



# Watching the Onslaught on Gaza from Facebook

By Rania Filfil, citizen from Gaza



The eventful 2014 is coming to an end. It has definitely been an unforgettable year. The year started with a heavy snowstorm in the West Bank that left large areas without electricity; and during the summer there was the World Cup Tournament alongside an aggressive Israeli offensive on Gaza. As though by coincidence, these simultaneous events brought back to memory the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 World Cup in Spain. It was a time when you did not need special receivers and a subscription to watch the World Tournament and when reporting from Lebanon was fastidious. Similar to the onslaught on Gaza, with its declared objective of dismantling the Palestinian resistance led by Hamas, the invasion of Lebanon was an attempt by Ariel Sharon, its mastermind, to disarm the PLO in a contiguous country and expel Palestinian refugees (preferably) toward Jordan. Back in 1982, there were no specialised news channels that had minute-by-minute coverage of the events. The Internet was a dream, and landlines were still a new technological revolution. In other words, unlike during the onslaught on Gaza, there was no social media or alternative journalism. Images had to be taken by professional cameramen risking their lives. Ironically the fate of the PLO in Lebanon was tied with Italy winning the World Cup.

Although Gaza is not far from the West Bank, the Israeli measures make it impossible to reach because of the permit system that denies most Palestinians the right to pass through Erez Checkpoint. The alternate road is also not guaranteed. It includes travelling to Amman, then to Egypt, and then trying to cross into Gaza via the Rafah crossing point between Egypt and Gaza. This is always subject to the whims of the Egyptian government.



Social media coverage of the Israeli onslaught against Gaza appeared like a horror film accompanied by the thought: "Once the film is over, things will go back to normal."

Here in the West Bank, totally disconnected from the field reality of Gaza, another movement was displayed on social media. Facebook was filled with sympathy, articles, photos, and prayers for the people of Gaza. Virtually everybody was supporting the resistance and steadfastness of the people of Gaza. One example is Farah Baker, the 16-year-old Gaza girl who became renowned for her extremely expressive Tweets and coverage of the onslaught. Articles and analyses were shared across the globe.<sup>1</sup> The articles reported the names of Palestinians killed in the aggression and details about their deaths, as well as the demolition of residential units and hospitals. Other articles spoke of the demolition of the Gaza power plant and sewer system. Some followed the international movement of solidarity with the Palestinian people, including the Israeli boycott announced by a number of Latin American countries. This was when I realised the power of social media. Some of my public posts invoked discussions and even accusations by some friends. Readers were totally absorbed, and their interest in the posts triggered a certain level of satisfaction in knowing that we were not alone in this crisis.

On the pages of non-Palestinian friends, I was engaged in one-to-one discussions about the right of the Palestinian people to an independent and free country. Chat groups were organised to support the people of Gaza. Alarmed by the atrocities, all voices cried out with sincerity, "But what can we do?"

What could we do other than write on Facebook?

It was also the opportune moment to promote the campaign to boycott Israeli products. People were even





A Palestinian looks at damages of a house in the Jabaliya Refugee Camp that was hit.

mobilised to visit various stores to raise awareness of the importance of abstaining from displaying any Israeli products. The Beitunia Municipality, for instance, granted supermarkets within its jurisdiction a discount on their licensing fees in exchange for destroying the Israeli products on their shelves and replacing them with national products.<sup>ii</sup>

And in the other part of the territory, during the short-lived windows when electricity was available, we received citizens' reports on their lives during the onslaught. On the walls of Facebook, my memories were being demolished one after the other: my old school, my friend's house, the marketplace, archaeological sites, and even children playing near the sea. It was like being in a horror movie accompanied by a wishful thought: "Once the film is over, things will go back to normal."

Questions ran through my head: If my friend is reporting about the killing of her in-laws, should I click "Like"? Should I share the story so that more people can read about it? Should I pick up the phone and express condolences? I called the neighbour, "Are you ok?" She replied: "We are still alive, and that's what counts." I realised that her

beautiful glass roof was a nice memory of the past. This was enough to bring me back to reality: the people I know who were hit. They are my friends and neighbours; I ate in their houses and played with their children. I needed to do something. What to do? How could we help? Obviously we could not fight but we had to do something tangible on top of the Facebook reporting. I thought I could make public posts or "invite" my friends to help the newly orphaned children deal with the consequences of the aggression, even though I couldn't stop it. Maybe we could go to visit the few injured who were lucky to be granted Israeli permits to receive treatment in the West Bank or Jerusalem. This feeling of "unworthiness" among the non-fighters led us to post photos on Facebook of ourselves with survivors coming from Gaza. It was personal. The pictures were saying, "I met this person; this man lost his family and is about to lose his life. But although the Israelis prevent access to Gaza, we can still come to visit them and express our support."

Over on the other side, planes were banned from landing at the Tel Aviv airport and instead were diverted to Amman. Reports of the losses in the

Israeli tourism sector were shared from one wall to another.

