



THE CENTER FOR
PEACE COMMUNICATIONS

وشوشات من غزة Whispered in Gaza

A Platform for Silenced Voices

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Hamas has placed Palestinians in Gaza under a communications blockade. *Whispered in Gaza* helps them breach it.

A collection of animated video testimony, *Whispered in Gaza* enables residents of the coastal strip to candidly describe their lives, struggles, and aspirations to a global audience. Prior to its release, CPC presented the testimony to distinguished figures in policymaking, education, and the public discussion and asked them to share reflections. We publish their responses here.

The opinions expressed in this monograph are those of the authors and not necessarily those of The Center for Peace Communications or its Board of Directors.

A Platform for Silenced Voices, January 2023

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Introduction

Beyond their physical isolation due to border closures, Palestinians in Gaza face a communications blockade: they are forbidden to express ideas or expose realities that do not validate Hamas. Nor can journalists in the coastal strip cover local dissent without risking arrest or deportation by Hamas authorities. *Whispered in Gaza*, a new CPC initiative, aims to help overcome this barrier.

Over the course of 2022, CPC personnel interviewed Palestinian men and women inside Gaza, from all walks of life and across the territory, about their lives, travails, and aspirations, for the expressed purpose of sharing their testimony with a global audience. Participants described arbitrary arrests, extortion, and violence by Hamas enforcers. Women in particular detailed the violation of their basic personal freedoms. Parents shared anxiety about exposing their children to Hamas indoctrination through local schools. Shopkeepers described Hamas shakedowns. Professionals shared their experience of the local patronage system, spanning the private sector and most fields, as enriching Hamas members and their families while marginalizing Gaza's majority.

Participants also voiced staunch support for Palestinian self-determination, yet denounced Hamas as harming that cause by starting wars with Israel it cannot win while hiding in bunkers and leaving civilians to suffer casualties. They conveyed an understanding of Hamas warfare as a play for aid money which the movement goes on to plunder. Some called for supplanting Hamas notions of "armed resistance" with new, nonviolent forms of protest against Israel. Others advocated civil engagement with Israelis — whether for the sake of a lasting peace, as part of an international effort to rebuild the coastal strip, or both. Nearly everyone called for a future without their current ruling elites, whom many called "the Hamas occupation of Gaza."

These sentiments comport with a wide body of Palestinian opinion polling, human rights reports, and published research that reflect a Gaza distant from TV cameras, in which a population, diverse in outlook, endures forced ideological conformity, systemic abuse, and theft by Hamas officials. Experts in Palestinian affairs know this literature, but it does not

figure prominently into international discussions of Gaza. Instead, the limelight is mainly occupied by polemics surrounding Hamas-Israel wars and a policy focus on managing the 15-year stalemate. Public concern for Gazan civilians appropriately manifests when Israeli air campaigns exact a human toll, or in appraisals of the daunting impact of Gazan isolation under Israeli and Egyptian border closures and restrictions. But when civilians in Gaza surface as independent voices, the world does not hear them very well. In 2019, approximately 1,000 Gazan youth braved gunfire and prison to protest the economic mismanagement of their territory by Hamas, in street demonstrations under the banner “We Want to Live.” One of this project’s Gazan interviewees observed, “The movement was brutally suppressed, and ... we found neither receptivity nor expressions of support from the outside world.”

After each of the interviews with Palestinians in Gaza concluded, we expressed thanks to the participant. Most of them replied with a variation of the same sentence: “I only hope my voice will be heard.”

It is hard to reach a global audience. It is harder still, in a world of polarized discussions, to focus attention on a tragedy that does not neatly fit an established political narrative. The difficulty in this case was compounded by concern about Hamas retribution for people in its territory who dared to expose local realities. Some interviewees, by their own account, had been jailed in the past for telling just such truths, but without success at reaching the outside world. We felt that a creative approach was necessary to minimize participants’ exposure while maximizing the impact of their testimony:

- We assembled a team of animators, illustrators, technicians, and musicians to create 25 video clips out of the interview recordings, using animation in lieu of the speakers’ visages and sound technology to alter speakers’ voices. We felt that, beyond protecting identities, an artistic depiction of the story a voice tells can provide a visceral experience of someone’s life that is hard to forget.
- We gathered documentation of the context in which the interviews took place. From human rights reports, surveys of Palestinian opinion, and news sources, we established that the video testimony in this series speaks to tragedies that occur regularly in Gaza and perspectives that are shared by a broad swath of the

population. Written summaries of these trends and related studies accompany the video series.

- We created versions of the material in seven languages, then reached content sharing agreements with media outlets on multiple continents to air it.

We did this to honor the interviewees' courage and desire to be heard, and because they have a right to join the international discussion of their own predicament.

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It falls beyond the scope of this project to formulate specific policy prescriptions concerning Gaza's future. We do wish to draw a connection, however, between the message of this testimony and the case for creative thinking about Gaza policy. To that end, prior to the videos' release, we presented the testimony to a number of distinguished figures in policymaking, education, and media, and asked them to share reflections.

We approached Ghaith Al-Omari, a Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, because he is a foremost expert on Palestinian affairs who also served Palestinians directly, both as an official at the Palestinian Authority and a diplomat in successive rounds of peace negotiation. We approached Brian Katulis, Vice President of Policy at the Middle East Institute in Washington, because in the 1990s, as an officer at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, he worked in the West Bank and Gaza to support Palestinian civil society.

We approached Jordanian statesman Jawad Anani — who served as Foreign Minister, led his country's Royal Court, and coordinated the kingdom's peace negotiating team with Israel — because over his long history of statecraft, he memorably incorporated wisdom and insight from ordinary people from all walks of life.

