

AFTERMATH:

Gaza in the days after the 22 Day War

Musthak Ahmed and Fahad Ansari



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by Islamic Human Rights Commission

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COVER PHOTO:

BALUSHA: Local children play in the remains of the Imad Ekel Mosque, Jabaliya refugee camp. The mosque was struck at 1 am on 29 December 2008 collapsing on the neighbouring house killing 5 daughters belonging to the Balusha family.

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Introduction

In the days after the trauma that was the 22 day assault on Gaza at the end of 2008 and early 2009, two of the IHRC team visited Gaza. Like the many, many other NGO workers from various countries, part of their purpose was to take detailed testimony from the countless victims of aggression: those who lost family, homes and businesses, or were maimed and psychologically injured.

What follows is not those testimonies but the journals of both from their short trip. Summaries of some accounts are given for general readership. The majority of statements are to be used at a later date in pursuit of justice for the people of Gaza.

Accompanying this narrative are some of the photographs taken by the pair, which bear further witness to the devastation and destruction.

A few notes on style. Gaza and Ghazzah are used according to the authors' preference. Both are Muslim and as such part of their vocabulary and language reflects the expressions Muslims from different cultures use in their everyday experiences. Translations of each are provided along the way.

Some of the identities of the individuals who assisted the authors on their journey have been changed for their safety and protection.

As well as witnessing the aftermath of death and destruction, these accounts capture the generosity of spirit of the Gazans – many offering food, shelter and hospitality despite their lack of it and their poverty. A lesson to us all in many ways.

Please be aware that while this publication is for general readership, there are scenes described that may be traumatic and unsuitable for younger readers. They are distressing in the extreme even for older readers. At least our suffering comes only through the accounts in the text.

With more prayers for peace with justice.

Islamic Human Rights Commission

Musthak Ahmed

Day 1: A Police State

We arrived at the ageing Cairo airport approximately 11:30pm local time. I was immediately struck by the sheer presence of the military in what was meant to be a civilian airport. The soldiers were armed to the teeth, yet many seemed to have little constructive to do. They scurried around aimlessly, with some carrying tea for others.

After paying for our entry visas, we had an interesting tussle with immigration control. This was a taste of how our relationship with the Egyptian authorities would manifest for the rest of the trip.

I walked straight through without much trouble, although I was subjected to the infamous line of questioning from Arab immigration authorities, when faced with a British citizen who doesn't look like a Brit, or at least their perception of what a Brit would look like. His puzzled face would ask, 'Asl? (origin)'

My reply would ease his confusion, but I could not understand why he needed to ask, or curiously still make a note of it. This particular question was a regular fixture in our encounter at immigration control and military checkpoints.

I went first, and then watched as Fahad passed his passport through the small opening in the glass screen. The Immigration official glanced at the beardless picture in his passport, which was massacred by the Saudis during the Hajj, and then at Fahad. He was not convinced that they were the same person. After explaining that the picture was old, and attempting to replicate his signature, Fahad was allowed to pass, but not before being asked whether his beard was from the 'Sunnah'.

We were met by our contact, Shaban and his driver, Hanni. (The names of our contacts have been altered in order to protect their identities). No sooner had we reached our car, we were disturbed by the knocking of the Egyptian Secret Service or the Mukhabaraat. Hanni jumped out of the car and produced his ID. After a quick exchange of words in Egyptian colloquial, the agents parted. Shaban sat in the car, turned, and said with a smile, 'Welcome to Egypt'.

Shaban took us to a plush hotel off the Nile. He gave us an Egyptian phone and offered some advice before parting. Don't talk about Islamic politics, the Muslim Brotherhood, Mubarak or any related matters to anyone. He also advised us to clip our beards so that we would not be accused of being Islamists and be impeded in our mission.

All of this was quite a shock to the system. It's one thing to have second hand knowledge of these realities but quite another to live it.

Whole words from the Arabic language censored and the freedom to adopt a valid fiqhi position relating to the beard limited. Thankfully, Arabic has two plurals for the word brother or 'akhu' to choose from, namely ikhwaan and ikhwa. The latter would have to suffice.

My beard? I refused to clip it.

I went to bed annoyed, hoping to wake up to a different Egypt.

Day 2: A good day to be Irish

With Mubarak still in power, we woke early for breakfast, and were joined by the Qatar Basketball team.

After breakfast, we were met by Shaban and Hanni who took us directly to the Arab Medical Union (AMU) headquarters. The AMU amongst other things coordinates the safe passage of Arab Medics into Gaza, as well as maintaining effective lines of communication with the medical professionals in Gaza.

Following a short meeting, we were advised to attend our respective embassies and obtain a letter confirming that the dangers of entering Gaza had been explained to us. It was also agreed that a short letter would be drafted by the AMU stating that we are working with the AMU to facilitate relief for the Palestinian people.

I doubted (and even mocked) how useful this letter would actually be, but its importance was soon to become very clear. Had it not been for this letter, Gaza would have still remained a dream.

We made the short journey to the British Embassy, but left disappointed when I was told that they had received instructions from London not to issue any more of these letters. The Irish on the other hand, wasted no time in issuing Fahad with a letter. Not fair.

Shaban left us in the care of Hanni and returned to work. We purchased phone credits and exchanged money, before we set out for the journey to El-Arish, a border town near the Rafah Crossing. Hanni hired a tourist vehicle and a co-driver for the 6 hour journey.

We left with a cloud of uncertainty hanging over the mission. It seemed that Fahad would have little trouble in crossing the border. I, on the other hand would almost certainly be refused entry. The Egyptians are frightened to death by the prospect of westerners being hurt, kidnapped or even killed under their watch. It's for this reason that they insist on a letter from the respective embassies confirming that the risks and dangers in travelling to Gaza have been explained.

This meant that there was a very high likelihood that we would have to split up. However, our boss Massoud, the Chair of IHRC, instructed us not to split up, unless we are accompanied by trustworthy people on both sides of the border.

To further complicate matters, whilst en route, we were informed that the Israelis had targeted a resistance fighter in Khan Younis and bombed tunnels along the Egyptian border. These tunnels were used for transporting essential items into Gaza.

My mother found out. I got a text requesting that I do not enter Gaza. I couldn't deny my mother nor did I want to return home after coming so close. I told her that that without a letter from the embassy, I would probably be refused entry anyway.

I played out numerous scenarios in my head. What if we are both refused? What if only one of us is permitted? What if our contacts are not allowed in? Should we find alternative means of entry?

What if? What if? What if? The different permutations were many, and far too depressing to consider. Fahad and I decided to exert our utmost efforts to enter Gaza by any means necessary, and trust in Allah (swt), and be content with whatever He has decreed.

We passed many checkpoints on our way to El-Arish, these became more frequent the closer we got to the border. Hanni's wise decision to hire a tourist vehicle helped avoid scrutiny at the majority of these checkpoints. However, on the occasions we were stopped, the soldiers would ask Hanni our nationalities, and where we were going. We would then show them our passports. Hanni and his co-driver would have to give his personal details. He explained that this was for our own safety, because if the westerners went missing, the army would know who was driving us.

We arrived in El-Arish late on Wednesday evening and were greeted warmly by Dr Abid and Dr Eyad. We declined their kind offer of a meal, and were taken to our hotel. Before parting, Dr Abid worryingly reiterated the importance of obtaining the letters from the embassy. After explaining our predicament, he doubted that I would get through but suggested I try nonetheless. He was however kind enough to offer me support should I fail to cross the border.

After checking into our room we decided to wonder around the small town of El-Arish, and sample some of the local cuisine. We decided to purchase another Egyptian phone, just in case we were forced to separate.

We sat in a small restaurant, eating a delicious sheesh kebab whilst talking to the young owner about, yes you've guessed it, marriage.

Just as we were discussing how and when we should meet the Malaysian delegation we agreed to enter Gaza with, a group of Malays walked into the restaurant. We couldn't help but look at each other curiously. Fahad called our contact, and waited for their phone to ring. Surprisingly it did, and we met with Shaykh Azmi of Malaysia and his entourage of six, all of whom were representatives of various Malaysian Human Rights groups.

One such individual was brother Noor. Noor had a beard that nearly reached his waist!! And we worried about the length of our beards!

We discussed ways of cooperating and entering Gaza together. Fahad and I agreed to call Dr Abid and ask whether he could help Shaykh Azmi's group enter Gaza. Dr Abid agreed to send his colleagues to facilitate our entry at the Rafah crossing in the morning.

We returned to our hotel room and retired for the night.

Day 3: Al Quran 36:9

“And We have put a barrier before them, and a barrier behind of them, and We have covered them up, so they cannot see” (Surah Yaseen 36:9)

We made the short journey to the Rafah crossing earlier Thursday morning with Dr Eyad. We passed through the remaining checkpoints with ease.

The crossing was just as we expected, crowded, and armed to the teeth. There was a group of Egyptian MPs from the Islamic Trends Party trying to enter and show solidarity with the Palestinian people. This was their third day at the crossing. We were able to take a short interview with one of the brothers from the delegation before they left, having failed to cross the border yet again.



RAFAH CROSSING: Many Gazans expressed their disappointment with the Egyptian authorities at their refusal to open the border to allow in humanitarian aid.

We met the Malaysians, who had arrived earlier hoping to be let in before the rush began. Dr Eyad went to liaise with the guards on our behalf, and we waited a couple of hours before only Fahad and I were allowed into the next section. Unfortunately, the Malaysian contingent could not pass.

Dr Eyad informed us that I would not be allowed in unless the embassy faxed the letter, and worryingly still, the Mukhabaraat wanted to speak with Fahad. Why? We asked. Dr Eyad didn't have an answer for us.

We took the fax number of the crossing and called our colleague in London to send the letter to the authorities. We sat and waited nervously for a shady bloke to arrive and interrogate Fahad.

