No Space to be a Child

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I am a Palestinian whose family lived for generations in the village of Al-Maghar. Sixty years ago, during the Nakbah (Catastrophe), my grandparents and their whole family were expelled from Al-Maghar, uprooted and sent to the huts and narrow streets of a refugee camp 100 miles away. After sixty years, still they taste the bitterness of that loss and watch helplessly as the flames of that tragedy continue to burn. As a small child I was used to living in one of the huts in the refugee camp, but as I got older and became aware of the discontent inside my family, I would pester my father with questions:

Why do we not have a garden?

Why does the roof always leak in winter?

Why do we go to school without having a breakfast or pocket money?

Why do all ten of us sleep in one room?

Why do we have no heating in our house or school?

Why does our classroom have 50 students in one small space?

Why do we not have a playground?

Where can I get clean water?

Why do we not travel anywhere?

Why do we hear booming sounds throughout the night?

Will the roar of the bulldozer come towards us today?

Who has been killed today?

Why do you let the soldiers humiliate you at the checkpoints?

Do all human beings live like us?

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Why has our country been wiped off the map in the library?

Often he would answer me with tears in his eyes. ‘We are the victims of a violent occupation. Like a cancer, it spreads over all aspects of our lives. Oh, my son, be careful! Do not provoke the violence to fall upon you."

I was born in 1973 and gradually became aware of all this suffering in the narrow alleys of the camp. By the time I was fourteen years old, I could not bear the fact that the occupying soldiers were wreaking havoc in my homeland. I would ignore my father's warnings and seek revenge for our humiliation.

So I used to throw stones at the bulldozers as they rumbled through the streets. With my brothers and my friends we would chase after the armoured cars and soldiers from one place to another, believing we were expelling them all from our land. As soon as we heard the rumble of their engines, we would gather pieces of rubble and pile them in various parts of the camp. Then we hid ourselves and as soon as we saw the soldiers coming we rushed out and pelted them with stones.

This was our favourite game. We had nowhere to play organised games and football in the street was too dangerous. The older members of our family and the neighbours continually warned us that they were unable to protect us from the dangers of the occupation. "We do not have a police or a national army," they said. So in our minds, we became the national army; we were The Children of Stones protecting our camp and resisting the soldiers of occupation. We were Robin Hood fighting for justice, or the American Indians defending the frontier from the white invaders. It was not just a game; it was actually a Death Game – a game which released our anger and gave us the thrill and pride of feeling we were protecting our communities when the older generation could not. I was too young to understand its consequences even though some friends of mine were killed or injured or became disabled for life.

It so happened that during one of these daily activities of throwing stones, the soldiers started to chase me. I had been hurling stones at them and my aim was good through practice. Now I turned and ran, dodging to avoid any bullets and evade capture. Suddenly my shoulder and back were struck in several places at once. They had fired a plastic bullet which, in order to stop me,

had broken into several pieces aiming to injure but not kill me. I fell, but immediately got up. I carried on running although I felt my shirt sticking to blood that poured from my back and head. I felt no pain as excitement, fear and pride forced me on and I raced towards the fence of a farm which was located at the edge of our camp. I leapt and climbed, but my leg became stuck in the rough pile of wood, thorns and metal. A hand gripped my shirt and I was pulled out of the fence and thrown to the ground. I yelled and kicked and the soldiers punched me hard. By now my bleeding was serious, but still they punched. I became weaker and my angry protests turned to sobs. I was beginning to lose consciousness, but then my arms were yanked upwards and a soldier pulled me by my hands and dragged me to where the officer in charge was waiting. During all this the people in my camp watched helplessly. Many shouted in outrage over what was happening and this anger helped me stop crying out in pain as my ankles were scratched and battered along the bumpy road. Suddenly, men, women, and children started to throw stones in an attempt to get the soldiers to release me. I was dropped in the middle of the camp and then hit again to deter the people from stone-throwing. But women from my family and then neighbours rushed forward and attacked the soldiers with their bare hands. Some of these women reached the officer and yelled at him: "Release the boy! Release him! If you don't, he will die and it will be your fault." This must have had an effect because the hitting suddenly stopped and soon after I found myself admitted to hospital.

