

8Reality in a Book: a review of Light in Gaza

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Reader, as you peruse these chapters, what can you or will you do, knowing that what you do can save lives and can change the course of history? Reader, will you make this matter?

–Refaat Alareer, “Gaza Asks: When Shall This Come to Pass?” (from *Light in Gaza*)

Light *in* Gaza, not Light *on* Gaza, or Light *from* Gaza but *in* Gaza. Not some radiance from outside that illuminates the plight of Gaza to suggest a bright future. Nor a light piercing the walls and fences from Gaza, given how isolated Gaza is, how little the larger world heeds its plight.

Light suggests to me the fabled Inner Light Quakers speak of: deep inspiration, motivation, commitment, and resilience. The Arabic word for resilience or

steadfastness is *sumud*, one of my favorite Arabic words, truly applicable to the Palestinian people of Gaza, the West Bank.

Light in Gaza is a compilation of writing from eleven current or former members of this besieged, blockaded, violated and enduring group of some 2.2 million human beings, trapped by Israel since 1948. Many refer to Gaza as the largest open-air prison in the world. When I mentioned this to a new friend during my first visit to Gaza in 2004 he corrected me: *worse than a prison, a graveyard*. Subsequent incursions and bombardments confirm his assessment. We must break barriers to see the light *in* Gaza, through the words of the book's authors—and act on it.

One of the most moving essays for me is by Yousef M. Aljamal, "Travel Restrictions as a Manifestation of Nakba: Gaza, the Path Backwards is the Path Forward." The author details how the blockade severs family ties. If one is outside Gaza and one's parent dies while in Gaza, offspring will probably not be able to attend the funeral. Same with marriages, same with births. Maintaining family relations—usually easy for many living in privileged, relatively free communities, one can, maybe with some travel restrictions (like during the Covid-19 pandemic), visit family and close friends during moments of joy and crisis. Not so with Gazans. This can debilitate people, who as humans need frequent, supportive and loving ties with family.

Another essay, "Gaza 2050: Three Scenarios," relates directly to the major theme of the book: survival and the future as a society. The author, Bassman Adirawi, imagines various futures. The first is the No-Solution Scenario, which begins with "It's July 2050, one of Gaza's hottest months ever. I didn't sleep well last night due to the heat and lack of electricity. I couldn't switch on a fan or an air conditioner. I still live at my parents' house as I don't have enough money to buy my own house or the salary required to rent one."

The second is the *Two-State Solution Scenario*. Palestine has its own state, conditions have marginally improved, but the people still live under severe and often inhuman restrictions Israel continues to impose, including the vital freedom to

travel outside the region, even between Gaza, the West Bank and Israel. Palestinian society still suffers walls, fences, checkpoints, road blockage, the permit system, ongoing surveillance, totaling a vast network of domination that Jeff Halper, the Israeli scholar, author, and activist, cleverly titles, “The Matrix of Control.”

Adirawi writes, “It’s July 2050. Gaza is suffering through one of the hottest summers. But Gaza has better facilities than in 2021. The Palestinian government rebuilt and expanded the electricity station, which improved the electricity supply. I can sleep now under the air conditioner without worrying. I still live with my mother at her house. The economy is too brittle.”

And the third is the *One-State Solution*, one democratic state with equal rights for all. “It’s July 2050, one of the hottest summers ever in Gaza. I live in Beersheba [distance of 60 km/ 37 miles and a drive of about one hour], my family’s original city, but I often travel to Gaza where my mother still lives... There is no military checkpoint and no apartheid wall.”

Titles of essays indicate the broad range of topics: “Gaza Asks: When Shall This Pass?,” “On Why We Still Hold Onto Our Phones and Keep Recording,” “Lost Identity: The Tale of Peasantry and Nature,” “Ethical Implications for Experimental Design on Affected Communities in the Gaza Strip,” “People’s Light in Gaza’s Darkness,” “Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Restoring Palestinian Rights and Improving the Quality of Life,” “Exporting Oranges and Short Stories,” and “Let Me Dream.”

The American Friends Service Committee (which organized publication by Haymarket Books) became involved in Gaza immediately after the *Nakba* or Palestinian Catastrophe. In 1948, Israel, to found its state, displaced some 750,000 Palestinians from their homelands throughout the region and forced most of them into refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza. About 75% of Gazans are refugees, most from nearby districts. The newly formed United Nations asked the AFSC to manage the camps. In 2018 the AFSC was one of the main supporters of The Great March of Return, a nonviolent campaign by Gazans to return to their

villages and towns, insisting on their right of return. To this moment the AFSC has a presence in Gaza.

From 2004 through 2013 I volunteered with the AFSC in Gaza to lead photographic workshops and photograph their activities. Since then Israel continues to block my entrance.

Jehad Abusalim, one of the organizers and editors of the book, himself from Gaza, sums up one of the reasons Gaza is so unknown and ignored: “Because Gaza’s experience is unique, the place, the people who live there, and their story become abstract and challenging to explain to an outsider who has never been to Gaza or there enough to absorb aspects of its experience. This creates a barrier of understanding and imagination between Gaza and the outside world. This intangible barrier becomes an extension of the physical barriers surrounding Gaza. As a result, Gaza is unrelatable and distant.”

Providing a storm of knowledge, thoughts, and imagination, inspiring us through writing such as this, we can enter into the lives of Palestinians in Gaza. May we join them in their struggles for justice and freedom. The international community—you—are vital.



Photo by Mohammad Zannoun

Purchase the book at Haymarket Books: haymarketbooks.org/books/1861-light-in-gaza

AFSC is organizing a monthly webinar series based on the book. The first was held on January 12, 2023,p and was recorded: fb.watch/i040ootHwW/

Harvard scholar and Palestine expert Dr. Sara Roy and Palestinian architect Salem Al Qudwa discussed the challenges and opportunities in developing and rebuilding Gaza after decades of Israeli occupation.

The second will be in February at a time to be decided.