We approached Michael Strong, an American innovator in the field of virtual education, because so many Palestinian parents lament the scarcity of learning opportunity for their children in Gaza. We approached Tom Vizel, a young Israeli peace activist, because he has worked to build structures of mutual support between Gazan and Israeli educators.

As Hamas draws sustenance and inspiration from Iran's rulers, we asked Roya Hakakian, an Iranian American author and supporter of Iran's growing protest movement, to reflect on the parallels between Iranian opposition to that regime and Gazan views of Hamas. As Hamas aligns itself with the range of Iran-backed militias, we asked Fatima Abo Alasrar, a scholar at the Middle East Institute who specializes in Shia transnational movements and served the Department for International Development in her native Yemen, to share her reflections as well.

We publish their responses here.

Hamas as a Governing Actor



Much has been said about the impact of Israeli policies and actions on the civilian population in Gaza, and rightly so. Whether through its restrictive policies regarding movement and access of people and goods in and out of the coastal strip or its conduct in the various military confrontations with Hamas, Israel profoundly affects the life of Palestinians in the coastal strip. Yet the conduct of Hamas, the de facto rulers of the Strip, has received much less attention. Through its actions during armed hostilities and its day-to-day religious, cultural, political, social, and economic policies, Hamas has created an oppressive, stifling reality for the majority of Gazans. Being seen primarily through the Hamas-Israel lens has done a disservice to the Gazan population, in effect depriving it of its voice in the debate and instrumentalizing its experiences.

The Center for Peace Communications' animated series *Whispered in Gaza* is a commendable effort to provide ordinary people in Gaza with a platform to communicate with an international audience. In viewing the original interview footage, I was moved by the spectacle of countless Gazans — men and women, from all walks of life — availing themselves of the opportunity to speak freely about their lives, travails, and hopes for the future. Reflecting the climate of fear created by the Hamas authorities, the CPC made the unusual decision to release their testimony using video animation in lieu of the speakers' actual visages. At the same time, the searing images inspired by this restriction make the stories all the more powerful: each animated character epitomizes a larger trend, and together, they tell a rarely heard story of Gaza today.

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"Being seen primarily through the Hamas-Israel lens has done a disservice to the Gazan population, in effect depriving it of its voice in the debate and instrumentalizing its experiences."

– Ghaith al-Omari

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Since violently wresting control of the coastal strip in 2007, Hamas has enacted policies to advance not only its terrorist agenda but also its intolerant vision for society. Under its rule, the public space for women has steadily shrunk. While traditionally a conservative society, women had nevertheless been present in the political, social, and cultural life of Gaza. Under Hamas, policies ranging from imposing Hijab on schoolgirls to banning their participation in arts and cultural events have served to steadily push women out of the public sphere. Consider the story of “Maryam,” a debka dancer and singer in her youth, who faces escalating Hamas threats of harm to herself and her family if she does not agree to end her artistic career. It is no surprise that these policies led her to call to “liberate Gaza from Hamas” so that the Strip can once again be a hub of culture, communication, and tourism. In saying so, she reflects the yearning of Gazan women for a different kind of future.

While Hamas's cultural policies have targeted voices and social trends not in keeping with its agenda, its economic policies have heavily favored its supporters and clients while shrinking the traditional private sector, doing particular harm to small and medium businesses. Witness the story of Fatah activist “Basma,” who tried to start her own pharmacy after finding that most job opportunities were open to Hamas members only.

Her effort at self-employment was short-lived, she explains because Hamas “monopolized the [pharmaceuticals] market ... They’d sell us the drugs at high prices. Of course, for people here, one shekel makes a difference, and they’d go to the pharmacy that sells at lower prices. In the end, I got exhausted and fed up with this and closed the pharmacy. Now I just stay home.”

While much has been said about corruption in the PA — and again, rightly so -- Hamas is similarly engaged with corruption and poor governance that impacts the Gazan population as a whole. Reaching for a metaphor to explain the problem, “Isma’il” describes Gaza as “the Bermuda Triangle, [where] anything that goes inside it, disappears ... Gazans should be living very comfortably, thanks to so much aid and support. But our ruling faction controls everything. Merchants are heavily taxed by the government. I get only 40 percent of my salary. Naturally, I end up in debt. So we have a lot of respected merchants in prison for debt and I know teachers, health workers, and soldiers who have quit their jobs. Why? Because they’ve accumulated debt. In the end, who pays for all this? Ordinary citizens.”

While maintaining these harmful policies, Hamas targets any manifestation of dissent and suppresses even the mere expression of dissatisfaction with the living conditions. In 2019, a large number of Gazans took to the streets in a movement they called “We Want to Live” to protest the dismal living conditions in the Strip under Hamas. The “Hirak” – the term commonly used for protests during the Arab Spring – was nonviolent and deliberately non-political. As one of the interviewees — a Hirak veteran – put it, “it wasn’t political or partisan in nature, but the government made it political and partisan, claiming that the activists were backed by outside elements. In fact, no one was backing them. ... It was the people taking to the streets. It was everybody, demonstrating due to the conditions they endure.”

Hamas deployed both its security forces and activists to crack down violently on the protestors. In the words of one interviewee, “We met arrest, hot pursuit, a hail of bullets — every kind of brutality.” This brutality extended not only to protestors but also to journalists and human rights activists observing, documenting, and reporting on the crackdown. And no effort was spared to delegitimize the protestors, who were called “traitors,” “collaborators,” and “spies” with “a Zionist agenda.” The words of one of the interviewees who participated in the 2019 protests drive home the importance of the *Whispered in Gaza*

project: “In fact, we were patriots, committed to the Palestinian cause, and all we wanted was a government that knows how to run the country, rather than a government of clerics. A government of people with advanced degrees. Statesmen. That was it. The movement was brutally suppressed, and we found no international support. **We found neither receptivity nor expressions of support from the outside world.**”

Understanding the experience of Gazans under Hamas is essential not only as a humanitarian matter but also as a policy imperative. Understanding these dynamics is key to formulating effective policies to address the economic, humanitarian, political, and security challenges in the Strip. Such policies must obviously address Israeli actions and policies. But to be truly effective in achieving the goals of security, stability, and dignity, we must also address Hamas policies. Such an understanding will enable us to devise policies that pressure Hamas and its regional backers in Turkey, Qatar, and elsewhere into addressing the needs, priorities, and grievances of the public. An essential, indispensable first step is to afford the people of Gaza enough respect to listen to and amplify their voices. Whispered in Gaza — the first substantive effort to take such a step — invites the policy community not only to hear Gazans out but also to grapple with the implications of their message.