An hour passed and neither the embassy letter nor the Mukhabaraat arrived. Our colleague in London called the embassy who assured him the letter had been faxed. We double checked the number, and realised that we had given the wrong number! Our colleague called the embassy with the correct number and was told the man responsible was about to leave the office and the embassy would next open on Sunday, which is the day we are scheduled to leave! Our colleague pleaded with him until he agreed to resend the letter.

Throughout this entire nerve racking period, Fahad and I continuously recited the verse of the Quran mentioned above. This was the verse recited by the beloved Emissary of Allah (pbuh) when the Pagans of Arabia had decided to extinguish his radiant light and had surrounded his home. He (pbuh) threw dust into the air, recited the verse and walked through the crowd unnoticed.

Dr Eyad told us that the Egyptians wanted us to sign a statement declaring that we consent to entering Gaza and promise to leave by the 05 February 2009 i.e. in exactly 1 week. We signed the statement, and bid farewell to Dr Eyad before paying the exorbitant bus fare for the ridiculously short journey across the border.

Palestine.

Alhumdulilah (All praise belongs to Allah).

The Palestinian side of the crossing was beautiful, as were its people. The greenery and the cool breeze, coupled with our happiness in having made it this far, left us breathless.

We stood for a few minutes before being approached by a guard. I guess the sight of two foreign lads smiling like Cheshire cats turning down the solitary taxi sparked his interest. He asked if we were okay, and offered his assistance. This was in stark contrast to the attitude of those on the Egyptian side. We gave him the name of our contact in Gaza, who he recognised instantly, in fact he had his number saved on his mobile!

The brother took us towards the lounge and introduced us to the welcoming committee. We were greeted warmly by Dr 'Alaa and Ayman Abu Al Enien, who work for Government of Palestine. They are stationed at the crossing and welcome the various delegations upon arrival into Palestine.

I munched on sweet Palestinian dates as Dr 'Alaa addressed us about the current political and humanitarian situation in Palestine. He was kind enough to allow us to tape his words. Ayman, who is a final year English student at Gaza University kindly translated Dr 'Alaa's words.

We gave a brief outline of what we wished to achieve in Palestine. Dr 'Alaa suggested that we meet with Dr Awni Al Harbeid in Gaza City who would facilitate our mission, and ensure that we achieve as much as we can in the short time we have.

Dr 'Ala lead us in Salaat, before escorting us outside to a curious mode of transport; an Ambulance. He explained that the road leading out of the crossing was extremely close to the border with Israel, and many assassinations have been carried out using 'zannaana's' or drones. I guess the likelihood of this occurring on an ambulance was lower, although not completely eradicated.

We bundled our belongings into the back of the ambulance, and sat beside each other, smiling and laughing at the irony of the situation. My mother's greatest fear partially came to true; me in the back of an ambulance racing down the streets of Palestine, weaving through traffic with the sirens blaring.

I looked around the vehicle and noticed the sheer inadequacy of the equipment. The cupboards looked bare, and the technology outdated. The immediate need for medical aid and equipment was apparent. Many lives could have been saved by having greater numbers of better equipped ambulances.

The sun had just set as we pulled up at an unknown location in Gaza city. We were met by a quiet young man, who greeted us before escorting us into a tall building. We took the lift to the upper floors and met Brother Maruf, Dr Awni and Brother Hani, all of whom work for the government.

We discussed the aims and objectives of our mission, and they expressed happiness that Muslims abroad were making such efforts for the Palestinian people. Dr Awni offered to book us into a hotel, and arrange a meeting with a legal advisor who was working with the Government.

We drove the short distance to the Gaza International Hotel, where we checked in, and met Mr Nafiz in the lobby. Mr Nafiz introduced himself as the legal advisor to the Government's newly established committee for the investigation of Israeli war crimes. He was at the Hotel briefing a delegation of medical professionals, who were part of the organisation 'Physicians for Human Rights'.

Mr Nafiz was happy to arrange a last minute meeting with Abu Islam, the head of this committee. We were whisked away by another car to a building 10 minutes away where Mr Nafiz, Abu Islam, Fahad and I had a short meeting.

Fahad began by giving a short introduction of IHRC's work, and the aim of our journey to Gaza. Abu Islam then explained the purpose of this committee, namely to ensure that this round of Israeli aggression would be followed up by an organised and coordinated documentation for possible war crimes tribunals.

He explained that the Government felt the need to centralise and organise this work which was vital to ensure the overall strength of the case. This is because without proper coordination, evidence would become scattered and distributed amongst the various NGOs.

We explained that we had an extremely short time in Gaza before we had to leave. Abu Islam and Mr Nafiz agreed to draw up an agenda enabling us to achieve maximum results in one day. We would join the Physicians for Human Rights delegation for a guided tour of the major incidents tomorrow at 8:00am.

We returned to the Hotel and ordered dinner at the cafeteria. While waiting for the food, we had the opportunity to interview Brother Ibrahim Jouda. He was asked by Dr Awni to help us in our endeavour, as he had a good command of the English language. We asked him to describe to us his experiences of the war, and its impact on him and his family. Ibrahim survived the bombing of his work place, the interior ministry. Internal displacement due to the bombardment has meant that young Ibrahim shelters not only his own family, but many others. The pressure and anguish is apparent in his voice, face, and even his hair, which has turned grey in places.

We finished our meal, and fell asleep.

Day 4: the Aftermath

We woke early, far too early for breakfast, as I had somehow misread the time. Sorry Fahad.

However, whilst waiting for breakfast to be prepared, we started talking to Bilal, an employee at the hotel. He told us how the hotel had been struck by an Israeli naval ship, and the neighbouring building destroyed completely by an F-16. He offered to show us the destruction.

We couldn't understand how the Israelis got this one wrong. The Gaza International Hotel is a well known hotel, frequented often by foreigners, including international journalists. If the Israelis had not impeded the world press from entering the Strip, this hotel would have hosted most of the journalists. The Israelis certainly knew of its location.

We were taken to the room. It was a complete wreck. The shell exploded on contact with the exterior of the building and the main window. Thankfully no one was using that room at the time.

We looked out and saw the remains of the house levelled by an F-16 fighter jet. The employee told us that it was a dwelling, and that thankfully it was also empty at the time.

We went downstairs, and had our breakfast, before setting out with Mr Nafiz to North Gaza, Jabalia Camp. Jabalia camp is the largest refugee camp in the Strip and is densely populated. Whilst driving through the camp we noticed the sheer number of children and young people. It was obvious that should any bomb fall in a place such as this, the number of child casualties would be huge.

We visited the house of Dr Abu Alaysh, a Palestinian doctor who works in Israel. His home was shelled by the Israeli Army, who then prevented the Ambulances, who were a stone's throw away, from access to the dead and the injured. Dr Abu Alaysh lost 3 daughters Bisan (20), Mayar (15) and Aya (13), and a niece Nur (17).

All this occurred despite the Army having knowledge of the whereabouts of Dr Alaysh's home. Dr Alaysh's heart wrenching phone call live on Israeli TV (available on YouTube - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLUJ4fF2HN4>) was said to have single-handedly pricked the conscience of the Israeli populace who had for so long dehumanised the Palestinians.

As I stood recording the aftermath of the carnage, I caught glimpses of the young girls possessions scattered across the floor: the Qur'an, magazines, (obviously fictitious) novels about peace, toys and clothing. There was even some human matter splattered on the walls and ceilings. Abu Alaysh's brother showed us the shrapnel wounds he suffered in the attack.

We then visited the Balusha family. The family lived in a small flat which was directly beside the Imad Ekel masjid. The mosque was struck by a missile on 29 December 2009 at 1 am. It also destroyed the home of Anwar Khalil Balusha, where he lived with his wife and 9 children. Five of his daughters were killed as they slept. They were Tahrir (18), Ikram (14), Sammar (11), Samah (10), and Jawaher (4). The collapsed debris made it impossible for help to reach the injured amongst them. The trauma of having lost 5 of his daughters has exacerbated Anwar's mental health issues, and he was clearly distraught.

We entered the property through a very narrow opening. The structural integrity of what remained was highly questionable, and felt like it could collapse at any moment.

AFTERMATH: GAZA IN THE DAYS AFTER THE 22 DAY WAR



A Hamas flag flies defiantly over the remains of the Imad Ekel Mosque, Jabaliya refugee camp. The mosque was struck at 1 am on 29 December 2008 collapsing on the neighbouring house killing 5 daughters belonging to the Balusha family while they slept.



Anwar Khalil Balusha stands in the remains of his flat which collapsed under the weight of the Imad Ekel Mosque after an Israeli strike destroyed it.



A double missile strike on 9 January 2009 destroyed the three-storey home of UNRWA worker, Faiz Salha.



An Israeli F-16 strike killed Faiz Salha's wife and four children.



View from roof of destroyed home of Faiz Salha



Masjid al-Taqwa, Sheykh Radwan neighbourhood, North of Gaza City, bombed on 7 January 2009 at 9pm and re-bombed 4 hours later resulting in the killing of 4 Palestinian civilians

AFTERMATH: GAZA IN THE DAYS AFTER THE 22 DAY WAR

The imam delivered a fiery sermon, and after the prayers he encouraged donations from the congregation. The Palestinian people already suffering from the economic blockage gave as much as they could.

We travelled to the Al Zaytoun district where we met the Al Samouni family. The entire clan were seated outdoors under a huge banner with the picture of some of their dead.

This was one of the worst atrocities committed by the IDF during the war. The IDF told the Samouni family, a clan of farmers, to move into a building. A member of the family could speak fluent Hebrew and reached an understanding with the IDF. However days passed without food and water. Three of the men folk went to gather food, and were attacked by the IDF. They ran back to the building, only to be targeted there. The IDF mercilessly slew anyone in their sight including women waving white cloth and holding babies. Twenty nine members of the same family were killed.

We met with Khalid Hilmi Al Samouni, who lost his wife and 2 sons amongst others. He showed us pictures of his two dead sons: Mohammed and Mu'tasim billah. One had a bullet through his chest and the other through his temple.