It was some weeks before I recovered and when I returned to the camp my friends treated me like a hero. My father, however, was not pleased. I had ignored his warnings and disobeyed him. When, later, my older brothers went out to throw their stones at the soldiers, my father locked me in a room upstairs. I knew he did this out of love and a real fear for my safety, but even so I climbed out of the window, slithered down the drainpipe and ran to join my brothers in the street. That night forty people were injured and during the curfew I crept through the darkness from street to street to avoid the soldiers who would arrest me. Since I was under-age, my father would be fined if I was caught. When I reached our home, I climbed to the space above our door and dropped quietly inside, hoping everyone was asleep. My father and mother, however, were up waiting for me. They had not been to bed. It was a full time job for them, protecting me and my eight brothers. I had ignored their warnings even during the curfew hours. That night I got a severe final warning. The next time I tried to go out to join in the stone-throwing, my father held

onto me and then, for the first and only time in his life he beat me.

As I grew older, I began to get tired of our games. Also, I found that I was doing well at school and as I learnt more I realised that knowledge was another kind of weapon. It made me feel strong. It reinforced my identity. The growth of understanding made me see the possibility of helping our people and resisting occupation in more subtle ways than throwing stones. However, I cannot blame those children who still throw stones. Their anger and their actions constitute some form of therapy and they have become a symbol around the world for innocent revolt against injustice. The root of the problem is not the throwing of stones, but the occupation that has stolen their childhood.

I began to study hard and found a path which would lead to my active role in helping the Palestinians remain steadfast in the face of humiliation and oppression. An understanding of History and the pursuit of knowledge in the Psychological Sciences have already produced results on the ground in Gaza. This work is set to continue for many years to come.

Since I achieved excellent results in high school and because my family had little money, I was given a grant by UNRWA to study to become a teacher. My hope was that I would then have enough money to support my parents. I needed to go to Ramallah on the West Bank to complete my studies, but due to the Occupation I faced obstacles wherever I decided to go. Travelling between Gaza and the West Bank was always difficult and during the first Intifada (the uprising between 1987 and 1993) I was prevented for a while from leaving Gaza.

Travelling has been one of the main restrictions we face in Palestine. Because of the wall, the fences, the checkpoints and the endless paperwork involved to get a pass, there is a barrier between Gaza and our relatives or friends in the West Bank. We can wait for one hour or one day or one week or one month or one year to get permission to travel to another region in our own country. One soldier can stop thousands of people crossing a checkpoint. One soldier is given control over the daily lives of thousands of people who need to get to work or to reach a hospital or go to school. I once saw an old man who was dying at a check point as he waited in the heat to cross through to go back to his family. Another time I saw a pregnant woman give birth beside the road at a check point after a soldier had refused to let anybody pass between the north and the middle zones of the Gaza Strip.

I was not surprised, therefore, to find that my studies were held back by the occupation. Later, when I finished my final exams in Ramallah in 1993, I could not get permission to return home. So I tried travelling through the checkpoint on a friend's ID. The plan failed and I was arrested. When I was taken into custody, they tried to get me to sign something that was written in Hebrew. I told them I could not read Hebrew. They said, 'Sign it anyway'. I said, 'No!' because I thought it was probably a confession statement. Then one of them hit me across the head and told me to sign. I refused and he punched me again and again. Even today, I still have problems in my left ear from this beating. After one month in prison, they said I would be released on payment of $500. I knew my family would have to sell many possessions to raise this sum. So, I refused to let this happen and stayed another two months in jail.

