

27-04-2022

A spacetime called Gaza

Haunting Memoir of a Journey Outside the Besieged Strip

Omar Mousa
ترجمة: أنس الحوراني



An anxious shiver, a quickening of the heart. I always wondered what the people of Gaza feel when they leave it for the first time, and here I was experiencing that. Lost in thought, and fearful of every passing stranger, a young man sat next to me, clearly weeping. He told me he bid his parents farewell, not knowing when he'd ever see them again. He still doesn't know what he's going to do in Turkey, which - with the ease of entry and the sharp despair of reality - has become the sole destination for Gaza youths in recent years.

“What’s important is that we got out of that dead land,” he said, exhausted. He asked me where I was going. I told him my trip would be short, and that I’d come back soon. The young man pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows: “So you’re just going to get mucked on the way and then come back! Why?” His question was expected from a Gazan traveler. People who live in normal environments don’t shed tears at the prospect of traveling like this young man. You can always come back when you travel. Nothing should stop you; there won’t be armored vehicles at the crossings, detention rooms, humiliation or extortion.

We arrived at the Suez Canal ferryboat after about 12 hours on the road from the Rafah crossing. Once there, the passengers heaved sighs, and their fears now were dissipated. They couldn’t sleep on the road. Some of them thanked God for the “easy journey,” and others were grateful to the prayers of their mothers. The mini-van stopped a little before entering the highway, and I looked out the window. The horizon seemed terrifying, a vast expanse, lit only by packed sparks that attested to its own immensity, and the smallness and insignificance of the viewer. I felt feverish, my vision blurred, with shortness in my breath. I panicked, then wondered: What’s going on, am I dying? If one has a fainting spell, do they know they will wake up afterwards? For me, it felt like the end.

One of the passengers handed me a bottle of water. “Is this your first time traveling?” the Egyptian driver asked me, non-chalantly, as if what happened to me in his minivan was a common sight. I said yes and trembled. “Ah,” he said, “that’s alright, you must’ve taken a fright. That happens to every passenger from Gaza!” His words sounded reassuring, and I felt I regained control. I regulated my

breaths.

Fear of open spaces was something I never took into account, nor the fact that sometimes it can be difficult to manage your own reactions. But could I blame my eyes as I was crossing these vast distances, witnessing this huge expanse for the first time?

For 25 years, I had never sat in a car for more than one hour. The longest walk I could take in Gaza - a measly 360 square kilometers - would take no more than two hours, even when the streets are at their busiest.

When we arrived in Cairo, my Egyptian friend and I entered the first restaurant we saw. Our conversation was occasionally interrupted by the sound of planes taking off from Cairo Airport. I felt as if every plane that took off was tugging at me, I reacted in astonishment to their mechanical roaring. My friend, noticing my distraction, protested: "Dude, is this the first time you see airplanes?" I answered jokingly, "A civilian one, yes! But I grew up with the military ones, they sounded different... They're vile!" My friend laughed: "Yeah, well, this is the first time I'm traveling too."

Despite the late hour, Abbas El Akkad Street in Nasr City was noisy. "Cairo never sleeps," my Egyptian friend remarked. "That's what they say to tourists," I thought, ecstatic and dressed up for the first time. My phone had died and I had to charge it as soon as I could so that I could reassure my family and friends. Hours have passed since our last conversation.

This is a duty any traveler from Gaza bears, which keeps their mind occupied throughout the journey. Your whole

family will be awaiting assurances and reassurances from you on the phone. “Yes, they called my name...” “We left the Palestinian terminal at the Rafah crossing...” “The Egyptians stamped my passport...” This last one alone would invite warm blessings, because now you won’t be disappointed like those denied entry at the crossing. It will also remind you of those worried about you. You suddenly receive texts from people you hardly remember: “Blessed travels, my friend!”

Such texts make me wonder: How did traveling in Gaza turn into something deserving of congratulation like a special ceremony? Throughout the 15 years of Israeli blockade on Gaza, travel has acquired a different meaning for its inhabitants, one that’s seared into their minds. It has become a subject shrouded in privacy, with every traveler keeping their journey secret until it’s undertaken. “Protect your candle so it stays lit,” says a common wisdom among the people of the Strip, who live with difficult circumstances, lack of opportunities, and fear of envy.