Brian Katulis

Palestinians in Gaza are People, Not Props or Pawns



In the late 1990s, I lived in the Palestinian territories, working at a nonprofit organization that sought to empower Palestinian civil society. Much of this time was spent in Gaza, where I came to know, and become deeply intertwined with, the lives, stories, and travails of people from all walks of life.

Many of their stories were simple ones; some were heartbreaking. One woman, a colleague's mother-in-law, was diagnosed with brain cancer. Gaza's hospitals were incapable of treating her, and, despite her age and condition, Israeli security authorities did not grant her a permit to travel to an Israeli hospital. Her family tried everything to save

her. At one point, they asked me to ferry tissue samples from the Erez Crossing to a hospital in Jerusalem for a biopsy. Her case required more advanced treatment than was available in the Gaza Strip, and her story ended sadly.

In the years that have passed since then, I often think back to these relationships with ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances in Gaza: how the day-to-day joys and struggles we all face as human beings are present in their lives as much as they are in ours, and how the difficult circumstances Palestinians living in Gaza face have only gotten worse in the past decade and a half.

In my work as an analyst focusing on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, some of the toughest topics to address in recent years have been the ones connected to the fate of the Palestinian people. Too often, Palestinians are used as props or pawns in political and policy debates in America, Israel, and the wider world – if they are even mentioned at all.

With respect to Gaza, a situation has emerged in which the policy discussion focuses primarily on managing the stalemate between Israel on the one hand and Hamas and other Palestinian groups on the other – and Palestinian voices are highlighted or platformed only when their testimony relates directly to that security discussion. As a result, the texture of Palestinian life in all its complexity, and the full range of issues Gazans struggle with today, are not represented. Nor are Gazan voices of dissent from the local authorities – an absence that makes it easier to conflate the people of Gaza with Hamas. The exclusion or marginalization of Palestinian voices from policy discussions in the United States and around the world is a long-standing problem, and there's no quick-fix remedy to it.

The *Whispered in Gaza* project offers an approach to begin to fill the vacuum, by helping people living outside the Gaza Strip to understand the perspectives of Palestinians there in their full complexity and nuance.

In the flurry of social media and instant analyses that are often produced in moments of crisis – like the Gaza war of 2021 – one would never hear a story like that of “Layla,” one of the 25 voices in this series. She sought to help her neighbors through their trauma by opening a counseling practice in her home, only to be stifled by a heavy-handed security apparatus fearful of allowing any space for private grievances to air. Among the ideas that local authorities suppress, but which Gazans share in private – according to another

speaker, “Yasmine” – is the desire to stop fighting. “If you’re a Gazan civilian who opposes war and says, ‘I don’t want war,’ you’re branded a traitor.” This is a voice that peace activists around the world need to hear.

No single research project or work can replace the perspective one derives from the direct experience of encountering others in person, hearing about their lives, and learning about their dreams and frustrations. But by gathering together dozens of voices and rendering them artistically through animation, *Whispered in Gaza* offers some of that experience to the many who may never visit the area. For policymakers, it presents an opportunity to temporarily pull ourselves from the narrow framework through which we perceive the Palestinian people living in the Gaza Strip, then return to our deliberations having acquired a new vocabulary.

I was moved by the testimony from “Iyad,” who describes the experience of walking by so many Gazan walls and alleys covered in murals of Hamas fighters and wondering, “Is this a city, or a military barracks?” On the one hand, he decries Hamas’s policies of perpetual conflict with Israel: “Palestine is our cause, and a just one,” he says, “but that doesn’t mean you should keep getting Palestinians killed, again and again, without any result.” On the other, he makes it clear that he is not advocating surrender to the status quo; he rather views nonviolent forms of protest as a more viable way to attain his rights. “Maybe I want to resist Israel using my oud,” he says. “I have an oud, and I play music. I could write a song to resist them. I’m free to do so. But don’t impose on me how to ‘resist.’”

Similar sentiments are shared by a young woman named “Najla,” who says that many Gazans like her feel that “a faction is fighting in the name of the Palestinian people, but not all Palestinians agree with it.” She views herself as a kind of fighter too: “My struggle is to communicate with Palestinians and Israelis and make them understand that I’m a human being here in Gaza — not a beast, a terrorist, or a lover of weapons — because, in the end, weapons won’t get us anywhere.”

Particularly heartrending was the testimony of mothers despairing of the bleak opportunities available to their children. “They’re talented and smart,” says “Amna” of her

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“A Gazan woman observed, ‘If you’re a Gazan civilian who opposes war and says, I don’t want war, you’re branded a traitor.’ This is a voice that peace activists around the world need to hear.”

– Brian Katulis

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kids, “[but] I can't even send them to the Qur'anic schools, because that's where they indoctrinate people, and I don't want my kids to be exposed to that indoctrination. I want them to think rationally ... and live a modern life.” “Lubna,” a newlywed, recalls the mixed feelings she and her husband shared at family gatherings when relatives repeatedly urged them to have a child. “We felt it would be wrong to bring a child into the conditions we endure. A child is innocent. She doesn't deserve to be forced to go to government schools teaching lessons that are worthless and deceitful.”