The period that followed was very hard. I was working as a teacher in UNRWA's schools to earn money for myself and my parents while, at the same time, I was doing my postgraduate studies in mental health at an Egyptian university. I had decided that I must learn more about psychology because the children I was teaching in Gaza were suffering badly from the Occupation and I wanted to be able to help them. During my work as a school counsellor in the Gaza Strip, I saw a lot of the Palestinian children who had been exposed on a daily basis to traumatic experiences since the beginning of the second Intifada which began on 28th October 2000. They clearly suffered from psychological, social and educational disturbances such as: insomnia, fear of the dark, phobias, depression, bedwetting, social withdrawal, negative social-interaction, aggressive behaviour, chronic forgetfulness and truancy from school. These were alarming indicators that having a normal childhood in Palestine was unlikely in the current circumstances and that the future psychological well-being of Palestinian children was being compromised by on-going traumatic experiences.

I began to study for long hours after school and travelled to Egypt to see my supervisor during the summer holidays. Once I had received my Master's degree, I began also to work as a part-time lecturer at a university in Gaza. Life was so busy that I had no time to see my friends and they saw so little of me that they thought I had gone away.

In 2001, I started studying for a PhD. But my family was worried. I was nearly 28 and they thought it was time for me to marry. I tried to tell them that I didn't have time for this. I was still

pursuing my long held dream to learn as much as I could so that I could help to heal the wounds caused by the Occupation. It was as if the anger that had made me throw stones had been converted into the need to study. I didn't have time to run a car, let alone get married - it would be too unfair on my wife. Gradually, however, I realised that my life should not be all work and, having found the right person with the help of my family, I got married in August 2002. In September 2003, I walked at midnight - the last two kilometres through gunfire - to the hospital where my daughter was born.

Scholarships from the International Ford Foundation Programme are very few and I was fortunate, after a long and difficult selection period, to be one of the ten people offered a scholarship in 2004. This was to do another PhD, this time in clinical psychology, a qualification which was both rare and very much needed in Gaza. Of course, I now had a difficult decision to make. I would have to go abroad to study, leaving my wife and little daughter at home with my wife's family. Also I knew this would be hard for my parents, particularly for my sick mother. I thought, however, that I should be able to go back regularly to see them and, that, when the time was right, and my wife had completed her degree, my family would be able to join me in England. But developments in Gaza were soon to make this hope seem an impossibility.

From the Nakbah in 1948 until now there have been only nine years in my country without war or conflict or uprising. In 2000, following the attack on the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque by the soldiers of the Occupation, a second Intifada spread through the Palestinian population and caused the Israeli soldiers to create even more obstacles and difficulties. So, although arrangements had been made for three Ford Foundation students to leave Gaza through the America-Mideast Educational and Training Services (AMIDEAST), the Israelis refused to allow this. Because of the Intifada, the Gaza Strip was now under blockade. It was a shock for all three of us. The Rafah crossing was the only route for the population of Gaza to the rest of the world. We no longer had an airport. The blockade stopped boats at sea. A wire fence, a high wall and watchtowers caged us in from Israel. At Rafah in 2004 we were kept stranded for three weeks, sleeping on the floor of a deserted, half-built house. It had no roof or doors or windows. To go back to Gaza City meant that we might miss the chance opening of the border crossing, so we slept in this place for 21 days waiting for the moment when, on the whim of a young Israeli soldier, we might be let through. The indignity of that waiting made many of us angry. We were being treated worse than

animals. Where was respect or decency? No wonder so many of us became violent in the face of such humiliation. Due to these delays, we almost lost our chance of a scholarship: we should have arrived in London in September 2004, but were actually delayed until November.

At last, however, we were able to travel from Cairo Airport to London. Very little post had been getting through to Gaza and Internet access was limited, so I had little information about the university I was to join. I managed to make my way there, however, and, as soon as I arrived at the University of Hertfordshire, I changed my research topic from the general subject of depression to one which would specifically study the effects of trauma on Palestinian children. This was so that I could go on to design and develop programmes which could be set up immediately to help the children of Gaza.