Not all travelers are able to keep their journeys secret. Their names are reported on local news sites, where such lists are published daily, and readers regularly check them with great curiosity to know who managed to leave. Some of them check for the names of their loved ones – such was the case of my aunt’s husband, who had found my name on the travel records before me, and called to educate me and offer instructions.

As soon as your name appears on the circulating statements, calls and messages will overwhelm you. Some are sad because you didn’t tell them about your travel, some worried about their standing with you, and some

curious as to the way you managed to leave. Others suffer a crack in their memory, posting on social media about a land from which friends disappear one after the other.

Then there are those who exercise great care with their customers before their departure – such is the owner of the barbershop I frequented. He called me while I was on my way to his shop, checking if I had betrayed him and already had a haircut. As soon as I sat on the his chair, he started describing the appropriate haircut for traveling. “You must forget your old hairstyle; your beard will be trimmed, more than usual. You don’t want to be kicked out at the crossing!”

Hours before departure, the instructions from my friends, my father, mother, and brother, grew in intensity. “Don’t get flustered before and throughout the interrogation... It’s just a conversation. Be honest!... Don’t act suspicious, talk comfortably and move calmly... Don’t be surprised at everything. And eat very little.”

“Leave the fork and knife, we’re the same people,” my Egyptian friend said as the waiter prepared the dinner table. How comforting, especially for an empty stomach like mine, after 500 kilometers and 12 hours of travel.

A decade and half ago, Palestinian travelers from Gaza could reach Egyptian territory without almost dying. They freely entered the Egyptian areas adjacent to the Gaza Strip, and from there were able to move fairly comfortably to their destinations. This was before Israel tightened its siege on the Strip, and before the new security arrangements in Egyptian Sinai, which resulted in a slew of new measures: new requirements for travel from Gaza,

identifying who is allowed to leave and who has bribe their way out, all the way to other border crossing requirements.

For Neruda

“He who becomes the slave of habit,
Who follows the same routes every day,
Who never changes pace,
Who does not risk and change the color of his clothes,
Who does not speak and does not experience,
Dies slowly.”

On a hot day last summer, I picked up my bags and went to the sea, a habit I hated winter for depriving me of. The sea was the only place in Gaza where a person can cross the land without difficulty. As I stood at the end of the road, a taxi stopped, and its driver looked out of the window. He honked and asked, “Where are you going in this prison?”

Had it not been for that regular hour of swimming in the sea, I would not have questioned the driver’s description of Gaza: it is an actual prison, yes, and the driver wasn’t the first to say that. But hearing it repeated, while seeking some reprieve, intensified its painful impact. What is prison? A space that’s fenced with barbed wire, and surrounded by high walls. Anyone who tries to break out of it is excluded by the hands that tamper with freedom. It is precisely Gaza.

In such moments, I recall the poem “Dies Slowly” by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. I think of this poem as my personal epitaph, and as a lamentation for my generation that was denied the freedom to leave Gaza Strip and travel abroad without coercion. Neruda’s lines always crossed my mind, and I vowed to tell Neruda at the end “I have left.”

Like most of my generation, I find myself stuck in the monotonous extent of Gaza; I do the same daily tasks, visit the same few places, and walk down the same streets. I have become a slave of habit. And when I grieved, I found no new places to walk, for all the places have become wearying and ordinary.

After more than 15 years of siege, the monotony of daily life has become one of the most harmful things to the people of Gaza. Monotony isn't routine, but rather coercion and domination: A naked life, lead an abstract biological existence. Such was the description the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben gave to concentration camps, and it is how the people of Gaza have been living since the beginning of the Israeli siege.

I remember what my friend said when he traveled out of Gaza for the first time: "All of a sudden, I felt like I could dream and plan my life. In Gaza, a dream that does not lead to imagining your own death is hard to come by."

An Unpredictable Step

My phone vibrated a lot every time I went out during my last trip, as though it was surprised with the steps I was taking. Usually, the number of steps I took each time I left the house in Gaza never exceeded 10 thousands, yet my phone would always celebrate me like a gym coach.

