

Three Wars and Counting

By Omar Ghraieb

We all take pride in different things in our lives, especially our nationality. But being a Palestinian gives a whole different dimension to this pride. It's a plight of over 66 years of struggling and yearning for freedom, waking up every day and reminding ourselves to keep fighting for our rights because, just like everyone else on this earth, we deserve it. We've kind of earned it too.

It doesn't matter whether or not you are a Palestinian who was born and raised in Palestine, or whether or not you live in Palestine, we all know that being Palestinian means that your homeland lives inside you, regardless of whether you actually live there. We all have the passion of Palestine filling our lungs, our hearts, our souls, and our existence. It's an on-going reminder, like an alarm you set every day for the rest of your life.



Photo by Shareef Sarhan.

GAZA
Lest We
Forget

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I was born and raised in Cyprus. We returned to Palestine before I was a teenager, and we lived in Gaza. I attended a Christian school, even though I am Muslim, and that kind of eased the culture shock of moving from Europe to Gaza. The harmony, love, and equality between Muslims and Christians here made me feel as though I fit in, to a certain degree, and the two Christian schools that I attended at different stages of school life were my sanctuary. Little did I know that the same school I attended years ago would become the sanctuary for displaced Muslims during Israel's latest and third war on Gaza. This harmony had come to life. I was proud and touched.

On-going occupation means a routine you get used to but always resist. Gaza has witnessed invasions, airstrikes, and tragic times throughout the years, some of which I witnessed while I lived here, including the second Intifada. But the concept of war was not only foreign, it just never even occurred to us.

In December 2008, it was a day like any other day. My sister, who is married and lives abroad, was visiting us in Gaza with my newborn nephew. We were all sitting in the living room when there was a huge explosion. The windows nearly flew off. I ran to cover my nephew but was pushed out of the way by my sister, who was



Photo by Shareef Sarhan.



running with her baby for shelter in the corner. She held him tightly and couldn't stop crying. It took time and strength to ease her grip and keep her from smothering him with her protection. Thus began the war.

I was in complete denial. I listened to music. I never watched the news unless I was forced to. I slept a lot and ate a lot and laughed hysterically every two seconds. As the days went by, this denial started to subside and the foreign concept

of war started to become familiar. But after 23 days of hell, the war ended at the beginning of 2009, and I thought to myself that Gaza would never ever witness this again. Impossible. No way. Never. I survived the worst with my family and it would never happen again.

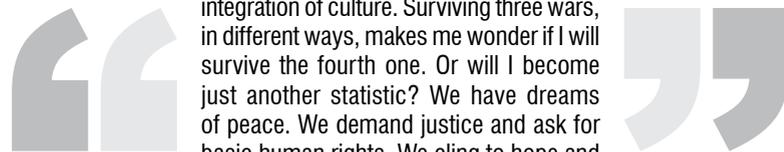
Only three years later, in November 2012, while I was in New York for media training with the United Nations, Israel launched its second war on Gaza. I wasn't physically there but I was constantly in contact with my family by phone or on Skype. They would lie and say that everything was okay, but I could hear the familiar noise in the background, and I read the news all day every day. I never slept and I lost focus till the war ended.

My colleagues and I went to protests in New York and Washington, DC, nearly every day. We shouted, we chanted, we cried, and we demanded an end to the war. The same thoughts came to my mind when I was going through "Operation Cast Lead": I want justice, I deserve freedom, I demand equality, I dream of peace.

I wanted to head back home to be with my family during this second and horrible war, but the Rafah border was closed and my family logically insisted that I stay in New York. But how can you think logically when your family is in danger and you are not there?

They assured me that the second war was less horrible than Cast Lead, but that didn't help. War is war, right? It is never fair or forgiving or less horrible or less damaging or merciful. It is blind and dangerous, and it claims too many lives and causes too many injuries and too much physical\mental damage.

As Palestinians, we are born into a struggle that we didn't choose. Fighting for our rights becomes a daily routine if not a lifestyle. Culture becomes a type of resistance, and resistance becomes an integration of culture. Surviving three wars, in different ways, makes me wonder if I will survive the fourth one. Or will I become just another statistic? We have dreams of peace. We demand justice and ask for basic human rights. We cling to hope and faith despite everything. We try to "stay human," like the late Vittorio Arrigoni used to say, even if all the odds are against us. Gaza is beautiful and will remain beautiful, no matter what.



The second war ended in a little more than a week. I came back home from New York after it was over and again the same naive thought came to my mind: Oh this will never happen again. Ever. Gaza – we – could never witness a third war. No way. No more war.

And then during Ramadan 2014, at the beginning of July, Israel proved me wrong yet again. A third and more vicious war was launched against Gaza. And even after five weeks, it is still not over. I am writing this during the second 72-hour ceasefire brokered by Egypt to allow talks to take place between Palestinians and Israelis. The ceasefire ends on Wednesday night, August 13. And the million-dollar question comes to everybody's mind: Will the war resume or is it over?



Nearly 2,000 people have died and 10,000 others have been injured, including hundreds of children. Pretty much everywhere has been bombed, including hundreds of houses and tens of mosques. Nowhere is safe. Never has been anyway. Nearly half a million Palestinians in Gaza are now displaced across Gaza, seeking refuge in schools, streets, churches, and every empty space they find.

It is beyond tragic and inhuman, distorting most definitions and beliefs that we have ever known or had faith in. Peace has started to mean war; targeting terrorism now means killing children; strategic targets means houses and mosques; and so on. How can we believe in peace again after living in danger and uncertainty during every second of our lives?

I didn't lose any family members or my house. And I am not married so I have no kids to lose, thankfully. But I have lost my humanity and big chunks of my soul. Oh, and most of my beliefs and my hope, my faith, and my dreams of peace. I guess we can never get all this back, can we? I don't think so.

Gaza was never normal, and life here was never normal, but I do want everything back. But how can you bring back the dead? And how can you bring back the health of those who have been injured and become disabled? How can you get the smell of roses back when all you smell now is blood, death, and intoxicating smoke? How can you get back all the children who have died? How can you get the beach to be untainted with the blood of children? How can you ever look at sunsets and dawns here without seeing smoke or bombings?

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." This maxim has always had a literal meaning for those who live in Palestine. Gaza will emerge stronger from the ashes, like a phoenix. We will emerge stronger. But what I know for sure is that we will never be the same after this war. Ever.

We will never give up on hope, peace, and/or our dreams of justice, freedom, and equality no matter what happens. Three wars and counting.

Omar Ghraieb is a Palestinian journalist/blogger and social media expert from Gaza. His blog can be found at <http://gazatimes.blogspot.com/>.



Photo by Shareef Sarhan.