I don't think I felt anything at the time. It hit me later.

I thought they had an understanding with the IDF, who were camped in the neighbouring building? How were women carrying white flags and babies deemed 'hostile' enough to shower with lead bullets?

Surely the IDF tried their utmost to distinguish between combatants and civilians? No. The reality was exposed by the graffiti left by those soldiers who were responsible, making it absolutely clear. These soldiers hated all Arabs. They had little concern for the norms of war, and knew that their disregard for the sanctity of human life would go unpunished by their Army.

We entered the building used by the IDF, and were immediately struck by the graffiti plastered everywhere. This included: Star of David, 'kill all Arabs', 'death to Arabs', 'brave Arabs will be underground', peace between Israelis only' and 'south Israel belongs to Israel'. Others would pen filthy slurs against Palestinian Women, around a solitary bullet hole in the wall, the hole being a reference to the vagina.

We also met a 13 year old girl who saw her family executed before her very eyes. We couldn't bring ourselves to question her further. Imagine the horrors that this girl will have to live with for the rest of her life.

The IDF were accused of using white phosphorus on the civilian population of Palestine, and we requested an opportunity to view some of the evidence. We were taken to Dr Kashif, the head of all the hospitals in Gaza. His home was struck by a phosphorus shell. It melted some of his furniture, and set his apartment on fire.

AFTERMATH: GAZA IN THE DAYS AFTER THE 22 DAY WAR



Home of Dr Kashif, director of general hospitals in Gaza, struck by white phosphorous shell.



The charred remains of a door inside the home of Dr Kashif.



Repair work is carried on on the interior walls of the flat struck by white phosphorous shells.



Dr Kashif fortunately had enough money to pay to have his house repaired. Most Palestinians do not have this luxury.

Dr Kashif escorted us to the home of a young boy who was burnt by the chemical weapon. The burns across his body were hideous, and his left leg, right shoulder, and left hand were particularly affected.

Just as we left the home, the light started to fade, and we decided to end the day's activities. We'd managed to do as much as we could in the short time we had. The carnage I'd witnessed was at best a reckless display of military aggression, or at worst, a calculated attempt to cow an imprisoned population into submission bordering on genocide.

We returned to the Gaza International hotel, and checked out. After saying goodbye to Dr Awni, we drove to Rafah using a car arranged by Ibrahim. In Rafah, we exchanged some further currency, had a quick meal, and went to the nearest mosque, where we arranged to meet Ayman and Abdullah. We prayed, and departed to Ayman's house where we would stay the night.

It was pitch black. I didn't know what to expect, as we pulled up in the Shabura Camp. Ayman escorted us through a narrow alley, and then he opened the door to his home. I looked around the humble abode, and noticed that it was just as cold as outdoors. The house was made from air bricks, and apart from some of the rooms, it was effectively outdoors.

Ayman took us upstairs, and (force) fed us tea and biscuits. He introduced us to his mother. A lovely lady, whose face would light up every time we managed to say a few coherent words in Arabic.

Whenever you have two or more single men in a room together, the conversation inevitably turns to marriage and more specifically my (mythical) search for what was now a Palestinian wife. Umm Ayman was so enthusiastic it was almost scary. She saw it as another way to ensure that we return to Palestine in the future. When prompted about her unmarried son, Ayman, she stated that she would prefer a non Palestinian. A change from the norm she explained.

We were treated to a humble dinner consisting of bread, hummus, falafel, and various cheeses and creams.

We spent the rest of the evening listening to the talkative Ayman, so much so that he was labelled 'chatterbox'. Not our finest contribution to the English literary development in Palestine.

Abdullah was far quieter, but fascinating nonetheless. He was a police officer and the sporadic crackling of his radio would distract him now and again. Abdullah, despite not knowing English, would be eerily aware of everything that was being said in English. He knew exactly when Ayman is poking fun at him, and responds with timing and delivery that would make a comedian proud.

Abdullah would 'blue-tooth' his Nasheed and Quranic recitation collection to my phone, while coaxing me into trying some of the Arabic I learnt in the UK. Unlike Fahad, who, mashAllah, was able to converse in Arabic, I, due to my one dimensional experience of Arabic, struggled.

I was reminded of what my Arabic teacher used to say about the relationship between grammar and vocabulary. 'Arabic without grammar is like skin without a skeletal structure; it cannot stand. Whereas Arabic with grammar but without vocabulary is like a skeleton without skin; it's ugly'

Ayman told us of his ambitions to learn and develop his English in the UK. Although his command of the language was very good, often using words such as 'hyperbole', he knew that the pronunciation and usage of some of these words was incorrect. This was partly due to the educational standards in Palestine. Ayman would often, in great humour, 'curse' his professor for poorly pronouncing English words to his students. For example, youth was read as 'yourth'. Fahad and I would laugh, but ultimately knew the educational achievements in Gaza were amazing considering that the fact that it is effectively an open air prison.

Death and the Palestinian struggle for unity and freedom was never too far from our discussions. Ayman showed us a picture of his best friend. He looked very young. Ayman told us that he was killed by Fatah members during the infighting. He explained that the Shabura camp is dominated by Fatah supporters. He put the figure at 60%. Many Palestinians were killed following Fatah's failed coup in Gaza. The tension on the street is thinly veiled, as Fahad and I were to discover the following day.

It was late. I was so tired I could hardly keep my eyes open. Ayman and Abdullah set up the bedding and I fell asleep as soon as my head went down.

Day 5: Farewell Gaza

We woke for dawn prayers. It was tough. It was freezing cold, and there was no hot water to make ablution with. I wondered how Ayman, and his fellow Palestinians in refugee camps do this everyday.

We prayed and returned to bed, to sleep for a couple more hours.

We woke to the lovely breakfast, which we enjoyed over conversation and song. Ayman would randomly burst out into song, and agreed to do so on the Dictaphone.

We packed our belongings in anticipation of arriving at the crossing no later than 3pm as advised by Dr Awni. If we were to delay any further we would risk being 'locked' in by the Egyptians, and miss our flight.

We left our belongings in Ayman's house, and went on a guided tour of the Shabura camp. The Shabura camp is the second largest camp in the Strip, second only to Jabalia.

We were keenly observed by the Palestinians as we were escorted though the camp. None more so than those affiliated with Fatah, and a group of them beckoned us to talk with them. We didn't have the time, nor did we feel it appropriate and turned them down. Another group attempted to intimidate Ayman, by playing Fatah's musical anthems as we walked by. The inter-factional tension was only thinly veiled.

Ayman first took us to the Abrar mosque. The mosque looked intact from a distance, but upon closer inspection, it was clear that the mosque had been completely destroyed. The missile entered from an angle and although the structure remained upright, everything inside the mosque was completely destroyed. Six people had been injured.



Masjid al-Abrar, Rafah targetted by Israeli warplanes twice on 29 December 2008 and 15 January 2009.



The remains of the destroyed Masjid al-Abrar, Rafah.

We wanted to speak to someone who was actually present at the time of the explosion. Ayman helped us secure an interview with Dr Mohammed Salah, an optician, who is based opposite the mosque. He and his family were present at the time of the attack. His family were not at home at the time of the interview. They decided to live with relatives for a while in order to recover. Dr Salah's son was so scared at the time of the attack he became comatose. He has since recovered but still suffers from nightmares.

Dr Salah confirmed that there were no rockets stored in or fired from the mosque by the resistance. Dr Salah commented that the area surrounding the mosque was a heavily built up commercial sector, and it would not be possible to fire rockets. This begs the question, why would the Israelis bomb this and so many other places of worship? I'll leave that to your imagination.

We then visited a park, or at least what remained of it. Ayman explained that this park was one of the very few areas where families go to relax. It was now desolate. The swings and slides destroyed. The Israelis targeted a small building situated inside the park. I was reliably informed that they were targeting five Palestinian police officers. The officers survived as they left a couple of minutes before the strike took place. Our source told us that the people suspect 'collaborators' of tipping off the Israelis. 2 people died: A man, who was thrown several feet along with his motorcycle, and a woman, crushed by her collapsed apartment. Miraculously her young son was lifted from the rubble unhurt.

We were introduced to Muhammad al Athanna, a shopkeeper, and his 12 year old daughter. Muhammad's shop was opposite the park, and his daughter often frequented the park with her friends. We were then taken to the home of the Alida family, the relatives of the lady who died in the attack. They kindly showed us around their home, pointing out the damage to their home.



Fathi Kader holds up a picture of his son who he says has been missing since the outbreak of the war.

We realised that we were running late and needed to leave for the crossing. We hurried back towards Ayman's house to pick up our luggage. We stumbled across Fathi Kader, an elderly man, who wanted to tell us his story. He told us that his son was missing. They were separated by the war and he can no longer find him.

Our focus has always been on people killed and injured, but little media attention was given to the unknown numbers of people missing.

We returned to Ayman's house, and said goodbye to his mother. She was in tears. We offered some words of comfort and left for the crossing. At the crossing, we bid farewell to the generous and kind people of Palestine, and returned to Egypt.

The contrast in behaviour and attitude was stark, particularly with those who found themselves in positions of power. The Palestinian guards, warm and smiling, so much so that you wouldn't even notice the rifles strapped to their sides. Their Egyptian counterparts on the other hand were cold and harsh.

We left the crossing and took a cab to El-Arish. The cab was in a pitiful state, and kept breaking down in the Sinai desert, but we eventually met with Dr Abid and Hanni in a plush restaurant, and discussed our experience over a meal.

Hanni who had only just made the six hour journey from Cairo, kindly drove us back there. The conditions for driving were extremely poor. Hanni's headlights were very weak, and the Egyptian motorways are poorly lit. This coupled with Hanni's fatigue made the return journey very treacherous. After 6-7 hours, and many breaks in between, we arrived in Cairo and met with Shaban and his friend. After a short meal, and a quick debrief we fell asleep.