Alongside the sadness and despair are recurring expressions of resilience. Consider the testimony of Ala, a middle-aged man who came home to Gaza after years overseas. While abroad, he recalls, “I said it's impossible for me to return to the Gaza Strip in light of the injustice and tragedies there. But for us Palestinians, longing for our homeland is sculpted like stone into our hearts.” Determined to take part in rebuilding the coastal strip, he observes, “What is so crushing about this whole thing is that we have the requisite capabilities ... and I hope that those capabilities will be utilized soon, with the world's help and with the help of ourselves, as Palestinians, working together to improve things.” He knows his dreams are attainable because they are reasonable, he assures himself: “a respectable and simple life where we can live in peace ... [and be] able to sit down with anyone, even those I disagree with, and have differences of opinion but agree about my country, my homeland, and my rights.”

Amid the bitterness of daily life in Gaza, Ala and many others like him are holding onto their dreams for a better future and maintaining a sense of possibility and even optimism. Though their visages and voices have been altered, they nonetheless braved the risk to share this testimony with an international audience.

It is hard to discover optimism in the overall situation that Palestinians in Gaza continue to face, but listen closely to the perspectives contained within this collection, and you will find some hope. It's the hope for change, better days, and freedom that motivate these Palestinians to take the considerable risk to share their perspectives with you.

Jawad Anani

Let Us Imagine What Gaza Could Be



Having reviewed the 25 interviews several times, I saw quite clearly that many people in Gaza yearn for peace and security and crave a dignified, decent life.

It is understandable that the interviewees preferred anonymity: merely for expressing themselves openly, they could have faced accusations of “collaboration with the enemy.” Yet in participating, they exposed the undeniable fact that people yearn for a normal life free of threats — a feeling that is shared on both sides of the border. All parties must come to terms with the fact that they cannot maintain a war footing while being oblivious to the pain and daily suffering of others.

A mother, no matter how devoted to her cause she may be, cannot ignore the tragedy of her children’s life in squalor, with no hope for the future — though living under daily threat consumes the soul and numbs the senses.

A talented young girl who dreams of fulfilling her life by pursuing her talent and happiness naturally resents the fact that her dream is unattainable. She does not want to be merely a womb that produces soldiers.

This sense of lost opportunity exceeds the fate of children. It would be normal, in the aftermath of war, for people to come together to rebuild their homes and lives. Gaza has known war intermittently but continually — in 1948, 1956, 1967, and over the course of four new wars in the 21st century. The victims, whether killed or maimed, are somehow not a part of our collective conscience. We should never forget the lost opportunity caused by these wars and sustained over the periods between them.

Let us close our eyes for a moment and try to envision what Gaza would be like if it were allowed to reconstruct and prosper — if all that innate energy were applied to the creation of a thriving area. I have not the slightest doubt that Gaza would become an oasis of peace and prosperity, a tribute to its people and their neighbors.

Our shared hope for such a future is why it was right and proper for this effort to turn the spotlight on the tragic situation of parents and their children in Gaza. It can help catalyze a new dynamic, moving beyond the present dismal, dead-end reality by fostering constructive dialogue. At the same time, such an effort will not succeed if it is focused on Gaza alone, without similarly highlighting the situation of Israeli children.

The cycle of war cannot be broken without the cooperation of all parties. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

This auspicious beginning to an ongoing effort should be nurtured and developed into a large push that involves all parties. May it serve to address the absurdity of current policies focused on retaliation and revenge, and bring a spirit of tolerance and peacemaking. Such a turn may lie far from here, yet it is worth devoting effort to its ultimate success.

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– Jawad Anani

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Tom Vitzel

The World Has a Stake in Gaza's Future



Viewing the clips from *Whispered in Gaza*, I felt as if I knew the interviewees personally, even though their faces and voices were altered to protect their identities. There was something familiar about the mixture of despair on the one hand and determination to improve their lives in the face of persecution on the other. The experience reminded me of the time I had the opportunity to peek over the walls of fear and hatred and encounter young men and women from Gaza. Those individuals, too, braved threats of deadly violence to share their stories and make new friends and partners.

In 2019, I began in my present position as Director of the Department of Education of the Federation of Learning and Working Youth (NOAL), an Israeli non-government organization. (In the U.S., NOAL is known under the umbrella of Dror Israel.) Since its founding in 1924,

NOAL has stood up against exploitation and violence and has worked to foster equality and social justice in Israeli society through education and dialogue. We currently operate more than 500 local branches across the country, with a member base of 90,000 Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze youth.

My mandate includes leading NOAL's International Relations Division. In addition to its bilateral ties with youth groups in the U.S. and Europe, NOAL maintains relations with a Palestinian youth organization based in the West Bank, as well as a similar one in Egypt. In striving to grow this community, I sought out youth organizations in Gaza that were interested in meeting with an Israeli counterpart. I felt motivated to do so by human concern for the situation in Gaza, and the conviction that we can help improve realities on the ground through civic action. After a long inquiry by way of educators, community organizers, and human rights activists in the field, I found a match: a group of courageous Palestinians dedicated to fostering education for resilience. They were interested in dialogue and willing to arrange a meeting.

I felt that the most relevant Israeli youth for such an encounter would come from Sderot, the city bordering Gaza which is usually the first to experience rockets launched by Hamas into Israel. Our fellow citizens are barred from entering the coastal strip, while most Gazans, aside from those with work permits, cannot enter Israel. So we planned a virtual introductory meeting.

