Gaza"



Photos from a Pro-Palestine protest in Austin, Texas calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to U.S. and Texas aid to Israel. Photos by Alondra López