The irony is that this whole onslaught coincided with the FIFA World Cup, and support for Algeria, the only Arab team in the tournament, grew; a nationalistic sports fever spread so widely that every time Algeria won a game, it would be equated with winning a battle in the war. A passion for victory, any victory, marked this whole 51 days of onslaught and games.

Then came the holy month of Ramadan, and festivities were condemned but not banned. This spurred confusion: Can we still perform the same rituals? Invite friends and go to restaurants for an *iftar* meal? And for Eid al-Fitr, will we in the West Bank be able to buy new clothes for our children? Yes, of course we feel for the agony of the people in Gaza, but we cannot deprive our children of their feast! Then let's see how we can send new clothes and toys to children in Gaza. Tiny details and profile information and cover photos were changing by the minute to try to solve the dilemma. Ok, we perform the rituals, but our hearts are burdened with sadness and the desire to support our people in Gaza.

*"My friends on Facebook, pray that Allah will protect Hebron against Israeli settlers' violence, and safeguard Gaza against Israeli shelling, and let the PA employees receive their pay, and let Palestinian families be reunited ... and and and ... a million things that come to a single conclusion: END THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF PALESTINE."*  
(Facebook post by author, August 1, 2014)

And then, by miracle or human act, the shelling stopped and a ceasefire was reached with results far below expectations and promises of a billion-dollar reconstruction plan for Gaza. Some were filling their walls with posts stating the need to continue the resistance and, on the other side, walls were being filled with "Enough is enough," "Stop the killing." And

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In spite of heavy media coverage, for us here in the West Bank – with no access to Gaza – the aggression seemed to take place on another planet; yet our bond with the Gazan people brought it right into our homes. It became our cause.

various pages held debates on the ultimate benefit of reconstruction if a second, third, or fourth attack were to take place.

Afterwards came the accusations from Gaza that the West Bank was living a normal life while Gaza was being raided. Somebody somehow had to be blamed.

لضفة...

بأفراحنا مدعية...

لأبحر اننا منسية

*The West Bank is invited to our happy events, but does not console us in our grief.*

(Facebook post from Gaza, on September 1, 2014)

And then September came. Are we or are we not sending our children to school? Will it be considered a lack of solidarity with our people in Gaza if we do? The minister of education instructed schools to re-open and education to resume. The supporters agreed and said that education is also a form of resistance; and some screamed, "Have you no feeling for the children of Gaza who have seen some of their schools demolished and others that have been turned into shelters for over half a million forcibly displaced people?"

Such a sad reality.

*"Today in the West Bank, children have gone back to school. But in Gaza,*



*We, the undersigned, have in no way any connection with the so-called "Happy eid". May God be our witness. Naji Ali.*

*children are celebrating a new day of being alive although many have lost their homes, parents, schoolteachers, childhoods, and lives. They are breathing today, and this alone suffices in order to give thanks to Allah and pray. So the post-war damage is even worse than a major earthquake or any other act of God.*

*And we are supposed to believe that Israel is defending itself."*

(Facebook post by author, September 20, 2014)

Yes, the assault on the ground and on Facebook is over, but the reality is that it resulted in half a million displaced persons who have no shelter, and about 2,000 martyrs, including women and children. Some tens of thousands of new orphans surfaced, including infants. The reconstruction plan is not expected to benefit the most harmed.<sup>iii</sup>

Children in Gaza schools are studying under the rain in classrooms with no ceilings.

Recently the world and Facebook reporters were forced to shift to Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the

repetitive Israeli attempts to seize or at least "share" the holy mosque. Submerged by the accelerated events and still at distance since in the West Bank very few people can travel to Jerusalem, we need to act. Our voices must be heard and choices must be made: Some choose to continue to report on life in Gaza after the war; some specialise in Jerusalem; and others take a practical approach and encourage the campaign to boycott Israeli products.

(Interestingly, it only now that we have begun to learn about extremely good national products: dry goods, dairy products, cleaning materials, paper, plastics, cosmetics, and many other products. The page "*Sun'a bijawdah 'aliah fi filistin*," presents a selection of high-quality Palestinian products.<sup>iv</sup>)

*Rania Filfil is a professional freelance translator, with special interest in Gaza, her hometown. Although she works mainly in the legal and economic fields, her writings mostly take her back to the sea and that place to which she is still denied access.*

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.palestine-studies.org/resources/special-focus/special-focus-gaza-under-attack> and [http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha\\_opt\\_sitrep\\_25\\_08\\_2014.pdf](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_25_08_2014.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.alhadath.ps/article.php?id=29bf9by2736027Y29bf9b> and <http://www.bdsmovement.net/2014/freedom-and-justice-for-gaza-boycott-action-against-7-complicit-companies-12386>.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/10/gaza-plan-relieves-israel-responsibility-201410195737724711.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> "High-quality Palestinian-made products." The page was created by a group of activists on face book during the onslaught on Gaza. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ilfalasteeneyirba7/>