Day 6: Home

After 2 hours sleep, we woke to offer Fajr (dawn) prayers before leaving for the airport. We bid farewell to Hanni and Shaban, without whom none of this would have been possible.

Just as upon arrival, our departure was marred by another tussle with Immigration control. I passed without incident, but Fahad was taken aside and made to wait while half a dozen officers discussed whether his passport was lacking the correct visa stamp. It turned out to be a false alarm, but that didn't stop us from reciting the verse from Surah Yaseen!

The rest of the journey went without incident, alhumdulilah.

After a long tube journey, I got off the bus and walked the short distance to my house. As I approached my home, the reality of what I had just experienced dawned upon me. I looked around and saw roads, without pot holes, my house, intact, my family, alive and well, my body, complete and functioning.

The Palestinians may be deprived of this, but what of my Imaan¹, islam² and ihsaan³? This is what counts at the end of the day. The Palestinians I was honoured to meet, had this in abundance.

¹ Islamic belief

² (a) Peace through the submission to God, (b) The outward practices of Islam

³ (a) lit. Beautifying (b) the inward aspect of one's worship

Fahad Ansari

Day 1: 29 January 2009

Don't call me Brother

Arrived in Cairo around 11.30pm. Was very excited, just the thought of entering the Holy Land was making me giddy, even though it is uncertain whether we will get in or not, the mere notion of making that effort to get in will be worth it. But before any of that, we were given a stark reminder of the not so holy land we had just entered.

Immediately at immigration, I faced problems. Apart from refusing to accept I was Irish, flicking through my passport, the officer noticed my beaming beardless smile on my American visa from 2000 and became alarmed. He scanned the passport and began looking at my other visas. Continuously switching glances from my passport to me, it dawned on me that he didn't think it was the same person. He made me remove my glasses before asking me to repeatedly sign a blank piece of paper. He didn't believe my signature was the same so he asked me for another form of ID. I showed him my driving licence but this confused him even more. Finally, he stamped my visa after advising me to get a new passport. But one last question - 'is your beard from the sunnah?' This was to be the first of many times I would learn that open sign of practising Islam were frowned upon and punishable offences in Egypt.

While waiting for our luggage, we were warmly received by a gentleman who identified himself as the head of the airport welcoming team, who wished to assist us. We quickly assured him that we were fine and had someone ready to receive us. I wonder why he never approached white Westerners who looked more lost and out of place than us. Not so welcoming were the dozens of armed police who looked far too trigger-happy for my liking.

Our contact, Sha'ban, met us outside the airport with his driver, Hanni. Sha'ban, a member of the Ikhwan, was an interesting character. The long three minute shuttle journey to the car park taught me a lot about Egyptian society. He quickly explained the rules to us: 'Don't discuss Islam. Don't mention the word Muslim' 'Brother(s)', 'Brotherhood', 'Ikhwan', 'Ghazzah'. Trim your beards and don't befriend anyone. Don't tell anyone you are from the Brothers. But we're not. It didn't matter. Even praising someone as a good brother had a whole different connotation to it in this place.

The advice was not without justification, it seemed. Our discussion in the car park attracted the attention of the Mukhaabaraat who came over and questioned Hanni and Sha'ban for about 5 minutes.

We were driven to our hotel in Giza, near the River Nile. We passed by the citadel of Salahuddin Ayubi, the Masjid of Amr ibn al As (the first masjid ever built in Africa!) and dozens of other masajid. I thought of how this was the same land where the Bani Israil were so subjugated by Fir'aun and unable to speak out against him and it took a Mother like that of Musa (as) to have the immense tawakkul (trust) in Allah that she could throw her newborn into the massive Nile River. This triggered a series of events that saw Musa raised in the tyrant's palace and which eventually led to the death of Fir'aun and the liberation of the Bani Israil. What tawakkul would it take to overthrow the Pharaoh of today? And who was ready to do it?

Got to our hotel about 11 pm, too late to eat anything. Better to just go to bed and awaken for breakfast at 7.30 am and get an early start to the next day.

Day 2: Wednesday 28 January 2009

When Irish eyes are Smiling

Although an early start was eagerly planned, it was being very optimistic having slept about 2.30am. After dragging ourselves downstairs for breakfast, we were contacted by Sha'ban who said he would meet us in 20 minutes. Sha'ban is a very dear brother and very hospitable - he wanted us to come back a day early so he could show us the pyramids, and other tourist sites, despite our short time. We managed to persuade him that we needed as much time in Ghazzah as possible and insha'Allah we would come again to Egypt for all that.

We agreed to first visit the Arab Medical Union, a major organisation which provided medical assistance all around the Arab World and was heavily involved in assisting the wounded and injured in Ghazzah. The Chairman, Dr Sayyid Zananiri, agreed to meet us to provide us with statistical information. But after waiting about 20 minutes while he relaxed with some friends, Sha'ban decided we needed to go. Before leaving, he had the secretary, Umm Salahuddin, prepare an official letter from the AMU stating that we are working with the AMU, and various other instructions. Although we joked about it at the time, the letter was to prove invaluable.

Next stop: British Embassy- security here was not as tight as we had expected. The fact that I was allowed in without any questions after showing the Egyptian airport my Irish passport spoke volumes. As soon as we mentioned to the consular staff member that we wanted to go to Ghazzah, she knew what we wanted. Anyone wanting to cross into Ghazzah from Egypt needed a letter from their embassy stating that they were aware that the individual wanted to enter Ghazzah and had been warned of the dangers and that they took full personal responsibility for themselves. "We have got instructions from London not to issue any more such letters". "As of when?" "2-3 days ago." We later found out from Br Massoud (Chair of the Islamic Human Rights Commission) that this wasn't entirely true as two Islamic Relief workers had obtained such letters the day we landed in Cairo. Nevertheless, we weren't going to get it today.

We jumped back into the car and headed for the Irish embassy, optimistically thinking they might issue these letters for both of us, despite Musthak not being Irish. A far less busy embassy and simpler design, the staff were also more relaxed, friendly and laid back. I had bought a bag of Taytos with me as further proof of my Irishness but it wasn't needed. It took them about an hour but they provided me with the letter but refused to do so for Musthak, him being a Brit and all. The consul fulfilled his obligation by telling me "obviously its dangerous and all that and we advise you to reconsider going but hey, you're gonna go anyways." A great day to be Irish – how I thank Allah for sending my parents to Ireland when the rest of the Subcontinent was settling next door.

Escape from Cairo

Back in the car with Hanni, it was about 1 o'clock now. Needed to change some money and head to Rafah. Just a bit about our driver, Hanni - a great guy who took his job very seriously and as he said on numerous occasions, he would give his blood for us to ensure he delivered us to the border safely. Very funny guy who told us the Golden Rule to driving in Egypt is "Whatever is wrong is right": as long as we remembered this, we would be fine. Pearls of Wisdom which we learned were not just limited to driving when it came to life in Egypt.

We transferred to a tourist mini-van with Hanni and another driver. Hanni's car would come under suspicion at checkpoints and a tourist van would get far less hassle. Off we went on the 6 hour trek to the border town of El-Arish. We were both slightly nervous now that Musthak had been refused his letter. Sha'ban told us to try anyways but it was unlikely that they would allow Musthak to cross in such circumstances. I called Dr Abid from the AMU who was to meet us in El-Arish and facilitate our crossing - he was looking forward to meeting us. We began discussing options of what to do - could we split up or was it too dangerous, both for me in Gaza, for Musthak in Egypt? Brother Massoud had advised us never to be alone. If we were forced to split up, we should at least be with either the AMU or the Malaysian delegation who had initially contacted us and invited us to come. I spoke with Sheykh Azmy who told me they were at the Malaysian delegation who told me they were at the Malaysian embassy getting their letters and would depart Cairo at 5pm. If some of the Malaysians didn't get in, maybe Musthak could stay with them? Sha'ban wanted him to come back to Cairo but that would be dangerous on his own and anyways, we had a feeling he would just bring him to tourist sites out of his hospitality, but we had a mission and objectives to accomplish.

On the journey, and particularly as we neared our destination, the number of checkpoints increased. Everyone wanted to know who we were and why we were going to El-Arish. Pull over! Then began a series of questions for Hanni, his companion, calls were made to Dr Abid to confirm our identity and mission. After about 30 minutes, we were allowed to go on our way.

The journey was lengthy and tiring and by the time we got to El-Arish, we were told the crossing was closed so we would have to stay the night at El-Arish and leave the next morning. We were received very warmly by Dr Abid, Dr Abdul Sami, and Dr Eyad from the AMU. They checked us into a hotel in the middle of town called, the Sinai Stars, a very simple but comfortable room. All 3 doctors spoke good English and were very laid back, relaxed and friendly brothers masha'Allah. When we told them the Embassy refused to give Musthak a letter, they were very sceptical of the chances of him getting in. They told us they would bring us in tomorrow and we would cross with them. I mentioned the Malaysian delegation to him and he said he would do whatever he could to assist them.

Allah: The Best of Planners

Now, how on earth was I supposed to hook up with Azmy's crew before tomorrow? If they left at 5, they wouldn't arrive till around 11-12 and to be honest, I was so tired. I didn't think I'd be awake. Anyways, we went to get a bite to eat and to buy a phone for Musthak in the event that we were split up and he had to stay in Egypt. We ate in a small place called Aziz which was recommended to us by a dodgy mobile phone salesman whose phone we ultimately refused when he persistently asked us whether we were Muslimoon (in the political sense rather than religious). The manager came and began chatting to us. He told us not to worry and that he was a Muslim too and felt happy to see us. I instantly recalled

Sha'ban's advice not to trust or befriend anyone. We were 2 friends just here on holiday. But why El-Arish? I avoided the question somehow and carried on talking. Just as we were preparing to go, a crew of 7-8 Malaysians walked into the restaurant. Could this be Azmy? Surely not. I dialled his number and it rang. Once I saw one of the men pick up his phone, I approached him and gave him a hug. SubhanAllah, what a coincidence, what were the chances? Allahu Akbar!! We joined several tables together and began discussing a strategy for tomorrow. As careful as we had been hitherto, Azmy now broke the barriers by repeatedly mentioning aloud words such as Ghazzah, Hamas and Ismail Haniyeh. I had no idea what the manager must have thought of us but our cover was blown now.