A shock awaited me when I went to the registration centre at the university: I found that they had registered me as an Israeli citizen with my homeland as Israel. I objected to this and showed them my passport which clearly identified me as Palestinian. They apologized, but all they could do was to replace 'Israeli' with 'Unknown Nationality or Nation'. And so it remains to this day. The reason for this is that the computer system does not include Palestine. I had the same problem when I opened a bank account and found, once again, that there seems to be no such country as Palestine. My country's name and my nationality had been erased. I told a friend at the university about how painful this was and he gave me a map of the world in the form of a globe with the word Palestine clearly written on it. For a short time, I was happy about this, but then he told me, "This is an old map and that is the reason why the name of Palestine is there."

In order to come to England to study I had left my wife and little one-year-old daughter. For a short time, I was able to go back and see them in the holidays. But in June 2006 the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, was captured by Palestinian militants and the blockade was intensified. I could not get to see them at all. My little son was born in January 2007 but I was unable to see him until over a year later.

Meanwhile, my family was telling me that life in Gaza had become more difficult than it had ever been before and there seemed to be no way of escape: if you went to a pharmacy, you found no medicine even if you could afford to pay for it. You could not find fruit or milk for your children. There were continuous power shortages, often only four hours of electricity a day,

sometimes none. Sick people were dying while they waited for permission to pass the Israeli checkpoints to reach a hospital. When someone died, it was often impossible to find them a coffin or cement to construct their grave. Medical services were starved of equipment. Children played on the dangerous rubble of bulldozed houses. They swam in the polluted water near the beaches where untreated sewage flowed into the sea. They mimicked the conflict with real homemade weapons, often injuring each other in these games. The life in Gaza was becoming a slow death.

My wife needed urgent treatment for an eye condition. I submitted a request to get her out of Gaza for humanitarian reasons. Neither the Palestinian Authority nor the Red Cross could persuade the Israelis to grant permission. I then asked UNRWA to help, and they said that I needed to get approval to pass through Jordan. After a two month wait we received Jordanian approval, but once again the Israeli side refused the request. As a last resort we contacted the Israeli Embassy in London explaining my wife's situation but once again help was refused. The situation seemed hopeless.

Then an event occurred which was to change everything. I heard on the news that the anger of the people of Gaza had finally exploded. They could no longer bear the hunger and the deprivation. Nobody was offering any help – not even the neighbouring Arab countries, which were just standing by while people were dying. So in desperation the people made holes in the border wall between Gaza and Egypt. First they exploded several bombs to make small holes; then bulldozers moved in to enlarge the holes so that people could get through. They made several holes along a twelve kilometre stretch of wall to make it difficult for the Egyptians to reseal the border. Then it was as if a damn had burst. An unstoppable force of tens of thousands of Palestinian people flowed to the Egyptian border cities of Rafah and Al-Arish in order to buy essential goods and medicines.

This happened on the 23rd of January 2008. I was in my office at the University of Hertforshire working through the night at my computer when the news broke. And suddenly here was my opportunity – I should leave at once and, if all went well, I would see my wife and little daughter for the first time in eighteen months and would have my very first look at my one year old baby son. I listened to the news on Aljazeera throughout the night and, in the morning, I contacted my wife and asked her to move quickly and leave Gaza for Egypt, like all the other people. This was

important because America and Israel were insisting that the borders should be closed again.

I was lucky that I had a valid visa and that I quickly found a seat on a flight to Egypt. I contacted my family, who had clambered their way with great difficulty through the rubble of the border and were now starting to walk along with thousands of other people to where they could get a car to take them to Al-Arish.

I arrived at Cairo airport that same evening. I dared not risk telling the authorities the real reason for my journey. I said that I was travelling as a student, but even so they delayed my onward journey for more than two hours. Eventually I was able to get to a hotel in Cairo and contact my family who were now safely in the very crowded house of a relative in Al-Arish. In three hours driving, I could be with them. But it was not going to be that easy.