Ahead of the encounter, some of the Israeli youth leaders we had invited conveyed reservations. In the minds of most Israelis, Gaza is a nest of terror controlled by Hamas, and dialogue between civilians on opposite sides of the fence seems almost inconceivable. So I ran an educational workshop for the Israeli participants on the subject of "encountering the other." We discussed the value of dialogue with Palestinians in Gaza as a way to examine our assumptions about the territory. We agreed that although we lack the tools to change the political situation, we must help our fellow educators on the other side of the border as best we can. We also recognized that our Gazan counterparts had their own reasons for concern about such a meeting, and would have to muster enormous courage to meet with Israelis. Together, we resolved to move forward.

We crowded around a computer screen in Israel and watched with anticipation as our Gazan peers connected to the Zoom call one by one. It was the first time any of us had seen young men and women from the Strip outside of news coverage.

Though our exchange began with formal presentations about our respective organizations, the discussion quickly moved to more personal questions about each other's lives. We shared feelings and personal history, compared our respective experiences during escalations of violence, and listened to each other's dreams and aspirations.

After an hour or so, we reached the central intended question of the gathering: what can we do together to improve the reality of children and youth? Ideas that emerged included a virtual language learning program for children, math tutoring, shared leadership training, and even a platform where young Gazans could talk about their daily lives with Israelis on a more regular basis.

In the months that followed, we met many more times, mostly virtually and once face-to-face in Jerusalem. We honed our plans for projects to improve the lives of Gazan youth. An escalation of violence occurred during this period. As I sat in a bomb shelter while a rocket siren sounded in my city, I called one of our Gazan peers to ask how she was doing. She described Israeli jets flying overhead, and having nowhere to hide. The asymmetry of our realities was deeply poignant.

Unfortunately, our cooperation ended before we could realize our shared dreams. Though COVID-19 and intermittent military exchanges posed challenges, it was Hamas that ended our partnership: deeming the Gazans' dialogue with Israeli civil society a "crime," they jailed several participants. Upon our friends' release, they departed the Strip.

To this day, however, and despite the dangers, most of the Gazan activists we met continue to operate, doing everything they can to empower and inspire their fellow Palestinians. They do so alone, without assistance or support; in addition to the direct pressures Hamas imposes, Gaza's isolation and the military stalemate that prolongs it effectively restrict them from forging the international partnerships they want and need. Yet the ideas,

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"We crowded around a computer screen in Israel and watched with anticipation as our Gazan peers connected to the Zoom call one by one."

– Tom Vizel

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message, and tools they offer to their fellow Palestinians may be part of what it will take to gradually change realities in Gaza for the better. All peoples vested in fostering peace and development in the area have a stake in their success.

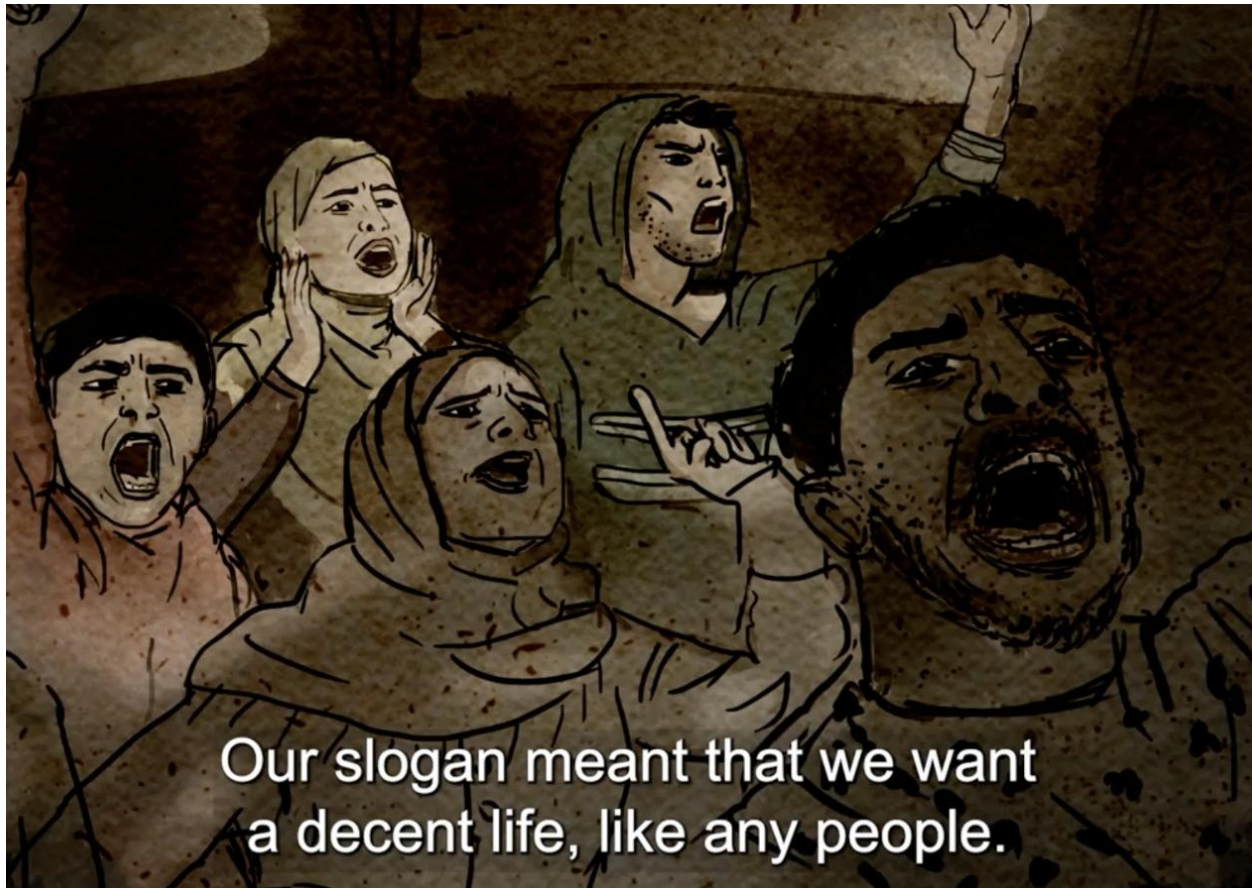
While the outlines of a plan to empower Gazan civil society remain elusive, perhaps its beginnings lie in listening to the remarkable voices in this series and raising awareness about their testimony. To that end, I would like to urge those who read this to take the following simple steps:

1. Gather ten relatives, friends, or colleagues.
2. Watch a number of clips from *Whispered in Gaza* together.
3. Hold a discussion, informed by questions like these:
 - a. What did you experience while watching the clips?
 - b. What did you learn that you did not know before?
 - c. What can be done to widen the circle of awareness and engagement around present realities in Gaza?