Azmy showed me the Malay letter, a lot better than the Irish one. It requested the Egyptian authorities to facilitate their entry into Ghazzah. I called Dr Abid and had him speak to Azmy - he would try to help but as they did not have a letter like ours, it would be severely difficult.

Day 3: Thursday 29 January 2009

The Power of Dua

We are in Ghazzah, both of us, amazingly. We are staying at the Gaza International Hotel in Gaza City. I still cannot believe I am here, finally after yearning to visit the Holy Land for over 10 years.

Knowing the immense difficulty we would have crossing the border, we had decided to awaken in the middle of the night, pray qiyam and supplicate to the One who controls each and every thing. Although very exhausted, we realised the importance of qiyam last night and dragged ourselves from our beds. We recalled the famous verse from Surah Yasin - *And We have set a barrier before them and a barrier behind them and covered them from above, therefore they see nothing* (36:9) - the verse recited by the Prophet Muhammad (may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him) when he escaped from his persecutors before their very eyes and also used by Mujahideen all over the world to cross enemy checkpoints and guard posts. Both of us spent the next few hours reciting it whenever we could.

There was no time to shower or have breakfast and we were picked up in a taxi by Dr Eyad at 0930. Off we went to the Rafah crossing. As we crossed the Sinai desert, I reflected on how Musa and the Bani Israil wandered through this land in the wilderness for 40 years because of their disobedience. Their sins had prevented them from entering the Holy Land. I began making istighfar and repentance to Allah lest my sins led to the same result.

In the end it emerged that Dr Abid was not going to be accompanying us into Ghazzah. Neither was Dr Eyad - he would just try to get us in and then return to Cairo. So who would accompany us? You're on your own. Slight feelings of anxiety began entering my heart as I thought I would be alone going in not knowing what to do or who to contact on entry. I was also very concerned for Musthak to be alone, in the Sinai if he didn't get in. I asked whether Musthak could interview patients being treated in hospitals in Rafah and El-Arish but he said they were surrounded by guards who would not allow it: what could they do if he didn't get in? Would I stay or go alone? Brother Massoud advised us not to but we didn't want to sacrifice the mission. Let's keep reciting and see what happens.

When we got to Rafah, we saw dozens of aid trucks lined up outside. Azmy and his boys were there, not having any luck getting in. The only people going in or out were doctors, ambulances, medics and some Palestinians and even that took ages. We spent the next 3 hours standing outside the crossing watching

all the action - families exchanged handshakes and kisses across the gates, journalists and aid workers came out, a group of Ikhwaan MPs were refused entry but then a group of Jordanian engineers were allowed through. We used the time to practice our Arabic with 2 Egyptian children who wanted money from us.

The wait seemed to last forever when finally, Dr Eyad ran over to me clutching some papers and calling my name. He beckoned for me to follow him.

“They want to speak with you.”

“Who?” I queried.

“Intelligence” he said with a smile.

“Why?”

“No reason” (still smiling)

“Musthak aswell?”

“No, just you.”

The Egyptian secret service is one of the most brutal in the world and I had no desire to have a chin wag with them at any time, let alone now. Which of the visas in my passport was causing the problem, I wondered? Lebanon? - the US? Pakistan? Morocco? China? Dr Eyad assured me he would be present and told Musthak to come too. Well, at least I wasn't going alone.

We entered the gate, to the envy of the hundreds still waiting, and walked about 50 yards into an administration centre where our documents were being processed. More waiting. More nervousness this time – if something went wrong, we couldn't just jump in a cab. We were in their custody now, they controlled our movement. We sat waiting in agony, cracking jokes to lighten the atmosphere. Dr Eyad was running back and forth trying to sort out others' entry. “MUSTHAK AHMED”. He was summoned. They wanted to fax a copy of his passport to the British embassy in Cairo in order to obtain the non-liability letter. Fearful that we could just end up in a lot of bureaucratic red tape, we called Ahmed at IHRC in London and explained the situation to him. Ahmed began calling the embassy to ensure they would send over the letter to the border. I got a fax number and gave it to him. We waited anxiously watching the time tick by- 1230, 1240, 1250...every second seemed like an eternity. I called Ahmed again – we realised I had read the fax number out incorrectly to him. The Embassy in Cairo had not bothered to call him back or the border to check what the problem was. Ahmed would call them back. We kept silently reciting. 1.05 – phone rang. It was Ahmed. The fax had been sent but we were unbelievably fortunate. The embassy had closed when he called and was not reopening until Sunday. Ahmed had pleaded with the only remaining member of staff who was about to leave to send the fax before he left. Subhan'Allah, the qadr (decree) of Allah. We could not believe it.

Musthak went to sign the consent form the embassy had sent. The language used was revolting. Part of it read:

“In addition to the threat of violence and grave humanitarian situation, we believe that terrorist groups continue to maintain the capability and intent to kidnap foreigners.”

29th January 2009

The British Embassy in Cairo has been informed by the undersigned of their intention to travel to the Gaza strip.

We have strongly advised them to avoid all travel to the Gaza strip. It would be reckless to travel to Gaza at this time. In addition to the threat of violence and the grave humanitarian situation, we believe that terrorist groups continue to maintain the intent and capability to kidnap foreigners. If, despite this advice, individuals decide to travel to Gaza they do so at their own risk.

They should review their security arrangements and seek professional security advice on whether they are adequate. The level of consular assistance we can provide in the Gaza Strip is extremely limited.

We are providing the undersigned with a copy of our travel advice from 15th January.

Name MUSTHAK AHMED
UK passport no
Date of Birth 19/06/08
Date of Issue
Date of Expiry

Letter from British Embassy, Cairo warning us of the dangers of being kidnapped by terrorist groups in Gaza. The letter failed to mention the threat of being killed in an Israeli air strike, something statistically proven to be far more likely to happen.

Israel had slaughtered 1300 people, men, women and children over a period of 3 weeks, through the use of the most sophisticated weapons known in the industry. No foreigner had been kidnapped in Ghazzah since the BBC reporter Alan Johnston several years ago (who Hamas helped rescue). Surely, the threat of being killed by an Israeli missile warranted more words than the issue of kidnappings. The rhetoric in this letter reflected the disproportionate nature of official British policy with respect to the conflict, equating the oppressor with the oppressed. Despite the letter warning Musthak that he was on his own if things went sour, he signed without hesitation.

We still had to wait for about another hour before being told we could enter Ghazzah. Finally, Dr Eyad came running towards us smiling and giving us the good news that we would be going in. Allahu Akbar. I couldn't believe it. Dr Eyad said that when he told Dr Abid, he was shocked that we got in without the letter from the British embassy (apparently the fax route was completely unorthodox) and said Allah must really love Musthak because there was no way he should have got in. But if Allah, the Most Powerful and the One who controls each and every atom in the universe, wills for something to happen, nobody and nothing can stop it from happening.

We boarded a bus to bring us the 20 yards into Ghazzah (walking there is prohibited for some reason) and ventured in. We hopped off the bus once we had crossed the gates. We were here. As we walked alone into Ghazzah, just the two of us, not really knowing where to go and crossing the empty desert terrain towards the nearest building, I began hearing the theme music from The Great Escape playing in my ears. How on earth had we got through?

Enter the Holy Land: Ahlan wa Sahlan

From the very moment we were greeted by the Palestinian immigration official, I knew things were going to be okay. I immediately felt a sense of belonging, that this was my land, my home, my people. In stark contrast to the stern, suspicious looks of the Egyptian authorities, this heavily bearded man welcomed us with a beaming smile: *Ahlan wa Sahlan, haya ka Allah* (Literally, You are like my family so take it easy May Allah give you life). Words which were to be repeated to us by every single person we encountered in Ghazzah. He honoured our passports with the Palestinian Authority Rafah Border Control stamp and we were officially inside Ghazzah.

We came out and inhaled the sweetness of the air and took in the atmosphere. A plain-clothes police officer approached us and asked us whether we were ok and whether we wanted to take a cab or a bus to the city. We told him a friend was picking us up. Curiously, he asked who. When we gave the name of the contact Sha'aban had given us, he said he knew him. He called him on his mobile while we waited and then ushered us into a special reception area. We were seated on comfortable couches while fresh dates and water were placed before us. Ahlan wa Sahlan, Haya ka Allah. We were greeted by members of the official Delegations Welcoming Committee. With beaming smiles, they embraced us and told us how happy they were to see us. They repeatedly described the recent events in Ghazzah as genocide and slaughter on a scale the Palestinians had never before experienced in all the years of occupation and suffering.

When I informed them how the British public had carried out daily demonstrations outside the Israeli embassy, how celebrities were boycotting the BBC and how people had taken to boycotting companies which supported Israel, their faces lit up with happiness. They saluted the Resistance and the people of the world. They said that they had seen the images of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators on the streets of Britain and around the world marching in support of them which helped boost their steadfastness as they realised that they were not alone in their struggle. This got me thinking – I personally had become disillusioned with demonstrations, having been attending them after every massacre for almost a decade, but at that moment, the significance of those acts of solidarity was brought home to me. I vowed to myself never again to question the purpose of demonstrations – such a small act on our part but something which could have such an impact on those living under the terror of bombs constantly raining down upon them. But, they added, demonstrations were not enough – they also needed money and aid and the people to pressure their governments to bring about an end to the occupation through a political solution. I also informed them of the open letter against the Israeli aggression signed by 82 leading Jews in the UK and how Jewish rabbis had demonstrated against Israel, going as far as to burn their Israeli passports. I didn't think their smiles could have gotten any bigger but I was wrong – this shows that it is not a war with the Jews but with the Zionists, I was eagerly informed.

