

THE BOOK OF GAZA EDITED BY ATEF ABU SAIF

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The Gaza Strip, a narrow stretch of land of just 350 square kilometres, though densely inhabited with a population of over 1.8 million people, was launched into global media headlines this summer. Though it has an 11-kilometre border with Egypt in the South, Gaza is predominantly surrounded by Israel, which has held the small territory under blockade since the Israel-Gaza War of 2008. Back then, the Strip's heavily populated urban enclaves were bombarded by a series of air strikes that led to the deaths of well over 1,000 Palestinians, predominantly civilians, and 13 Israelis, in a conflict that lasted just 22 days. In the intervening six years, the blockade has severely limited international access to Gaza, preventing the free movement of goods, people and even humanitarian aid, on which many of the Strip's inhabitants are now almost entirely dependent. Gaza's fishermen, one of the few trades that still bolsters the region's stifled economy, are even restricted as they move out to sea, Israeli gunboats preventing them from travelling beyond the polluted shallow waters to access the abundance of fish that lie further off-shore in deeper parts of the Mediterranean Sea.¹ Gaza is often described by activists, humanitarian organisations, and even branches of the United Nations, as an “open air prison”. Unable to leave the Strip without engaging in Kafkaesque bureaucratic processes, cut off from their fellow Palestinians and family members in the Occupied West Bank, and resorting to desperate measure such as the construction of tunnels beneath the tightly regulated borders simply to import food (as well as weapons), it's hard to argue that that phrase, “open air prison”, is just hyperbole. Nevertheless, situated outside of the spotlight of a global media that feeds off “fast-paced” violence rather than slow occupation, the Israeli government continues to practice its stringent measures without being pushed by the international community, on any significant scale, for reasonable justificatory arguments.

In the summer of 2014, however, Israel's mostly uncontested suffocation of Palestinians in Gaza suddenly took on a violent immediacy as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched “Operation Protective Edge”, a seven week-long bombardment sparked by a spiral of events that crushed Palestinian rocket-fire from Hamas—the Strip's democratically elected party government—as well as other political factions. The number of civilian Palestinian deaths of the 2008 war was dwarfed as around 2,200 men, women and children were killed in their homes, fleeing their cities, and even sheltering in UN schools and hospitals. Coverage of atrocities in the Strip shot into the mainstream media in the Global North, and hotly contested debates took place over whether Israel was justified in its use of harsh military violence in such densely populated civilian areas. Though major broadcasting institutions such as the BBC document events in the region when they become overtly violent in this way, the slower forms of oppression that have turned the Strip into a fertile hotbed for a Palestinian anger and violent resistance go largely unanalysed in the mainstream media. In the context of this fraught, decades-old political contest, the literary and cultural documentation of the everyday life of Gazans becomes an imperative project that not only gives shape to the day-to-day violence committed against Palestinians, but also reclaims a Palestinian subjectivity that is not defined by the Israeli occupation.

It is for this reason that a new collection of short stories, *The Book of Gaza*, published earlier this year before the summer's war, is so valuable. As editor of and contributor to the collection, Atef Abu Saif, writes in the anthology's introduction: “Literature has been the

living voice of the Palestinian struggle, in the face of being uprooted, displaced, and occupied.” (p.ix) His excellent framing essay outlines both the important political context whilst also highlighting the literary tradition on which these short stories draw. The Palestinian novel has historically been a genre defined by its short length, in large part due to the practicalities of publication processes in the context of ongoing occupation. However, the short, sharp assertion of Palestinian subjectivity that the novella and the short story forms allow have enabled the recovery of a private sphere that lies beyond the oppressive political realities of day-to-day life in Gaza. The form has allowed authors writing in Gaza and the West Bank to reclaim an identity that is not entirely defined in relation to Israel and the region’s ongoing political struggles. Such a process is itself an imperative form of cultural resistance that allows Palestinians to retain a semblance of their own humanity, articulating and communicating the simple fact that they too are people simply trying to live their lives to the rest of the world.

