

By Clare Holohan

I HAVE COME to the realisation that living and working in Palestine has left me with some unresolved Post Traumatic Stress Disorder due to the egregious human rights violations I witnessed while there. I first went to Palestine at the age of 18 in 2002 when my Father was posted as the Irish Government's Representative to the Palestinian Authority. Following that, I worked for UNRWA's Community Mental Health Programme and *Addameer* the Palestinian Prisoner's Support and Human Rights Organisation. I did my MSc thesis in Human Rights on the subject of '*The Right to Education for Palestinian Child Prisoners*'.

It is difficult to imagine that *one* day in 2005 would still be affecting my mental health 16 years later, but the brutal assault in May 2021 triggered upsetting and unforgettable memories about a place that I love. I wanted to share them to emphasise how unrelenting the effects of human-rights abuses and breaches of international law have been on Gazans.

Between September 2005 and June 2006 7,000 to 9,000 Israeli artillery shells were fired into Gaza, killing 80 Palestinians in nine months.

In December 2008 Israel launched Operation Cast Lead with a massive air assault on Hamas to halt militant rocket attacks. The 22-day operation left 1,400 Palestinians.

In 2014 the combined Israeli airstrikes and ground bombardment resulted in 2220 Gazan deaths, 1492 of whom were civilians.

Now in 2021, as a result of a week-long aerial bombardment, 256 Palestinians, including 66 children, were killed. In Israel, 13 people were killed, including two children.

Unemployment in Gaza is one of the highest in the world at 43% in late 2020. The youth unemployment rate is currently at 70%, with young graduates making up 58% of unemployed youth. Despair, frustration, and depression are very common and many young people choose to either migrate or commit suicide. It's estimated that 38% of young people have considered suicide at least once. For most young people, death is a constant shadow over their lives. Many have developed post-traumatic stress and anxiety disorders that are largely untreated, and they are growing more desperate.

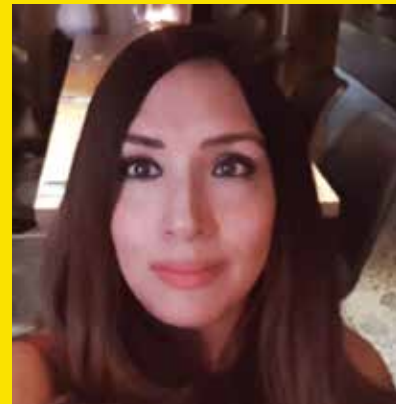
Nothing changes. Nothing has changed.

It pains me to know that friends of mine have again been mercilessly and defencelessly pounded with the risk of injury and death and I

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Nothing changes in Gaza



Memories of hell on earth with its resilient, generous people

2005



2014



am completely helpless to do anything for them. I cannot even reassure them that this will never happen again or that they will be free soon. I implore you to imagine being under endless lockdown, surrounded by rubble and under constant threat of aerial, sea, and land bombardment. Gaza is a besieged, densely-populated place without sufficient electricity, clean water, medical and educational infrastructure – an open-air prison.

The latest aerial strafings once again brought flash-back nightmares of the last time I visited Gaza in 2005; one year before '*Operation Summer Rains*'. I have to say that Gazan people are some of my favourite Palestinians; their infectious sense of humour, resilience, generosity, and warmth are some of their unforgettable traits.

The last time I visited Gaza we had been invited to attend the inauguration of an EU-funded project that had rebuilt the homes of

families which had been demolished by bombs along the border of Egypt. Irish Aid and the EU had helped rebuild them and we were now going to see the finished homes and hand over the keys to the new owners, that is, if we managed to reach them.

As we were waiting for our security clearance, I noticed a military jeep pulling up beside us at the Erez crossing. The back of the jeep opened and out came three young Palestinian men: all three were blindfolded and their hands tightly tied with plastic handcuffs. Their dishevelled T-shirts were ripped and I could see the fear on their faces, despite their eyes being covered. My heart sank as I watched them being forced to line up against a wall, while teenage soldiers looked on and mocked with their rifles pointed at them. I don't know what the fate of those young men was, but it is a memory which I have not forgotten.

We got our 'security permit' and were finally allowed to enter Gaza in our armoured, bullet-proof car with Dad driving and me in the backseat with my dodgy Google map-reading skills.