Such modest efforts have the potential to turn viewers into activists. They are a meaningful enactment of the principle that it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness. Amid the cynicism and sameness that typify discussions of Gaza around the world today, the “whisperings” in this series — stories of sadness, told passionately out of hope — offer a spark.

Roya Hakakian

Gazans, Like Iranians, Choose Life Over “Martyrdom”



Being an observer of the Middle East and a supporter of Iran’s growing protest movement, I was moved by the accounts of Gazans opposed to Hamas rule, as rendered through this animated series. The parallels between Gazan suffering at the hands of Hamas and the Iranians’ grievances with Tehran are glaring. The contrasts are obvious: Gaza is a completely different place with a different history. The genesis of the conflict and the issues that have led to the tragic conditions of Gazans have a different origin than the ones Iranians are experiencing. Yet, the two situations have such profound similarities that they overshadow the differences.

For instance, the clip about the professional dancer who was forced to end her career after Hamas's takeover of Gaza in 2007 very much reminded me of Iran in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution in 1979, when the exercise of most art forms became a crime. She describes her love of dance and art in general, her need for culture, and her desire to resuscitate cultural life in the coastal strip. Her longing for that life is reminiscent of the longing so many Iranian singers and musicians expressed when music and dance were declared banned in the early post-revolutionary Iran. Women were forbidden to participate in sports. The dress code was imposed shortly thereafter, together with many other wide-ranging restrictions.

Four decades passed. Iran's population grew larger and increasingly younger, forcing the regime to temper some of the draconian restrictions of those early post-revolutionary years. And yet, the new generation was far less forgiving and far more demanding and self-aware. The principal slogan they chant today — "Woman, life, liberty" — reflects the widespread conviction that any modest concessions the regime made over the years have been inadequate. The same slogan could double as a summation of the collective state of mind to which the *Whispered in Gaza* series draws attention.

Viewing the clips, one can also discern the exhaustion Gazans must be feeling with the ideas of "sacrifice" and "martyrdom" — that is, the notion that they are living a life that prepares them not for the future, but for death. In this respect, too, Gazans resemble countless Iranians. While it may be possible for a regime to sell an ethos of "martyrdom" to a nation at war or other temporary emergency, it cannot expect a people to forgo hope and joy and live for martyrdom indefinitely.

Gazans and Iranians are both expressing a yearning for life in all its aspects — whether by dancing or singing, or simply by planning four or five years into a future in which they can invest their hopes and envision a better prospect. The many simple, poignant stories Gazans tell in this series correspond uncannily to the lyrics in the song *Baraye* — now the anthem of Iran's protest movement — which is basically a compilation of so many simple desires that Iran's people have repeatedly expressed, as seemingly banal as a wish to be able to walk one's dog on the street. (Dogs are banned in Iran, as dog walking is banned in Gaza.)

The commonality, in sum, is the desire to live a normal life.

It is significant that the creators of the Gazan videos decided to publish a version of the clips with Persian subtitles. The series offers Iranian audiences a perspective on Gaza they have never known before. For decades, Iranian government propaganda has portrayed Iranian support for Hamas as a means to help Palestinians defeat occupation and gain sovereignty. Iranians may be surprised to learn that the monies their regime poured into Gaza has been primarily to spread among the Palestinians the very ideology that has been the very cause of their suffering. Besides, in the face of Iran's current economic crisis, why spend the much needed national assets on foreign interventions which the regime has long promoted as "just causes?"

What makes the intervention in Gaza especially complicated for Iranians is that their regime has committed so many violations, both at home and abroad, in the name of the Palestinians. While the people know not to trust the regime's propaganda, they have meanwhile had little or no access to Palestinian voices outside of the regime's control. It will be an epiphany for Iranian audiences to be able at last to hear them — and at that, to hear them echoing some of their very own experiences, thousands of miles away. No doubt Iranians will identify with much of what the speakers share.

Meanwhile, these videos are reaching Western audiences while they have been hearing and sympathizing with the plight of the Iranian protesters. As we must defend Muslim minorities from the bigotry and mistreatment they at times experience in the West, we must equally speak out against the Islamism that holds various Middle Eastern societies in its grip — in the case of Iran, an entire regime. It is ordinary Muslims in these societies who are the primary victims of their own homegrown ideologues. These two moral commitments not only complement and reinforce one another; but also, together, they safeguard democratic principles at a time when the global movement for democracy is at last regaining momentum. Iranian demonstrators against the Islamic Republic, like Ukrainians resisting Russian invasion, stand at the front lines of the struggle for free and open societies. As their oppressors, aligned with one another, grow weaker, all democratic countries grow more secure.

The success of the democratic movement in Iran will surely lead to the weakening of Iran's regime's armed proxies in the region, allowing an alternative future to emerge within those enclaves to challenge the status quo. In creating a platform for Gazans to reach an international audience, *Whispered in Gaza* has opened new lines of communication for voices of conscience within the strip to win solidarity and support. It is now for the audience to make sure that these brave voices who risked speaking are heard.