We were introduced to a field commander, Dr al-Batta, of the al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, who advised us not to believe the propaganda of the Western media. Hamas had killed over 50 Israeli soldiers and captured 3. The incident in which Israel admitted to having killed 4 of its own soldiers who had allegedly taken a Palestinian home over as a base was incorrect in that the 4 soldiers were not in a base but had been captured by Hamas and Israel was more willing to kill them than allow them to become four more Gilad Shalits.

After resting and praying, we were told we would be taken to Ghazzah City in the north now. Mode of transport – an ambulance. Apparently the safest way to travel in the area at the moment, although even these were targeted on occasion as we noticed on arrival at al-Shifa hospital later that evening.

By the time we got to Ghazzah City, it was getting dark so we wouldn't be able to do much recording that evening. We decided instead to try to hold some meetings with other NGOs or officials who could provide us with statistical information or assist us the following day. We first met with a representative from the Ministry of Information and then the head of the Delegations Welcoming Committee. They both wanted to know the remit of our work and about IHRC. They thought it would be a good idea for us to meet other lawyers with similar remits and members of the recently



Palestinian Red Crescent Society ambulance destroyed by Israeli strike.

established Committee for the Documentation and Investigation of War Crimes. This committee was formed in the wake of the Ghazzah massacres with the purpose of documenting evidence and testimonies with a view to creating a legal case against Israel in the future. It was assisting NGOs from around the world by facilitating their access to victims of the aggression.

We finally got to our hotel around 10pm. Ghazzah International Hotel is by the sea and frequented by Western journalists, doctors, lawyers and other experts. A simple hotel with only 40 rooms, there doesn't appear to be many people staying here right now. Simple rooms but very cold. Realising we had not eaten anything since about 4 o'clock the day before, we got some food in the restaurant. Our interpreter Ibrahim joined us and we took this testimony from him before going to bed. His story like so many alarmed us.

He told us of how Israeli troops had targeted everyone and everything during the offensive – nothing and nobody was spared; men, women, children, government buildings, schools, hospitals, factories – all were deemed legitimate targets. Even animals in the zoo were shot and killed during the ground offensive. But his attitude was one of resilience – he was of the opinion that Israel believed it could batter the Palestinians into submission and that the harder they hit them, the quicker they would surrender. But Ibrahim was defiant – he would fight until he was martyred and after him, a new generation would fight and this would continue until they were free.

I cannot believe I am in Ghazzah.

Day 4: Friday 30 January 2009

We awoke this morning around 4.30 so we could attend the Fajr prayer at the mosque nearby. A friend of the hotel receptionist who lives nearby had promised to meet us outside the hotel and bring us to the mosque. True to his word, he was waiting there at 4.45 and we walked in silence in the cold to the mosque. Peace and serenity filled the atmosphere inside. How different must it have been I wondered when bombs and missiles were raining down upon the worshippers within. In total, 41 mosques were completely destroyed by the Israelis and 53 partially destroyed. Some were attacked whilst people prayed inside. We were told that during the war, many people were terrified to venture out of their homes to pray in the mosque for fear of being killed.

After the prayer, we met a young man called Ahmed Asmar.

He told us of the “unprecedented atrocities in the history of humanity.” He told us story after story of how Palestinian civilians were specifically targeted in addition to even the animals in Gaza Zoo. He himself saw the animals that were killed at point blank range by Israeli soldiers. Ahmed told us of how IDF soldiers ordered civilians to evacuate their homes, only to execute them afterwards and then destroy their homes. He told us of how Israelis had occupied civilian homes and written anti-Arab graffiti and drawn pornographic pictures on the walls using sexually violent and racist language. Ahmed was adamant though that this was not a war between Muslims and Jews but between the Zionist occupiers and criminals and the oppressed Palestinians.

Ahmed told us that the Israelis wished for them to leave Ghazzah but that he would never leave. He thanked the British public for their numerous demonstrations but said that it was not enough – they were in dire need for direct support for the Resistance, for the people to rebuild their homes and for there to be a political solution to the conflict. Ahmed had little to say about the rulers of the Muslim and Arab world who he believed to be very weak and who could do little beyond using condemnatory rhetoric.

Finally, he called on people to boycott Israeli products in order to assist the Palestinians and to engage with the media and other people to raise awareness of the plight of the Ghazzans. As for the Resistance, he believed it was not only their right but their duty to continue to defend the Palestinians as long as Israel continued to occupy and oppress the people of Ghazzah.

Room 307

By the time we got back to the hotel, we decided against going back to sleep due to the little time we already had. We went downstairs to see if we could get some breakfast. There was nobody about except the night porter, Bilal, who told us breakfast began at 7 am. While we waited, we asked him about life during the war. He brought us out the back of the hotel and showed us the ruins of a neighbouring house destroyed by an Israeli F-16 attack. The hotel too had been hit – by a naval strike - and I then realised why it was so cold – all the windows had been shattered and had been replaced by plastic sheets, something I would see over and over during the course of the day. Bilal then asked us to come upstairs. He brought us to Room 307 which had been directly struck by a naval artillery shell.

Windows shattered, furniture smashed and bits of gravel and broken glass sprinkled all over the floor. Was any member of Hamas staying here? I asked. No, this is a hotel used by many Westerners and there was absolutely no justification for the attack.

After breakfast, we set off for North Ghazzah where the most intense and most severe bombardment had taken place.

Our first stop was the Jabaliyah refugee camp. As we drove through the camp, I could not help but notice the number of children present in the streets – running, playing, staring at us with curiosity – scores and scores of children in every street we drove through. Of course if any bomb was to fall in such an area, the number of child casualties would be huge. For Israel to arrogantly claim that Hamas fighters were hiding amongst civilians was to completely ignore the reality of life in Ghazzah, the most densely populated area in the world, where 1.5 million people, 800,000 of whom are children, are imprisoned in what is essentially a cage. Any deadly bombs fired from the skies will inevitably fail to discriminate between civilians and fighters.



The shattered remains of Room 30 in the Gaza International Hotel, devastated by an Israeli naval strike.

The Dream of Peace

We visited the destroyed home of Dr. Ezzeldeen Abuelaish, a Palestinian obstetrician who specialises in treating infertility and who trained and worked in Israel, and whose immense grief at the killings of his daughters was captured on live Israeli TV on 16 January 2009. Dr Abuelaish, who was also working as a correspondent for an Israeli TV channel during the invasion, phoned in and whilst crying and beseeching Allah, in fluent Hebrew he described his pain and suffering to the watching Israeli public. For the first time, there could be no media censorship and the emotions of a father whose children had just been murdered by an Israeli tank-shell. Not even the newscaster could contain his emotions as tears welled in his eyes. In those couple of strikes, Dr Abuelaish lost his three daughters Bisan (20), Mayar (15) and Aya (13), as well as his niece Nur (17). He had just left the bedroom with his young son on his shoulders when the missile struck the building; when he rushed back to what remained of the bedroom, he found the bodies of the girls, one without any legs. Across the road, literally a stone's throw away was an ambulance centre who were prevented by Israeli troops from coming to assist the victims.

The bedroom was littered with debris within which could still be found the usual items which would belong to any teenage girls – magazines, hair-brushes, teddy bears, clothes, copies of homework, copies scarred with dried blood. A sticker of a butterfly could still be seen stuck on a wall, surrounded by the damage caused by shrapnel. A book, *Hilm al-Salam* (literally, The Dream of Peace) ironically lay half-buried under the debris. The Abuelaish girls used to regularly take part in peace conferences and often spoke publicly of their desire for peace. When Israel later alleged that rockets had been fired from his building, Dr Abuelaish had responded, "All that was ever fired out of our house was love, hugs and acts of peace, nothing else, ever." Tragically, Dr Abuelaish's wife died in September 2008 of leukaemia leaving him as the sole carer of his two sons and six daughters.



Paper mache butterfly on the wall of children's bedroom in home of Dr Abuelaish.



Stuffed toy found in debris of children's bedroom in home of Dr Abuelaish.



The Dream of Peace - novel about peace in the Middle East which was being read by Mayar Abuelaish(15) who was killed by a tank shell which destroyed her bedroom.



Window of Dr Abuelaish's flat which was struck by tankfire. The strike on 16 January 2009 killed three of his daughters and his niece.

The Balusha Family

We next visited the Balusha family who used to live in a small flat next to the Imad Ekel masjid. The mosque was partially destroyed on 29 December 2009 at 1 am by an Israeli missile strike which also destroyed the humble home of Anwar Khalil Balusha, where he lived with his wife and 9 children. Three of the four walls of the house remain standing but look like they are about to collapse under the weight of one wing of the mosque. The floor is debris. The only way to access the house is through a very narrow alleyway from a neighbouring shop which was also destroyed.

The strike killed five of his daughters who were buried under the rubble of the falling mosque – Tahrir (17), Ikram (15), Sammar (11), Samah (10), and Jawaher (4). Their screams alerted neighbours who desperately tried to rescue them but in vain. For without proper equipment or machinery, they could only keep trying with their hands until the screams stopped. His wife and 2 other children were also critically injured in the strike.

Anwar told us how he was trying to arrange Tahrir's marriage but she continuously refused to because she wanted to complete her education and become a doctor. Anwar himself was now suffering from post

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and had lost his job. He was frustrated and didn't know where he was going to live now.

He cursed the Arab rulers as useless and incompetent. He was angry at the fact that despite all the media focus, no action was being taken against those responsible for the massacres. He urged the international community to establish a war crimes tribunal to prosecute the Israeli political and military leaders who had done this.

