

Bearing witness to Gaza as a place of life

Wednesday 19 March 2025, by [MHAWISH Mohammed R.](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2025).

A new book shows a side of the enclave rarely seen in news reports — its vibrant history, culture, and people — to insist that Gaza speak for itself.

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[“Daybreak in Gaza: Stories of Palestinian Lives and Culture,”](#) a collection of vignettes from a wide range of Palestinian voices, seeks to unearth and preserve the side of the enclave rarely seen in news reports. Published by Saqi Books in September 2024, with proceeds going to the NGO Medical Aid for Palestinians, the book offers a deeper view of life during the genocide: artists sketching between bombings, chefs recreating the flavors of home from exile, medics tending to the wounded while clinging to their dreams of a future beyond war, and journalists risking everything to tell their people’s story.

Woven together, these narratives reject the narrow labels of victimhood and survival so often imposed on Gaza from the outside. Through the personal reflections of its contributors, many of whom endured loss and displacement firsthand, the book reveals the collective spirit of a people determined to live, create, and remember.



From the cover of “Daybreak in Gaza.” (Courtesy)

For Mahmoud Muna, a Jerusalem-based Palestinian writer, publisher, bookseller, and one of the book’s editors, “Daybreak in Gaza” was more than a literary project. “I’ve never been there, but like many Palestinians, I’ve always carried Gaza with me,” he told +972. “Its stories shaped our collective consciousness.”

Growing up in Jerusalem, Muna recalled how Gaza generally felt distant, even within Palestinian discourse. “We often spoke about Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Nablus, but because we couldn’t physically access Gaza, it was somewhat pushed to the background,” he explained. Working on this book became a means to bridging that distance, and piecing together a deeper understanding of a place that holds immense cultural significance yet had always remained out of reach.

“My generation [of Palestinians], born in the 1980s, had very little interaction with Gazans,” Muna reflected. “The few [Gazans] I did encounter, I met abroad during my travels in Europe. This book

was a way to truly grasp the social fabric and cultural depth of this remarkable place.”



Mahmoud Muna (Sally Hayden)

Last month, [Israeli police raided the Educational Bookshop](#), Muna’s store in Jerusalem. They detained him and his nephew, Ahmad, overnight on suspicion of “disturbing public order,” and confiscated a series of books they claimed constituted “incitement.” The store has long been renowned for championing Palestinian literature and thought, and Israel’s raid — which it repeated earlier this week, this time detaining Muna’s brother, Imad — only underscored the very repression “Daybreak in Gaza” seeks to lay bare. Muna’s dedication to storytelling and resistance, however, has not wavered.

An urgent moral imperative

Like his co-editors, Muna described the exhaustion of immersing himself in stories of loss, survival, and resilience — which, especially as a Palestinian, demands extraordinary emotional and intellectual bandwidth. “There were moments when I had to step away for days at a time, to ensure I could engage with each story intimately without being overwhelmed,” he admitted.

Another difficulty in the editing process was “making sure the book isn’t just another collection of tragic stories.” While pain and loss are undeniable when tackling such a subject, “Gaza is so much more than that,” he noted. Without the poetry, music, humor, and resilience of its people, “the story of Gaza would be incomplete.”

Muna explained that a guiding principle in creating the book — rooted in Edward Said’s philosophy of reclaiming narratives — was that any person who has lived through the horrors of the past 17 months is more than qualified to tell their own story. “Writers write stories, [but they also] support fellow writers and amplify voices — and that’s exactly what we set out to do,” he said. “We wanted to ensure they were the ones narrating their own experiences.”

With no “Chicago Manual of Style on how to write the war diary of a genocide,” Muna remarked, and with only their moral compass and the urgency of the moment guiding them, he and his co-editors did not strive for literary perfection. “It’s about content: the raw, unfiltered stories themselves,” he explained, noting that many of the contributions were created in harrowing conditions, with people overwhelmed by grief and trauma. “If we had spent too much time second-guessing every decision — asking ourselves, ‘Am I doing this right?’ — nothing would ever be completed.”

Muna’s primary co-editor was Matthew Teller, a UK-based author and broadcaster with a long-standing focus on Palestine and the wider Middle East. For him, working on “Daybreak in Gaza” was a moral imperative. “Between October and December 2023, I was watching the news from the comfort and safety of my home in the UK,” he recounted. “What I saw was horrifying. I was out on the streets protesting, I was writing, I was speaking — but none of it felt like enough.”

Protesters at a march in support of Palestinians in London, November 25, 2023. (Jess Hurd)

What struck Teller most, however, was the silence from the very industry he belonged to. He had expected publishing houses, major media outlets, and literary figures to respond to the unfolding genocide with urgency. “I kept waiting for something, some movement, some honorable, moral response, but nothing came,” he said. “The voices speaking out were few and far between.”