Michael Strong

Educating for Civility and Prosperity



A Palestinian mother in the *Whispered in Gaza* series says,

"I wish I could send my children to centers of learning ... They're talented and smart. But it's just not possible. You either have to pay a lot of money or go to Hamas-run centers. I can't even send them to the Qur'anic schools, because that's where they indoctrinate people, and I don't want my kids to be exposed to that indoctrination. I want them to think rationally and do as they like. At those places, that's not an option; you need to adhere to their rules. You need to be completely on their side. ... My kids are smart. ... I want to be able to provide the education they need, to develop their abilities and talents and truly make use of them so they aren't wasted. I worry a lot about them."

In watching the Gazan testimony, I was struck not only by the brutality of the Hamas regime but also by the oppressive moral and intellectual environment it has created. Thought control is a mainstay of dictatorship, typically enforced by threats of violence and retaliation, shaming, media incitement, and religious indoctrination, as well as brainwashing through the education system. The voices in this series describe precisely such realities on the coastal strip today.

As an educator who is committed to fostering freedom of thought and liberation of the mind, I experienced the heartrending stories in this collection as a call to action. Those of us who are in a position to respond to the mother's plea for a decent education for her children should, in my view, do what we can to help. We should do so not only as a matter of human responsibility but also because, in the twenty-first century, as I have discovered through my own work, virtual education programs devoted to fostering resilient and independent youth can reach deep into troubled environments and empower young people to bring positive change.

Last year, I was approached by a mother of five children from an Arab country torn by war. She contacted me online having discovered that I lead a virtual school based on Socratic dialogue methods and open to children and teens around the world. She and her children were fleeing death threats by armed militias because she had dared to call for a different kind of future for their country. The family had found temporary asylum in a place where, for security reasons, they were not in a position to mix with the local population or its school system.

For years, our school has sought to provide a supportive education and a warm, nurturing environment for our students spanning four continents, including learners from Arab countries. We welcomed all five youths into our classes. As in my mind, the experience bears relevance to youth in Gaza, I will describe our school, then describe the possibility of extending its approach to Palestinian students in the coastal strip.

Our core experience is an intellectual dialogue in which students read and discuss ideas from diverse intellectual sources, including Western, Far Eastern, and Muslim learning traditions. We read texts with an effort to understand the ideas of the authors, while also

reflecting on how those ideas do or do not align with how we understand the world. There is no one interpretation of any text that we, as an organization, favor; we want students to become sophisticated readers, thinkers, and writers who are capable of developing and defending their own ideas. We seek out students who learn to listen and respect other perspectives. We want students to become as articulate as they are independent, prepared to navigate the global knowledge-based economy from a position of strength. To the latter end, we also provide personalized training in mathematics, using a combination of software and tutors, and various electives in marketable digital skills. Finally, we support students in developing entrepreneurial and creative projects that provide them with real-world experience, including earning income online as teens.

In exposing students to the norms of dialogue by practicing every day with intellectually challenging texts, we help transform latent biases and animosity into a passion for thoughtful and considerate understanding of the other. People still disagree, sometimes firmly and with great conviction, and we in no sense expect or require people to change their beliefs. But we do help them learn how to express dramatically opposing beliefs while listening to the other with empathy and respect.

The five new students I mentioned joined a larger number of peers in our classes who also face challenging situations involving violence and the threat of violence. It is terrifying just to hear them describe their situations. For them, our peaceful virtual haven provides connectivity to the world beyond the pressures of their environment. Everyone desires peace and security. If children are constantly in a crisis situation, they grow up traumatized. We cannot address all the trauma virtually, but we can fill part of the void that surrounds them by providing an emotionally positive and supportive community.

The five young refugees not only flourished; they also gave at least as much as they received by inspiring and enriching the education of their peers. They inspired our faculty as well: all of us felt honored to help them — and committed to serving more people like them.

Returning to the Gazan testimony, I will draw attention to another voice in this series — a young man who observes,

“Gaza is an area cut off from the world. Its people don’t know about other ethnicities and religions and how they live. Their conception of the world is based on the views of clerics: ‘Whatever the cleric says I should do, I do.’ ... But if we could engage the outside world, it would be possible for Palestinians in Gaza to regain their humanity. In recognizing that life has value, they’d see the humanity in Israelis too. ... Palestinians need preparation to become a civil society.”

The goals the speaker describes are daunting, and Palestinians who seek to meet them face powerful opposing forces. But perhaps if some Gazan children had access to a virtual education that supported them in becoming independent thinkers, they could, over time, develop effective strategies to improve their communities. The strongest case for optimism is the resilience on display among the Palestinian voices in this series. Isolation within a repressive regime typically disheartens and exhausts a population. These individuals maintain determination and faith in their cause. They ask for international support to overcome their isolation. It behooves us to provide it.

Our experience shows that access to quality virtual education can help fortify young minds, improve their society by modeling empathy, and even earn an income digitally — itself a potential form of direct aid to Palestinians in Gaza that can circumvent the corruption of local authorities. In a territory with high Internet penetration, they can partake in such programs privately and safely.

Most present discussions of Gaza’s future adopt the narrow presumption that progress is unfeasible without an end to the military stalemate and border closures, yet there is no end in sight. Here is an opportunity to begin to connect Gazans to the outside world now, without delay. I suspect, moreover, that education is only one of the numerous fields for which similar creative approaches are possible.

Such efforts are hard, requiring devotion and sustenance of effort by outside actors, considerable bravery on the part of people in the strip, and enormous goodwill on the part of many players, including Israel, Gulf states, and international bodies. At best, moreover, a

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"Here is an opportunity to connect Gazans to the outside world now, without delay ... [and] education is only one of numerous fields for which similar creative approaches are possible."