Last stop before juma'ah was the now destroyed home of Faiz Salha, an UNRWA worker, who lost six members of his family, including his wife and 4 children, Ziyaruddin (14), Rana (11), Bahauddin (4), and Ruhla (1) in an airstrike on 9 January 2009 at 3.30 pm. We saw the mark left by the warning missile. Unfortunately, the family didn't evacuate in time before the heavier artillery rained down upon them a whole two minutes later.

Generation Ghazzah

We stopped to pray juma'ah in Masjid al-Taqwa or what remained of it, in the Sheykh al-Radwan neighbourhood in North Ghazzah.



Children play amongst the remains of the destroyed Masjid al-Taqwa, Sheykh Radwan neighbourhood, North of Gaza City, bombed in 7 January 2009, killing 4 civilians.

Again struck by an Israeli missile. This strike however was symbolic in that it was against the mosque in which numerous Hamas leaders used to pray such as Sheykh Ahmed Yasin, Dr al-Rantissi and Dr Mousa Abu Marzouk. Now some children played in the rubble underneath the green Hamas flag which still flew defiantly from the minaret. Behind the mosque, a tent had been put up where the worshippers flocked to pray, refusing to submit to the Israeli F-16 demands that they pray elsewhere. The angry khutbah focussed on the resistance and the destruction of the mosques, with a call for locals to donate money to rebuild the mosque. There was also an announcement made for the congregation to attend a rally in support of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan who had walked out of an international summit due to comments by Shimon Peres. If only the Arab leaders had an ounce of the dignity of this man was the general sentiment there.

At the mosque, I found myself surrounded by dozens of children wanting to talk to me and about why I was in Ghazzah. Sincere in their curiosity and extremely warm in the manner they welcomed us, with beaming smiles, they proudly boasted about the Muqawwama and how they wished to join it and fight jihad for the sake of Allah in the future. These kids were phenomenal – for a people who had just been devastated by the most technologically advanced weapons on earth at the moment, who had lost their homes, their parents, brothers and sisters and all they held dear, they were remarkably positive. The victory is coming, they predicted and justice will prevail inshaAllah.

These children also had something else about them which I had not seen in any other children – they had a dignity and self-respect which refused to beg for sympathy or assistance. My sister-in-law had given me some bags of sweets to distribute amongst the children we met. After spending 20-30 minutes with this group of children, I reached into my pocket to offer them some sweets. They politely refused. Could I take their pictures. La!! Still smiling, they refused to allow me. They had pride, they had dignity. They did not want hand-outs. They did not want to be a spectacle for the world, no matter how sympathetic. They knew that the solution to their problem would not come from outside but from within Palestine. For only those who live through the ordeal will have the passion and energy to spend their lifetime resolving it. Nobody else would ever understand.

After convincing the kids that I could not attend the Erdogan demonstration or join the Muqawamma on this particular trip due to the limited time I had, I got in the taxi and we returned to Gaza City where our mission would continue. I will never forget the attitude of these children – neither Israel nor the world realise that their actions have only spawned a new generation of children who will insist on dying with dignity rather than living in humiliation.

The Samouni Family



A banner commemorating the 29 members of the al Samouni family killed by the Israeli troops during the ground offensive flies in what remains of the family farm. Roses represent the women and children killed by the IDF.

After lunch, we went to the Hay neighbourhood of Al Zaytoun district to the site of one of the most horrific atrocities of the Israeli ground invasion where 29 members of the same family were massacred by Israeli troops. When we arrived, scores of men sat sombrely in a circle with meat being grilled on a makeshift barbeque. The presence of death could still be sensed in the atmosphere. We were introduced to Khalid Hilmi Al Samouni whose wife Maha and baby Muhammad were among those killed in the massacre.



One of the homes of the al-Samouni family from which they were expelled by Israeli troops who used it as a base, leaving behind them bags of defecation, rubbish, and racist and murderous graffiti on the walls.

We heard how in this plot of farmland lived over 100 members of the Samouni family – grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousin – the entire extended family. On Sunday 4 January 2009, dozens of extended family members gathered for safety in the ground floor of Salah Samouni's home. A shell was fired into the top of the building starting a fire. Despite calling the ambulance and fire services, nobody came to rescue them. They could not – they were prevented from doing so by the Israeli forces. Soon a group of Israeli soldiers came to the front door. They accepted that they were all civilians but ordered the entire family of approximately 100 men, women and children, to move into the home of Wael Samouni a few metres away, they stayed there for the rest of the day with little food and water. The electricity had been cut off since the Israeli bombardment began on 29 December 2008. The morning after being moved, four of the men decided to leave the property to bring back water for the children who were thirsty. A shell was fired directly at them, killing two of the men instantly, and injuring the other two. The house was shelled a few more times, killing dozens. Many of the survivors tried to leave the house carrying white sheets and banners and carrying some of the bodies of those killed but the Israeli soldiers began shooting at them too.

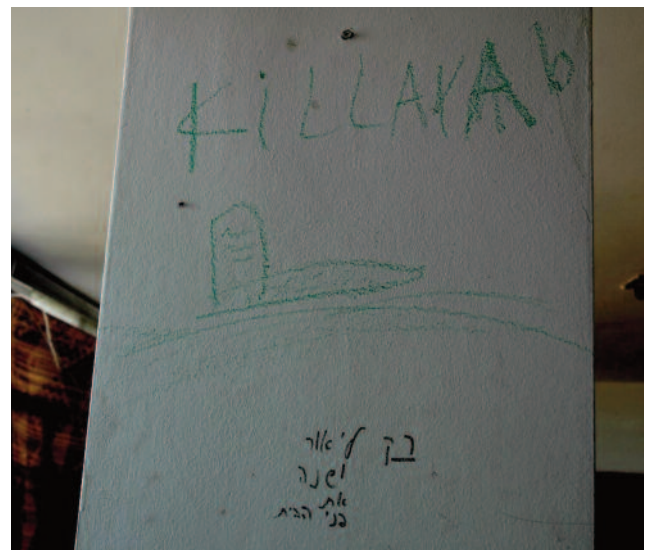
We heard how some members of the family were executed in cold blood, despite clearly being identified as civilians. We were shown some mobile phone video footage of the body of one man who had been executed. His feet were still bound together; the Israelis tied him up before shooting him. We were shown photographs of some of the toddlers who had been killed, not by shrapnel. Like little dolls, their tiny bodies looked completely normal except for single bullet holes through the heart in two cases and the head in the case of Khalid's son. Paramedics were refused access to the area for days as surviving children sat without food or water, surrounded by the bodies of their dead mothers and fathers. When they finally were allowed to enter the area, they found the children clinging to the corpses of their parents.

I was completely stunned by what I heard. The word genocide was reverberating in my head – how could we have allowed this to happen? Imagine the fear of those children, found clinging to the corpses of their parents who had just been mercilessly slaughtered in front of their own eyes. Imagine the terror that this family of farmers experienced at the hands of “the most disciplined army in the world”.

Zionism is Racism



Graffiti found in home of al-Samouni family after being occupied by Israeli soldiers.



Chilling graffiti drawn by Israeli soldiers on pillar inside a house belonging to the al-Samouni family. In total, 29 members of the family were killed by Israeli troops.

One particular telling piece of graffiti showed the origins of some of the soldiers – “I’m Russian!!!! Putin”. Tins of Israeli food and military body warmers were still lying around. As one man bitterly pointed out, while they tried to survive without food, water and electricity or any extra clothes, the Israeli soldiers came equipped with their own food and extra warm clothes. Others mentioned to us how copies of the Qu’ran had been found desecrated and how the soldiers had left bags of their defecation around the house, despite there being functioning toilets. What kind of beasts were we dealing with here?



Stolen Innocence

We were also introduced to a young girl of 13 who told us how she had seen members of her family executed in front of her very eyes.

I was numb. I wanted to ask so many more follow-up questions but looking into her dead traumatised eyes, no words would come out of my mouth. This was barbarism of the worst kind. This poor girl, what horrors must she relive every second of her life? What crime was she guilty of that she had to experience such terror? We gave our condolences and left in silence.

Stolen Innocence: A 13 year old member of the al-Samouni family who saw members of her family executed in front of her



Chemical Warfare

In silence, we were driven to the home of Dr Kashif, the director of all the hospitals in Ghazzah. A relatively well off resident of Ghazzah, his top floor apartment was struck by white phosphorous, a chemical which we had heard a lot about. We could see the exact point at which the missile had struck the roof and the route of the fire damage could be tracked across the ceiling. Inside was as if the walls and ceiling had been painted black. Darkness inside while two workers attempted to repair the walls. We were shown the remains of a mattress from the apartment below in which an enormous crater had been formed as a result of the phosphorous.



Mattress belonging to the owner of the flat below that of Dr Kashif. Damaged by the white phosphorous strike.

Dr Kashif then took us to the home of a patient he knew had been a direct victim of a white phosphorous attack from an Israeli drone. His injuries were horrific – his hand, his leg and shoulder all bearing the yellow scars of the attack.



Injuries to leg sustained by victim of white phosphorous strike.



Injuries to arm sustained by victim of white phosphorous strike

Home Sweet Home

By the time we left his home, it had gotten dark. We returned to the hotel to collect our bags before taking a taxi south to the Shabura refugee camp in Rafah where we met our host for the night, Ayman, an English language student who insisted that we stay at his home that night in the refugee camp.

The first thing we noticed on entering his home was the intense cold, just plain concrete walls which if seen in London, one would presume the building was still under construction. No doorbell, just a system of hollering through the window if you wanted to see anyone. Here Ayman lived alone with his elderly mother, who continuously worried about his safety. The homes here were in better condition than those in North Ghazzah in that they had water (albeit freezing) and electricity. Nevertheless, they possessed very little in terms of food and material possessions, just a few blankets to stay warm.