Comprised of ten stories by ten different authors, all of which have been translated into English, *The Book of Gaza* gives an international readership unprecedented access to this day-to-day Gazan subjectivity. They enable this audience to understand the people of Gaza as more than victims of Israeli violence, or radicalised Islamic fundamentalists, or any of the other many stereotypes that are so easily taken up and perpetuated by media coverage of the Strip. They add flesh to the bones of what are often undocumented lives, complicating the simplistic binaries that the categories of political argument so often force them into. Five of the stories are from female contributors, a gender balance that allows the collection to address discriminations and oppressed subjectivities within Gaza itself. For example, Najlaa Ataallah’s story, “The Whore of Gaza”, articulates an overt feminine sexuality as its protagonist longs, both literally and metaphorically, “to try a cigarette” (p.41), in a society where such a practice is reserved only for men. Likewise, “When I Cut Off Gaza’s Head” by Mona Abu Sharekh references a biblical narrative by telling its story across a temporal seven day period, whilst articulating a complex and conflictual female subjectivity through a disruptive formal style that veers between italicised, epigraphic and epistolary segments.

The collection is also comprehensive in its documentation of Gaza’s many diverse geographical spaces, including stories set in Gaza’s many dense urban landscapes as well as beachfronts, refugee camps, bedrooms and taxis. As with so much of Palestinian literature, the physical contours of the terrain emerge as a central thematic concern across these stories, the authors embarking on a project to recover and identify the land that for the last hundred years has been systematically taken away from them. This cartographic element to the collection is superbly visualised by a series of accompanying images that map Gaza in different ways. The artist Mohamed Abusal’s superb contribution, *A Metro in Gaza*, with which the collection concludes, envisages an underground train network spreading through the Strip. Despite the catastrophic damage to Gazan infrastructure caused by Israeli airstrikes in both 2008 and 2014, and which leave Palestinians without electricity and clean water, Abusal is determined to picture a functioning transport system that lies beyond the Israeli violence, its location—beneath the ground—cheekily alluding to the notorious tunnels that run into Israel and Egypt, and which in recent months Israel has also been determined to destroy. Furthermore, the stories are interleaved with segments from an unnamed map, metaphorically enacting the motions of each story as they zoom in on the micro-stories of people’s daily life, whilst cumulatively painting a macro picture of Gaza’s diverse and heterogeneous cartography.

As might be expected, however, the collection never avoids its political context. The immediacy of oppression and violence in Gaza is such that its structural contours will always remain present, imminent even when absent. But even the collection’s stories that tackle these politics directly do so in formally experimental ways from the so-often unheard

Palestinian perspective: “Truncheons. Fists. Shoes. [...] Thrown Stones. Tear gas canisters. Empty cartridges. Punches. All those things hidden deep down inside spring to life: the tips of his fingers twitch.” (p.115) Thus writes Zaki al’Ela in the penultimate paragraph of the collection’s final story, resorting to lists so as to capture monotony occupation’s ongoing violence, whilst asserting the ever-present reality of Palestinian resistance. But the reclamation of a space beyond the politics of occupation is perhaps this collection’s most valuable contribution. As Abu Saif explains:

This book seeks to paint a portrait of Gaza through the eyes of its writers, as a city different to the one presented in the media. Gaza is a city like all cities by the sea, where people relax on the beach, where the streets have names and the coffee shops their patrons. People love and hate, they are filled with desires and wracked with concerns. (p.xiii)

The Book of Gaza maps this unchartered landscape of day-to-day existence in the Strip, as well as the inner landscapes of previously stifled voices and subjectivities. In this regard, it is a text that deserves to be read by all those interested in the region as an essential supplement to the failures of media coverage, and by everyone as a series of high-quality short stories valuable as literary narratives that exist beyond the claustrophobic parameters of a weary, war-torn political context.

¹ For these statistics and more on the blockade of Gaza, see ‘Five Years of Blockade: The Humanitarian Situation in the Gaza Strip’ (June 2012), produced by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories; and for continually updated information on economic, political and closure issues, as well as the lingering effects of the recent war, visit: <http://gisha.org/reports-and-data/the-gaza-cheat-sheet>