For a first-time visitor, the destruction can be quite overwhelming. Every building is peppered with bullet holes and either demolished or partially standing with the exterior of the building blitzed to pieces. Destruction is evident on every corner. Sad, malnourished donkeys roam the streets trying to scavenge for whatever food might be left for them. It is difficult to have hope and optimism in such surroundings and that is why my admiration for Gazans is so strong.

We were invited to lunch in the beautiful Al Deira Hotel. There we feasted on a delicious fresh fish lunch with spicy Gazan salad and rice topped with pine nuts. All this with the freshest and famous Gazan strawberry juice. This hotel is an unexpected gem in the grim reality of Gaza. It contains a small number of rooms which are beautifully styled with arches and vaults – each more like a palace than a mere hotel room. The view from the restaurant on the terrace overlooking the seafront is breath-taking. If given the chance, Gaza could be a busy Mediterranean tourist destination, with children

ago, had been living homeless in tents. Dignity had been briefly restored to these people. Unfortunately, those homes have since been bombed to rubble. I might add that all of these houses were built with EU taxpayers' money.

I also visited my Bedouin friend Hanan and her five-year-old daughter Sheyma who I first met while volunteering in the St John Eye Hospital in Jerusalem. I used to bring Sheyma treats,, and we became close friends. Hanan is a malnourished, single mother and lives with Sheyma in a small plastic tent in Rafah. I was invited in for tea and fruit. Despite having very little, the generosity of the Gazan people is just so strong. Unfortunately, when I tried to call her a few years ago, her number rang out, so I have lost touch. I hope they are OK and wonder if they are still alive.

It was getting dark by the time we left, and we had heard that an attack on Gaza was about to happen. As we waited for the Israeli army to open the gate for us, I heard a massive BOOM BOOM. It was literally as if the sky was falling

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Bombs caused fear among many children, which led to a loss of concentration, loss of appetite, bed wetting, and other disorders.

plates is illegal under International law but like all the other violations of International law, the Israeli Occupation Forces refused to let us leave until my Dad opened all of our doors and we held our passports up to the watchtower for clearance. All this while the bombing was



flying kites and families splashing and enjoying the waves.

When we arrived in Rafah in the early evening for the inauguration ceremony of the housing project, a group of barefoot children surrounded me. Young girls and boys with piercing blue eyes, blonde matted hair and others with olive and black skin tones, and even redheads! The diversity in Gaza is so striking and this is what makes it so special. They were all smiling at me and asking to get their picture taken. And then they started begging me for my water bottle. They were telling me how thirsty they were and had no fresh drinking water. Drinking-water is contaminated in Gaza due to Israel's illegal dumping of sewage onto the Gaza seashore. Bottled water is a rare luxury and I felt so guilty that I had no more bottles to give out. I threw my empty bottle in the bin and to my horror, I watched as a dozen kids fought to fetch it so they could recycle it for a few shekels.

The inauguration ceremony was quite moving. I felt some joy as I watched my Dad and UN officials handing out keys and property ownership papers to the new owners who, one hour

and the ground shook. I had never been so terrified in my life. Another BOOM followed. This was the start of the Israeli sonic boom bombing campaign which would happen daily that summer. The sole purpose of these bombs is to prevent the residents from sleeping and to create an ongoing sense of fear and anxiety. In the past, the Gaza Community Mental Health Center reported that the bombs caused fear among many children, which led to a loss of concentration, loss of appetite, bed wetting, and other disorders. The Center also reported that sonic booms caused headaches, stomach aches, shortness of breath, and other physical effects that appeared among both children and adults.

The border gates were opened for us and I again felt a feeling of utter helplessness and sadness, as I could leave this terror and go to the relative peace of our home on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. I felt a sense of guilt that I could leave freely whilst the children I had just met would remain and endure this mental torture.

Opening and searching cars with diplomatic

increasing in the background. I remember my Mum's face looking equally terrified and helpless and she shouted up to the watchtower that they were war criminals. As expected we got no response, but the gate was lifted. We quickly drove through and made the journey back to Jerusalem in silence and me in tears.

16 years later the situation is much worse. The UN Secretary General António Guterres says "If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza". The UN had warned in 2012 that it would be impossible to live in Gaza by 2020.

As *Village* went to press Israel, under a new Prime Minister, seemed to be renewing its bombardments.

Gaza has been abandoned for far too long and the reality seems to be accepted by the international community which increasingly accepts Israel as trade partners. It is time to end this illegal occupation. Dignity and hope must be restored, and justice must be given to the victims of the endless Israeli war crimes there by allowing them to tell their stories and bring awareness to their plight. 📌