As soon as the border was breached, more than fifteen checkpoints manned by Egyptian security forces were set up on the road from Cairo to Al-Arish to make sure that the refugees from Gaza could not travel to Cairo. Anyone caught doing this would be imprisoned. And it was equally difficult to travel in the direction I wanted to go. So how would I reach my family? The Palestinian authorities in Cairo told me that there would be no way for me to get through, but I was not going to turn back now.

I thought about various different ways of getting through the checkpoints. I considered using my wife's illness to get an ambulance to go to her, but this proved impossible – no Palestinian was allowed to travel to meet refugee relatives in any circumstances. Three days passed and I was becoming angry and depressed especially when I heard from my wife that conditions were very bad in Al-Arish. There was such serious overcrowding that people were sleeping in the streets even though it was cold winter. Also my baby son was sick and my wife's condition was worsening. She was so unhappy about all this that she wanted to go back to Gaza. I was running out of ideas, but I managed to convince her that she should stay put for one more night – if I hadn't thought of a solution by the following afternoon, she could give up and go back.

Until this point I had been honest and declared my Palestinian nationality. Now I realised I had to try another way: I took the underground to get to a minibus station outside Cairo, calculating that, for my plan to work, I needed to travel on a crowded bus and at night. I was going to

pretend to be Egyptian so I needed to talk as little as possible so that my accent would not give me away, and I needed to sit in the middle of many people so that the false ID I was hoping to use (which was actually my University of Hertfordshire staff card) could only be glanced at.

We were stopped at seven of the checkpoints and, miraculously, my plan seemed to be working. The other Palestinian people were identified and taken off the bus, but somehow I got through. Then we reached the last and strictest of the checkpoints and, to my horror, we were asked to get out of the bus so that we could be checked individually. My fake 'Egyptian' ID could not possibly survive a close scrutiny, so I had to change my tactics. Now I would find out if my faithful university card would support my new claim to be a British citizen. The officials seemed reasonably satisfied with this ID, but said that they needed a passport. So I gave them a quick look at my British visa and they accepted it. I was through! Of the original eleven people on the bus, only seven remained, six of whom were genuinely Egyptian.

Arriving in Al-Arish, I could see what had been making my wife so unhappy. The overcrowding was worse than any I had ever seen, even in the refugee camps. So I decided to try to rent a hotel room or a flat before I even tried to contact my family. No-one would rent any rooms to a Palestinian at that time, so I continued to pretend to be British and eventually found somewhere I could bring my family to hide and have a few days of peace while we sorted out all the papers that would be necessary for them to travel. Prices had gone mad since the border was breached. It now cost me as much to rent a flat for one day as it would have done previously to rent for three whole months.

At last I was ready to contact my family. I asked them to walk to the town square and went to meet them there. Like everywhere else, the square was very crowded and I could not see them. I waited. After all the obstacles, I was going to see them at last. How would they look now? How would they greet me? My little daughter had refused to speak to me on the phone all the time I had been away – she couldn't understand why her Daddy had left her for so long. And the son I had never seen - my mind was busy imagining, as in a dream, how it would feel for me to hold him. But for him it would be as if he was being held by a stranger.

Through the crowds, I thought I saw them walking towards me. Then I was sure it was them. I ran to them, full of happiness. I took my little son from my wife's arms and hugged him as I had

wanted to do for so long. This was a moment of great happiness but also of sadness and burning anger. I had been unable to travel to see them for eighteen months and now my son did not know me and did not want me to hold him; my little daughter was very shy of being near me and my wife looked tired and ill.

Tradition demanded that we should go back and spend a night in the crowded house of my relatives before going on to our flat. The best thing about that day was that, later on, I was able to go on a little walk with just my children who were beginning to accept me. I talked to them and bought them presents and gradually I could feel them coming back to me. But this reminded me of one more important journey I must make – I had not seen my parents for eighteen months; they were both too frail to travel and this might be my last chance to see them.

