

Gaza Lions



By Amira Gabarin



The Israeli assault on Gaza in the summer of 2014 inflicted tremendous damage and destruction. It destroyed Gaza's infrastructure, it took over 2,000 lives and wreaked havoc on thousands of others. And it broke every Palestinian heart. Yet stories of Gaza and its brave and enduring people never fail to inspire. Gazans deliver moving, often jaw-dropping tales of humanity at its most beautiful, of strength at its most powerful, and they tell of incidents that time and time again prove to the world that "Palestinians teach us how to live." It comes as no surprise that even on the obscure theme of animals, the people of Gaza do not fail to teach us a lesson.

Following the latest attack on Gaza, Rafah – a city caught in the middle of the complex political interplay between Egypt, Israel, and Palestine, and overwhelmingly populated by refugees – felt the full brutal impact of the conflict. Here people have continuously been living in poverty.



Photo by Alieh Darwish.



Photo by Adel Al-Hana.

But the destruction not only affected the people of Rafah, it also had an effect on its animals. Rafah Zoo owner Mohammad Juma explained, "We have a large number of animals that need to be taken care of, and since all people live in dire economic circumstances, there is a lack of interest in leisure activities. In such a situation one sells anything one has in order to save the rest of the animals." The zoo, struggling to make ends meet, was saved by refugee Saad Aldeen Al-Jamal and his six children who adopted two baby lions, Alex and Mona.

Although the cubs were initially bought in order to try to relieve the economic burden of the Rafah Zoo, they have without doubt become a cherished part of the family. Al-Jamal explains,

"They're living inside the house just like the children. They eat and drink inside the house, and they have a bed on which they both sleep. They also play football." The cubs have brought joy to many around them, most importantly perhaps to the camp's children who, during the last decade, had to witness and endure several wars.

However, the Al-Jamal family is faced with the expensive costs of feeding two lion cubs who already consume half a kilo of meat per day. This is proving to be a struggle because prices have risen drastically since the 2014 war. Al-Jamal's plan is to lease the cubs to lunar parks, seaside resorts, and restaurants in an effort to relieve the financial burden caused by the lions. Moreover, although the cubs are a small safety risk for the family now, once they are fully grown, they could weigh more than 400 pounds and will obviously not be able to roam freely.

This story parallels another one, much sadder and darker. During the horrific



Photo by Adel Al-Hana.

times of the 2014 war, the whole world was able to see heart-wrenching footage from the only hospital in Gaza, Al-Shifa: The waiting room was filled with women who showed every painful emotion possible as they waited for news on their children, husbands, and other relatives – not knowing if they were alive, injured, or, in many cases, dead. Their suffering was etched on their faces. These women overheard a doctor speaking about a group of children who had lost everyone in their family and were now orphans. Immediately and simultaneously, several women jumped up and said “We will take them, these are our children.” They said these words sincerely and were ready to follow up on their promises with true actions

Photo by Atieh Darwish.



of love and compassion. We must remember that this happened at a time when everyone in Gaza had lost a loved one or at least an acquaintance to the assault and was under terrible emotional stress. In such a position, when people were waiting for news on whether their own children were alive or dead, who would have the love, kindness, and compassion to think of others? The people of Gaza.

This same spirit drove the Al-Jamal family to take in the lion cubs and look after them, even though they were neither financially nor logistically in a position to fully take on this burden. Whilst the fate of Mona and Alex may be still undecided, this incredible and unusual tale must teach us the importance of compassion and strength in its purest form.

While animal activists might complain about the treatment of these animals and consider it inappropriate, the sad truth in Gaza under siege is that we simply do not have other options.

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