Yet, they put out their best food for us, as their guests. In one large tray, they served us small plates of hummus, olives, cheese, dates and some processed chicken, which I suspected had been bought specially for us. Like the sahaabah⁴ used to do, they nibbled at their food in order to ensure we ate our fill. They treated us with the warmth and kindness reserved for close family. After dinner, some of Ayman's friends came over and we talked into the early hours of the night about life in the refugee camp, the recent Israeli aggression and the future for the Palestinian people. That night, we slept on the cold floor with our hosts, warmed by their incredible hospitality. Despite the dangers we had been warned about, this truly felt like home.

⁴ The Sahaabah is the collective word used to describe the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)

Day 5: Saturday 31 January 2009

IDF: Islamophobic Death Forces

After breakfast, we thanked and greeted Umm Ayman, who had tears in her eyes as we left, and set out to gather as much evidence as we could in the little time remaining. We were told that we needed to be at the Rafah crossing by 3pm latest.

We first visited the site of the Abrar mosque which was struck by an Israeli F-16 missile strike on 15 January 2009. Again, the purpose of striking a huge mosque in the middle of the commercial centre of the town was not clear. Was this just another case of institutional Islamophobia and racism within the Israeli army?



The interior of Masjid al-Abrar, Rafah, destroyed in 2 Israeli strikes on 29 December 2008 and 15 January 2009.



The interior of Masjid al-Abrar, Rafah. In total, 94 mosques were destroyed by Israeli forces in the three week aggression.

We met an optician, Dr Muhammad Salah, who lives across the road from the mosque and has lived here for over 20 years. He had witnessed the growth of this mosque over time from a small tent to the magnificent building it was before the strike. His little son witnessed the strike itself which destroyed the mosque and was in a complete state of shock and fear for days afterward.

We began reflecting on what he had said. We often take mosques for granted which are built in the Muslim and Arab world, almost as if they magically appeared overnight. We know the various difficulties in building a mosque in the West, from getting the planning permission, to raising funds, and developing and expanding it over time. Yet, we assume that these difficulties do not exist in the construction of mosques in the Muslim world. While this may be true for certain places like Saudi Arabia and Iran where the government has the funds to build grandiose mosques, for the people in Ghazzah, their mosques are grassroots. They fundraise, put money together and slowly build up their mosques over time. So just as angry and upset as we in the West get when a racist throw a brick through our mosque window, imagine the fury we would have if an RAF pilot struck it with an F-16 missile completely destroying it.

Playground of Terror

We set forth for al-Najm, a family park and museum, where we were told families and children would come to play and get together every Friday. But that was before the invasion. Now the museum had been devastated by an aerial bomb which struck at 11.30pm on 31 December 2008 and nothing remained of the children's playground except the steel frames of the swings. Slides, roundabouts, all had been obliterated. Dozens of little children now wandered around aimlessly, not knowing how to entertain themselves. Some dabbled their fingers in the dirt, others quietly whispered to each other, others just sat in silence. Locals told us how the bombs had fallen during the night killing a passing motorcyclist and a woman who lived in an apartment adjacent to the museum.

We were introduced to Ibrahim Muhammad al Athanna, a shopkeeper who worked directly across the road from the playground. He had just closed his shop and gone to his flat above the shop where he lives with his 6 children. He had just entered his home when he heard a huge explosion which shook the neighbourhood, killing a motorcyclist and a woman in her home. Thankfully, neither Ibrahim nor his family were hurt. But Ibrahim was most angry at the fact that the bombs fell without any prior warning from the Israeli forces. He bitterly commented while the West was celebrating New Year's Eve, they were fearing for their lives. Ibrahim was adamant that there were no rockets or weaponry or anything of the sort in this area – this was an open public place which was not even strategically useful for such a purpose.

Ibrahim did not feel that Western governments could assist them because of their blind love for Israel and their untainted support for them, even during this recent conflict. How on earth could they help the Palestinians while they simultaneously provided Israel with the weapons to kill the Palestinians? The only people who could help them were the Resistance who were defending them against this aggression.

We also met the local children who complained to us about how they had nowhere to play now and that Israel had done this to destroy whatever little happiness they could have. I thought about what we had been told about the bombing of the zoo and the shooting of its animals. It really did appear that the intention of the Israeli army was to obliterate anything which Palestinian society could look to and utilise as a temporary haven to escape from the hellish existence they were forced to endure.

A young 12-year old girl called Sundhus said there was little the children could do now as the roads were too dangerous and they had nowhere left to play now. She used to come to al-Najm playground three or four times a week to play with her friends. As well as playing on the swings and slides, Sundhus also revealed the more popular game of “Israeli soldiers and Palestinian resistance”, their own version of “Cops and Robbers”, providing an insight into the psychological effect this conflict was having on children, that not even the games they played could provide them with an escape from the occupation.

Now there was little for her and her friends to do because the roads were too busy but they would play there anyways, because they were children and they had to play.

Like all the children we met, Sundhus’ ambitions in life revolved around gaining a better deal for her people. She wished to become a journalist to expose the truth, that the Israelis were the ones killing the Palestinians and not the other way around.

Sundhus’ message to the children in the UK, particularly the Muslim children, was for them to show their solidarity with them and for the people of the world to defend them against this aggression. She wanted a peaceful solution which would allow her and her friends to play and to run. Her little face beamed with happiness when I told her of the children’s demonstration in support of Ghazzah in London and she called upon the children to come to Ghazzah to help them rebuild their homes.



Sundhus al-'Athanna told us how the al-Najm family park and museum were devastated by Israeli strikes leaving local children with little recreational activities.

I was struck by the political maturity of these young children – how they were fully aware of the historical injustice committed by the British over 90 years ago and how their aspirations revolved around bringing justice to their people. I remembered that I still had some bags of sweets with me and tried to distribute them. La!! That same sense of dignity. I quickly explained that it was a gift from the children in London and they accepted them with beaming smiles. The children in London, their counterparts, had thought of them. It was this which brought out these smiles, not the sweets.

Our final stop for the day was with the family of the lady who had been killed in her flat after the museum was bombed.

Realising the time and the fact that we had to be at the Rafah crossing by 3 pm, we rushed back to Ayman's home to collect our bags. On route, we bumped into a man called Fathi Kader who insisted on speaking with us to let us know that his son was missing since the war began. Kidnapped by Israeli soldiers, shot dead or buried under some rubble, nobody knew. How many more stories like Fathi's were there, I wondered as we hurried home?

Back to Reality

Apprehensive that we may not get out of Ghazzah in time and thereby miss our flight, we rushed back to get our bags. Ayman insisted we stay for lunch and looked offended when we said, we really had to run. I told him that if we weren't allowed through, we would be having breakfast, lunch and dinner with him indefinitely. This seemed to cheer him up. We said goodbye to his mother who again had tears in her eyes and grabbed a taxi to the crossing. We exchanged some gifts with Ayman and his friends – something beautiful about this land and these people is their selflessness and their embodiment of the saying of the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) to love for your brother what you love for yourself. Items they owned, whatever was in their pocket at the time, anything they could find – Qur'ans, pens, torches, books, scarves - they would give them away with such love. We got to the crossing on time, embraced our brothers like family members and boarded the bus to leave. That was it – we were leaving the Holy Land and returning to “civilisation”.

As heart-warming and welcoming Ghazzah had been, before we even arrived at the administration centre, we were treated to the coldness and hostility of Egypt. Two armed officers boarded the bus asking questions. We agreed that this was probably the scariest part of the trip as we were in no man's land. We had an exit visa from Ghazzah but no entry visa to Egypt. We were completely on our own – no Dr Eyad, no Sha'aban, no Ayman, nobody. But we had Allah and sufficient is He for us and the best One to put our trust in.

The Best of People

The remainder of our trip was pretty uneventful apart from some drama at the airport when the officials stopped me for about 15 minutes while they held a conference on whether the entry stamp I received on returning from Ghazzah was valid or not. Amazingly, they allowed Musthak through even though he had an identical stamp. After I explained that this was put there by their colleagues at the Rafah Crossing and that I was not going to pay an extra 15 dollars to get an additional entry stamp which would give me countless difficulties in the future no doubt, they let me pass through.

On the way home, I kept thinking about Ghazzah and its people. The Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said that Allah tests people in proportion to how much He loves them. The most tested people ever to walk the earth were the Prophets, showing how beloved they were to Allah. Today, at this moment in time, no people are being tested more than the people of Ghazzah – since they voted for Islam three years ago, they have been punished with economic sanctions, locked in a cage and experienced inhuman savagery at the hands of their oppressors. The entire world has betrayed them and yet they have remained firm on their religion and their beliefs. I close my eyes and see their radiant faces, their beaming smiles and I hear their sincere laughter. Their courage in the face of such oppression is inspirational. They will continue their struggle until victory or martyrdom. We shouldn't feel sorry for them, they will be successful in this life or the Hereafter. We need to feel sorry for ourselves, for the deep slumber from which we refuse to stir. Our luxurious lifestyle in the West has deadened our hearts and we can barely muster up the courage to attend a demonstration against the atrocities. Allah has promised the oppressed victory and it will come – the question we must all ask ourselves is not when this victory will come but what part we will have played in it.

I end with a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him):

“A Group of my Ummah will be apparent upon the Truth, Dominating their Enemies, and not being harmed by those who oppose them up until the decree of Allah passes by”. One Companion asked: *“Where would they be?”* The Messenger (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) replied:

“In Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) and its surrounding areas”

I truly believe that I have met those people.

In the days after the trauma that was the 22 day assault on Gaza at the end of 2008 and early 2009, two of the IHRC team visited Gaza. Like the many, many other NGO workers from various countries, part of their purpose was to take detailed testimony from the countless victims of aggression: those who lost families, homes and businesses, or were maimed and psychologically injured.

Gaza in the Days after the 22 Day War provides extracts from the journals of both men. Captured in this work is not only the devastation and destruction caused by the aggression, but also the determination, strength and resilience of the people of Gaza. Despite everything they have endured, they continue to seek justice and resist oppression. In adversity and poverty, they provide great hospitality and friendship to those who seek to understand and help. Above all they speak of justice not vengeance.

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