My wife and all the relatives were very much against my going into Gaza – getting in would be fairly easy but there were many Egyptian soldiers now massing on the border to prevent any more Palestinians getting out of Gaza. Stories were coming from the border of violence and killing. The situation was very risky but I had to balance the risks. It would be dreadful if my wife and family had escaped from Gaza and I then became a prisoner there, but equally it would be dreadful if I came so near to Gaza without seeing my mother and father.

I had to walk the last two kilometres to the border through the dust and the rubble and amongst crowds of people returning with sheep and food and petrol cans and medicines. At the border, I saw something I had never seen in my whole life: the hole in the wall had been made large enough for cars to pass through in both directions. For the first time since 1967, and for only two days, cars were able to cross the border. I walked through the hole in the wall and put my feet on the land of my home country again. I would have liked to kiss the soil, but there was no time and no space to do this amidst the crowds.

As I travelled on and reached my parents' camp, there were fewer and fewer people – the place was almost deserted – everyone who was young and fit seemed to have gone to Egypt – only the old people were left. The meeting with my parents was very happy and very sad. We had so much to say and such a short time to say it in. Nobody knew how long the border would remain open and every hour I stayed increased the risk that I would not get back to my family. So, after two hours, and with tears in his eyes, my father told me that it was time for me to go. And this

time I was lucky: the border was still open and cars were still passing through. So to the great relief of my wife, I was able to get a car and arrive back safely in Al-Arish.

I now went with my wife and children to live in the flat I had rented while I sorted out a way to get them out of Egypt. The border with Gaza, having been open for one week was now closed again, and the security forces were arresting any Palestinian found in the border cities, regardless of circumstances. We were only able to stay in the flat for a day or two because the landlady became suspicious that we were not Egyptian and she feared the police. So she asked us to leave. We moved on to another flat, but, on the first night there, the security forces banged on the door in the middle of the night. This was very frightening for my wife and children and, if they had been discovered, they would have been sent back to Gaza. I quietly prepared to hide them, but as we waited in the dark we heard the police go away having assumed the place was empty. So now we had no choice. We had to move back to hide in the house of my relatives, which was less crowded now as most Palestinians had been forced back to Gaza.

I had registered the names of my wife and my children in the Security Directorate so that their passports could be stamped and they could leave Egypt for Britain. But after three weeks no progress had been made, so I decided to again use my University ID, my UK and Egyptian visas. I adapted my methods depending on who was manning the checkpoints and whether they were likely to understand the English writing on some of the documents. It was another big adventure – sometimes I pretended to be an Egyptian local and at other times I would be a British citizen working in England. Praise be to God, we succeeded in reaching Cairo eventually and spent two more weeks there getting approval to travel out of Egypt.

The journey had lasted five weeks from the time I arrived in Egypt to the time the four of us left. We finally left Cairo and journeyed to London at the end of February 2008. We had difficulty getting my little daughter onto the plane. All she knew about aeroplanes was that they dropped bombs and killed people. It was very hard to convince her that this plane carried no bombs. Since she has arrived in England she has often been frightened by things like fireworks and flashing lights on cars and even by the post coming through our letterbox. She is just one of the traumatised children who are the subject of my PhD.

When I left Gaza to come to England to study, I left everything behind me, but the people all

remain etched in my heart and my memory. However long I have been away from home, I have never forgotten the flag of my country and the grief of its children, particularly when I see the green spaces and playgrounds in this country where children play without fear of sniper fire or the roar of tanks or the restrictions of the blockade. I do not begrudge the children here the joys they have. I simply wish that the children in my country had something similar to this, or at least half, or anything of it. I am one of Palestine's children, and none of us has had a childhood. We were all born as adults and our childhood has been stolen from us in front of the eyes of the free world. So for how long will this suffering and tragedy continue? Where are the people of conscience? Where is the free world? Where are justice and freedom?

Mohamed Altawil, October 2008, Hatfield, UK