The book was initially meant to be much shorter, he explained. “At first, I wasn’t sure whether we would be able to reach people inside Gaza at all, let alone whether they would trust us enough to share their experiences while under bombardment.” But as the process unfolded, and more and more firsthand testimonies from Gaza reached the editors, its scope expanded.

“We hoped that by the time it was published, the book would have become obsolete,” Teller continued. But with the genocide and suffering continuing, the book became an ongoing call to action. “The ambition was simply to act — not to keep the outrage inside or just post something on Instagram and move on, but to take deliberate, concrete action in the world.”

This sense of urgency was also reflected in the decision to first release the book in English. The team couldn’t afford to spend years refining and polishing the stories in the book, and translating it into multiple languages. “Our priority was to reach as wide a global audience as quickly as possible,” Teller explained.

‘What do Gazans think? Talk to them’

While working on the book, Teller took care to avoid moulding the testimonies to fit a particular narrative. “For me, as someone coming from the outside, not being Palestinian, and speaking from a place of safety, it was crucial not to frame this as anything more than what it is,” Teller said. “It does not attempt to explain or encompass the full horror of what has happened and continues to happen. It is simply an effort to shed light.”

The contributors, he continued, “were very clear that this should not be a funeral eulogy for Gaza.” With this in mind, the editors drew upon two key ideas from Palestinian literature: the poet Mahmoud Darwish’s belief that hope must be cultivated, nurtured, and allowed to grow, and Edward Said’s argument that hopelessness is a form of submission.

Palestinians eat their first large Ramadan iftar in Rafah, southern Gaza, amid the destruction and rubble caused by Israel’s genocidal war, March 1, 2025. (Doaa Albaz/Activestills)

For Palestinians, particularly those in Gaza, hope is not a luxury — it is a necessity for survival. And Teller noted that the team carried this message beyond the book itself, engaging directly with audiences across the UK and Europe to challenge the widespread sense of resignation that often defines international discourse on Palestine.

Perhaps most strikingly, the book refuses to frame Palestinians as either villains or superhuman symbols of resilience. “There is a prevailing narrative — particularly in the West and in Israel — that seeks to paint every Palestinian in Gaza as a terrorist,” Teller said. “But there is also another, equally dehumanizing narrative: the idea that Palestinians in Gaza are somehow superheroes, that they can endure anything, that their resilience is limitless.” The testimonies in “Daybreak in Gaza” push back against both extremes, asserting the simple but crucial truth that Palestinians are ordinary flesh and blood. Drop a bomb on us, and we will be killed.

The goal of the book, Teller concluded, wasn’t to “give a voice” to the people of Gaza. “They already have voices,” he asserted, “strong, urgent, and unwavering. They have been yelling, shouting, screaming for the world to listen. The problem is that we haven’t been paying attention.”

Muna echoed this sentiment, describing the book as a call for more voices to emerge and more stories to be told. “Many times, during our book tours, people have asked us, ‘What do Gazans think? What do they say?’” he explained. “Our response is simple: talk to them.”

For Juliette Touma, who has spent years working closely with Palestinian refugees across the region as director of communications for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), Gaza is not an abstraction; it is a place that has welcomed her with open arms. She remembers it not just as a warzone but as a vibrant community, full of bookstores, laughter, art, and incredible food. “Despite the suffocating 18-year blockade, Gaza’s people have continued to embrace life,” she told +972.

Touma — who, along with the London-based journalist Jayyab Abusafia from Gaza’s Jabalia refugee camp, supported Muna and Teller in compiling the vignettes — “Daybreak in Gaza” is an essential counter to the dehumanization of Gaza’s people, “many of whom are my close friends, colleagues, or acquaintances,” she said. “The level of dehumanization they have endured has been beyond shocking.”

Acknowledging the immense responsibility of this project, Touma explained that she views it as an act of bearing witness. “Our hope is that as many people as possible read this book, that they carry these stories forward, and that they continue talking about Gaza long after the headlines fade.” Beyond that, she hopes the book will inspire further action: films, documentaries, translations — anything to ensure these stories live on in multiple languages and across different media.

Ultimately, the stories in “Daybreak in Gaza” represent a refusal to let the reality of Gaza be dictated by those who seek to erase it. In a media landscape that has consistently failed Palestinians, it stands as a rare and urgent corrective gesture. And that, perhaps, is what makes this book so essential. It does not speak for Gaza; it insists that Gaza speak for itself.

Mohammed R. Mhawish

P.S.

- +972. March 13, 2025:
<https://www.972mag.com/gaza-journalists-october-year-on/>
- Mohammed R. Mhawish is a Palestinian journalist and writer from Gaza, currently living in exile. He is a contributor to the book “A Land With A People — Palestinians and Jews Confront Zionism” (Monthly Review Press Publication, 2021).
- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas’ murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel’s retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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