On my last trip, the steps I took every time I went out of my place exceeded 30 thousands. With every tremor in my pocket, I felt that the phone was experiencing a parallel shock to mine as I was discovering the outside world. I really wanted to take the phone out and exclaim: How come this world is hidden from Gaza, my friend? It's a really

big world.

It was not laziness that prevented me from taking this distance in Gaza, but rather its meaning. Every meter outside Gaza is a new place, with a different wavelength, different traditions, customs and dialects that Gazans are denied hearing. As I was walking, people from Yemen, Sudan, the Gulf, and almost every Arab country, would ask me for directions to some place! And whenever I replied that I don't know, I asked myself: Should I really have known?

Gazans always ask themselves, as they travel, about the meaning of life in the spacetime called Gaza and its meaning abroad. They wonder about the simplest things forbidden, such as hearing a strange dialect, and having the chance to give directions to a tourist.

Mixed Returns

In the training camp that brought us together, my Tunisian friend would strike a conversation with me every morning. With his agile accent that conveys a lot in so little, he would tell me about southern Tunisia and its customs. Others from Somalia would describe the beaches of Bosasso, or the habit of eating fresh fish with tea for breakfast. I have spoken with others from Upper Egypt and Aswan, all the way to Khartoum, Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, and Amman. What more would a Gazan guy wish for? To mix with all these dialects and stories so that some of them would stick in his memory, before returning to practice what is normal and ordinary – an exception in that faraway land, where friends and family await his arrival to hear from him about the wide world.

When I arrived in Gaza, right after congratulating me for the safe arrival, everyone kept asking me, “What brought you back to Gaza, man? How is the world outside?... Ah, the world! Where do we live! In a trench, right? Where have you been? Tell us, man!”

The most eloquent comment was what a friend said, quoting the smuggler in the Chilean writer Antonio Scarmita’s novel *The Victory Dance*: “Omar, ‘When a man flees, he never stops’!”

The funniest thing happened when I was summoned for interrogation. The visa on my passport was of a country whose name is frequently mentioned on the Internet, and it is suspicious of a Gazan to leave for that particular country. After the usual questions, the Palestinian investigator’s eyes twinkled: “Tell me, how is it? Like the pictures? The world is sweet outside?” Everyone has a burning desire to know the unreachable world.

Distances

I reached Gaza around midnight. My friend, who lives in Rafah in the south, suggested that I stay at his place to rest so I would return the next day to my home in the north. After a short hug, I answered jokingly, “The road won’t take more than 5 minutes, my man. You haven’t traveled and seen the world!”

A small laugh resounded. My friend replied, “Oh, so now you forgot when I would tell you to come visit me, and you’d ask me why do I live in Rafah? Now Rafah isn’t far away!”

Gazans are doubly prey to the trap of distance: First, when

they experience long distances and know what it feels to drive to an unknown destination, or to ride a plane that crosses countries. Second, when they return to Gaza, and the distances shrink before their eyes: a kilometer becomes a meter, the journey that once took an hour in the car now takes five minutes, and Gaza becomes even smaller and narrower.

After returning to Gaza and its routines, Google Maps sent me a monthly report of the places I had visited every time I left the house, a feature I despised. It kept reminding me that I've been hopscotching in the same closed circle: from home to the beach, passing through the same streets, then the supermarket or any other location.

The thought that every place I could go to in Gaza was a couple of meters away from me started to get on my nerves. And that monthly Google notification, a refreshing reminder perhaps for those who swim in the expansive seas of geography, became a dizzying reminder of powerlessness; a prompt for a relentless questioning of the self. If the sea is the only place Gazans go to for recreation, where do Gazans who live by the sea go when they are bored?

When I returned, I understood what "invisible handcuffs" meant. The occupation has manipulated distances in Gaza and turned it into punishment. A friend from Gaza was once asked by an Instagram follower after returning from Turkey: "Is it true that those who travel out of Gaza can never come back?" "Absolutely," my friend answered. "Because when they leave Gaza, they see the world outside, what it looks like, and what it the Gaza Strip deeply means."

This article was produced during the study period at **the Counter Academy for Arab Journalism**.