- Michael Strong

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virtual education program of this sort would reach enough people to achieve only a ripple effect. But what is a better alternative than to try, and what are we waiting for? Let us move beyond stale polemics and binary policies, make the most of present-day tools to connect across borders, and actually achieve some good.

Fatima Abo Alasrar

Our Responsibility Toward Gaza



As I watched this series of testimony by Palestinians in Gaza, I was struck by how similar their suffering is to that of others in the Middle East who have experienced the brutality of armed actors ruling non-state enclaves. For example, the Houthi militia in Yemen governs with an iron fist, using fear to hold onto power by means of torture, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings. They have rejected peace under the false pretense of resisting aggression from the U.S. and Israel. The Houthis' immediate goal is ending Saudi Arabia's intervention in the country, which in their view would enable them to fully conquer Yemen's territory through armed force and establish a theocratic state aligned with their patron, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Conditions in Gaza, from isolation to religious indoctrination, reflect an effort by Hamas to transform the social fabric and use people as tools, as part of a larger geopolitical pressure campaign, waged in tandem by like-minded armed actors including Hamas, the Houthis, Hezbollah, and other movements that identify as part of the “Axis of Resistance.” Under the threat of violence, most of the civilians who live under their rule choose to conform — while those who challenge their authorities pay a heavy price.

For others, the only option is to leave. A woman in this series shared the story of how her brother fled Gaza by sea in great danger to escape harassment by the authorities in Gaza. His family lost contact with him. It reminded me of the devastating news of eight young men from the same city who drowned while trying to make their way to Europe. These stories reflect the desperate measures to which Palestinians in Gaza resort in order to escape their oppressive conditions.

Hamas frequently exerts pressure on citizens and dissidents who do not conform to its political ideology. Civilians in Gaza accuse Hamas, like other militias, of using torture, arbitrary detention, and other forms of repression to silence opponents and maintain control. Hamas has targeted journalists, human rights activists, and other critics of the group. There have also been reports of forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

As is well known, people in Gaza live behind a blockade of Gaza’s borders imposed by Israel and Egypt, which view Hamas as a threat to their own national security. When war erupts between Israel and Hamas (or another armed group operating from Gazan soil), Israeli airstrikes incur civilian losses. Unfortunately, the pain of these losses and the difficulty of the isolation Palestinians in Gaza endure are compounded by the human rights violations they suffer at the hands of Hamas.

The international community might be able to help by lessening the impact of the humanitarian conditions. However, structural issues that affect the human rights of Gazans are a challenge to address because that is largely the responsibility of the governing authorities. Alas, as the interviews in this series reflect so viscerally, people are being used as pawns as Hamas deepens its power, disregarding the well-being and fundamental rights of the people it is supposed to serve.

When we focus on only one aspect of the conflict because of the perception of our inability to influence Hamas, we leave a major cause of human suffering unchecked and reinforce the power dynamics that perpetuate the cycle of abuse.

Another significant theme from the interviews with residents of Gaza was their desire for increased connectivity with the outside world. This yearning only grows amid the restrictive conditions Gazans face, characterized by widespread surveillance, fear of reprisal for expressing dissenting views, and the threat of incarceration by authorities as a means of social control.

Adopting a “with us or against us” mentality, Hamas pressures Gazans to conform to a narrow way of thinking and living. Like other armed non-state actors that claim to be fighting for justice, they engage in criminal activity themselves. They assert legitimacy not by popular support but by waging violent attacks — yet the consequences of their behavior instead delegitimize them in the eyes of the people they rule.

Gazans feel anguished about their dim prospects for the future. In one of the interviews, a newlywed explains that she has chosen not to have children, despite her and her husbands’ desire to do so, because they do not want to expose a child to the oppressive conditions in their society, noting its flawed education system.

Yet despite the challenges people in Gaza face, they are holding onto hope for a better future in which they can live freely and meaningfully. They know their own potential to thrive and build a peaceful society and pray that they or future generations will be able to bring the dream to fruition. They want their rights to be respected, to live with dignity, and to coexist peacefully with others, including Israelis. They express frustration with Hamas leaders who have meanwhile left Gaza and are living abroad. They want to open themselves up to the world and have connectivity between Gaza and the West Bank. They want movie theaters and nightlife. In short, they want Gaza to be a thriving metropolitan city like Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, or Cairo.

Though the Center for Peace Communications employed animation in order to protect the identities of the interviewees, numerous participants were courageous individuals who had already braved prison to protest their authorities, as the videos reflect. They are part of a rising tide of Palestinians in Gaza who are struggling to break the silence about Hamas’s

exploitation of their suffering and wanton disregard for their basic rights. At the recent funerals of the eight Gazan drowning victims, which were attended by thousands, one of the mothers spoke out, assigning blame to the local authorities. Both her grief and her courage should inspire us to learn more about the conditions in Gaza, and grapple with the question of what can be done to ameliorate them.

The international community must not forget the right of Gazan civilians to know stability and security, and explore potential ways to empower those who rise up against Hamas's corruption and control. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "The denial of human rights is a fundamental threat to peace, progress, and democracy. Without a commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of all individuals, we cannot hope to achieve lasting stability and prosperity." This statement holds true not only for citizens of Western democracies but for all peoples, in countries and enclaves around the world, including the Palestinians of Gaza.

Contributors



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Tom Vizel is Director of Education for NOAL (the General Federation of Working and Studying Youth), Israel's largest and most diverse youth organization, with a member base of 90,000 Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze Israelis across the country. He began his career in education by creating a model for joint activities of young Jewish and Arab leaders in mixed cities. In addition to his work at NOAL, he manages the nascent Youth for Middle East and North Africa initiative (Y4MENA), which aims to bring youth from across the region together to promote mutual understanding, inclusiveness, and peace.



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