

“Poetry from Gaza”, Ayat Abu Shmeis, Jaffa-based poet, 7/9/2025

Introduction

Hello everyone. Welcome to “Eyes on Gaza,” our daily gathering which links together protest and learning. Among the reports and analyses that we hear here and everywhere about the unceasing attacks, the displacements, the starvation, and the erasure—in quotes or not in quotes—of Gaza, it is important for us to learn to know Gaza not only as an object of horrible violence, but also as a place of life. And not only as a place of minimal life, or of basic existence—which are of course also important—but as a place of education, of culture, of music, poetry, sport, and creativity. Gaza of life. In order to talk here about this life, as it was, and about the struggle to hold on to it, and to poetry even under the horrible violence, we are hosting today Ayat Abu Shmeis, a wonderful poet, Palestinian, resident of Jaffa, and an activist. First of all, thank you, Ayat, for agreeing to come today, really at the last moment. As usual, Ayat will speak for eight minutes and afterwards we’ll leave time for a short discussion. Anyone who wishes to ask a question is invited to write it in the chat and I will read it to Ayat after her remarks. Marhaba, Ayat.

Talk

Marhaba, shukran, thank you very much. We will start by watching a short video of a Palestinian poet from Gaza. But before that, a short introduction so I can present her. We will watch and hear the voice of Hiba Abu Nada, may God have mercy on her. She was a writer and a young poet, born in 1991. She studied biochemistry and nutrition at the Islamic University. In 2017 her novel won second place in a competition for Arabic creativity, a prize given by the United Arab Emirates. Unfortunately, Abu Nada was bombed in Khan Younis together with members of her family—meaning she is no longer with us. May God have mercy on her. We’ll now see a video edited by Maisam Haddad and hear Hiba’s voice. There are English subtitles; the poems themselves are in Arabic. Today I will read three poems, all with translation.

Hiba Abu Nada, Poem

*our loneliness,
they won their wars
and only you were left behind, naked, before this loneliness.
No poetry could ever bring it back, Darwish,
and what the lonely one has lost—
and what the lonely one has lost.
our loneliness, this is another age of ignorance;
damned be that which divided us, then stood united at your funeral.
our loneliness, the world’s a free market, and your great land is auctioned.
our loneliness, it’s a barbaric era; where none will stand for us.
our loneliness, wipe away your poems—old
and new—and your tears,
and remain steadfast, my beloved city.*

I will now share another poem by the poet Hind Jodeh. Hind began as a writer and as the presenter and editor of a radio program. She won a local prize for a short story she wrote, and afterward another prize called the Gold Prize, an Egyptian prize awarded to young creators at the beginning of their path. Later she began writing poetry. Her first poetry book came out about twelve years ago, and since then she has continued writing. During the current war she took part in a number of writing and translation projects. Very recently—about half a year ago—she published a bilingual

book in Arabic and French. Hind is among the few who managed to leave Gaza; she spent a period in Egypt and is there now. I'll share her poem so you can read a little and follow in English:

Hind Jodeh, Poem

*What does it mean to be a poet in times of war?
It means apologizing—extensively apologizing
to the burnt trees, to the nestless birds,
to the crushed homes, to the long cracks along the streets,
to the pale-faced children before and after death,
to the face of every sad or murdered mother.
What does it mean to be safe in times of war?
It means being ashamed... of your smile, of your warmth,
of your clean clothes; of your idle hours, your yawns, your cup of coffee;
of your restful sleep; of having loved ones alive;
of a full stomach; of available water; of clean water;
of being able to shower;
and for accidentally being alive. O God,
I don't want to be a poet in times of war.*

You can take a few seconds to contemplate this poem. It has been translated into several languages. It was written right at the beginning of the war—in the first half-year, more or less—and recently it was also included in the bilingual Arabic–French book.

And finally, I will read a poem by Hussam Ma'rouf. Before that, briefly about him: Hussam was born in 1981, a writer, poet, and journalist. He is married and a father to two children—a teenage boy and a teenage girl. He has published three books, two of them poetry. He won the Mahmoud Darwish Prize in 2015 for his book, titled *Death Smells Like Glass*, and received another prize from a Turkish organization encouraging culture. He writes articles about life in Gaza—previously and now—on issues of women, violence against women, childhood in Gaza, and the war. He continues his work as a journalist and editor even now, as much as possible.

It was important to Hussam, when I spoke with him—when my friend and I organized this event I'll mention in a moment—to say that this poem was **not** written in this war. It was written during the 2014 Gaza War, “Operation Protective Edge,” and he chose and sent it because he wanted us to know this is not a first war; it is a kind of ongoing reality in Gaza. So, the poem:

Hussam Ma'rouf, “Specific Details”

*In the time allotted for truce,
we manufacture spare hearts,
in case we lose the single heart each of us has.
We're uncertain of life's worth on the slipping edge,
yet it seems hope can't be shelled all at once.
The minute details of war—poison gas we can't thwart
from settling in our blood,
we can't even grab fear to toss it whole outside our flesh.
Dear God, anxiety's beat within us
is louder than a nearby shell; tell me,
how will you convince the world that the forest has no drums?
Specific details fix our feet in place while the house runs and runs,
leaving its stones behind, children's body parts—
fragments in memory.*

A bit less than a year ago my friend, Dr. Rachel Korazim—who also works in literature—and I held an event bringing the voices of Gaza’s poets—women and men—to us here. It was one of the hardest things I’ve done, and I’ve done quite a few challenging things. Life here is challenging in general, so nothing is simple. But this was especially, very, very challenging: the emotional closeness, the blood, the blood-ties—everything. Also as a human being, as a creator—the things we encountered. But *alhamdulillah*, thanks to God, in the end we managed to do it. It was a very big event, in Jaffa, at the Al-Saraya Theatre. Many attended; the hall was packed. Many Israelis and Palestinians came who wanted to hear these voices. Everyone who took part, of course, volunteered—including the theatre. It was an homage.