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In the Penumbra of Death's Shadow

Winter Break in Gaza

By MAX AJL

I got to Gaza three weeks ago after being away for over five months, and almost nothing has changed. F-16s continue to unload their cargoes of heavy explosives on “suspected” military sites nearly every night, terrifying everyone in Gaza as we all wonder if this is the explosion which heralds Cast Lead II, while “suspected militants,” or any Palestinian male under the age of 80, are consistently shot down by the IDF for loitering within a couple hundred meters of the border, especially if a bit of debris kicked up by the wind scares a frazzled and homicidal IDF sniper.

The rolling blackouts thankfully hit Gaza in even more of a stutter than they used to. Some days the power remains on all day. The plastic greenhouses right on the side of the road from Rafah undulate a little in the wind, the garbage remains littered all over the side of the highway, the children in their school uniforms, constantly multiplying, cluster on the side of the road, peering into passing cars; and the 40 kilometers from the Rafah terminal to the restaurant in Gaza City port took over an hour on the over-crowded, under-maintained, under-funded, crumbling and shattered roadways. Meanwhile, Gaza isn't so much antediluvian—although it's that, too, with donkeys moving people up and down main streets, jostling for space with late-model Mercedes recently imported into Gaza—as outside time people wait to come into time.

The first thing I did when I got here was have a Turkish coffee in a café overlooking the Mediterranean. The calm was interrupted when the reports from gunshots started ricocheting off the water. When you're sitting that close, it's hard to distinguish between bombs falling far away and the echo of shots from the big guns the Israeli navy uses to harass fishermen. Then later people told me that the shots I was hearing weren't the fishermen—that evening, my friends walked into the apartment where I was staying with more far composure than I remember having when I saw AhmadSalem Dib, a 19-year old man from Gaza City, hemorrhaging after being shot by a dum-dum bullet in the femoral artery at a non-violent protest last April east of Gaza at the Nahal Oz crossing. That protest was against the Israeli-imposed “buffer zone,” a no-go swathe of land running along Gaza's borders with Israel, which robs the farmers here of 36 percent of their arable land. That shooting concluded with Ahmad dying from blood loss and shock after desperate emergency surgery at Gaza City's Al-Shifa Hospital, as surgeons tried to repair his shredded leg. This time, Israeli maintenance of the illegal “buffer zone” meant the murder of a 20-year-old shepherd, Salama Abu Hashish, apparently shot through the kidney from the back as he was herding his animals a couple hundred meters from the border.

Later, I went to Salama's tent in Beit Lehiya. The shepherd who had died was freshly married. His child had been born two days before. His father said, "I am open," indicating a line running along his sternum. The young man who had died had been his oldest son, leaving three brothers and two sisters. My friends working here, and the statistics, say that these murders, even more, the injuries, have been incessant since I left at the end of July. Incessant, and marked in the West by a thundering silence—the silence of a racism that roars at the death of a Jewish Israeli and does not even bother to shrug at the death of a Bedouin living with his sheep.

And what remains for his father? The stink of Beit Lehiya's open, fetid sewage pits glittering in Gaza's hot January sun, and a kilometer or two north of their home, the ghetto wall running along Gaza's northern frontier, with its watchtowers and their minders, one of whom put a hole in his son's back for being on the wrong part of his own land, a mistake for which his child will pay by never knowing his father. There will be no apology forthcoming for that murder.

The family probably won't bother with an impotent lawsuit in the racist Israeli court system, and that same obdurate racism ensures that Salama's murder will be reprised—already has been reprised—again and again in the coming days and weeks while Israeli snipers maintain Israel's "security" in a buffer zone already monitored by endless surveillance towers, drones, motion sensors, tanks, and automated machine guns, all of it a constant reminder to his parents that their child's murderer walks free somewhere north or east of that concrete wall while they while away their time fuming, anguished, asking us as we visit, rhetorically rather than desperately, "Where is our freedom?"

And all we can ever do is pathetically look at the ground and pretend we don't understand the Arabic and don't know the answer. We understand the Arabic, we understand the question, we know the answer, we know exactly where that freedom is—it's under an Israeli-American jackboot that's trying to grind that desire for freedom into nothingness, into human dust, while Obama and Netanyahu babble insanely about the Zionist need for security, a security that can only be secured by endless piles of Palestinian corpses, with resistance quieted and Ashkelon safe amidst the secure tranquility of the killing fields to its south.

Indeed, the next attack is on everyone's mind. They speculate: one university professor told me that it would probably be a set of "surgical" strikes, hitting government targets, compressed into a two or three day hell. "Any day now," he said. And, he asked, "who would notice, or care? It would pass like a quick storm and be gone from people's minds," before the Western journalists left their flats in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv to try to pass through the Erez Crossing, with the aftereffect of the government here being further embittered, the population traumatized by again seeing F-16s, missiles, and Apaches filling the air, white phosphorus glittering horribly in the sky.

A friend, 20 years old, tells me in response to my question of how she's been that they are simply "surviving." This is what life is like here, in the penumbra of death's shadow, with death tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after. What they wish is so plain and

regular that it's nearly breathtaking in its sheer normalcy, and what's sickening is the wrenching denial of that wish by a state that insists that it has the right to abuse another people merely for being.

What they want is for the Goldstone Report's findings to be taken seriously.

They want what everyone wants: decent, peaceful lives; they want to get the good jobs that the Gazan economy is structurally incapable of providing, they want their children to grow up unburdened by trauma and despair, they want to see their children get married and have grandchildren. They receive none of that. Instead, as a young shopkeeper living around the corner from my apartment mimes to me with his hands around his neck, they are choking, and when they lash out at their tormentors with an occasional Kassam, the Israeli-American air force unleashes a fresh round of hell on this child-filled ghetto, and to what end? A young guy, a little younger than me, cuts my hair, and told me last week that "we are the ones that die and nothing happens to Hamas." Meanwhile, the government here will never agree to reconciliation terms with the collaborators in Ramallah, and perhaps this is what the civilian managers in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv wish: a split, divided populace, unable to unite, unable to resist. And when, asks my landlord, will it end, and what is there to say but to impotently mutter, hopefully soon?

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