

Palestine: The Cost of Bearing Witness. Chris Hedges

There are scores of Palestinian writers and photographers, many of whom have been killed, who are determined to make us see the horror of this genocide. They will vanquish the lies of the killers.

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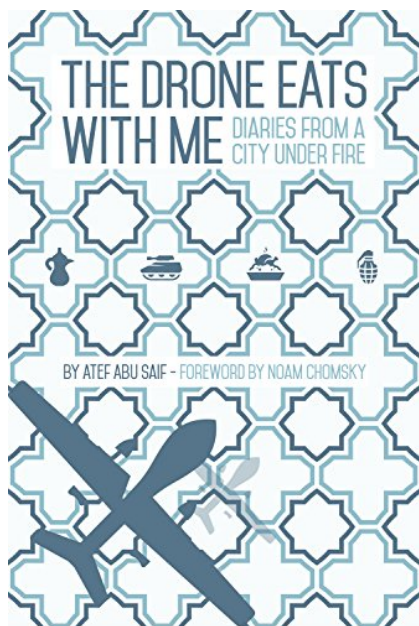
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Writing and photographing in wartime are acts of resistance, acts of faith. They affirm the belief that one day – a day the writers, journalists and photographers may never see – the words and images will evoke empathy, understanding, outrage and provide wisdom. They chronicle not only the facts, although facts are important, but the texture, sacredness and grief of lives and communities lost. They tell the world what war is like, how [those caught](#) in its maw of death endure, how there are those who sacrifice for others and those who do not, what fear and hunger are like, what death is like. They transmit the cries of children, the wails of grief of the mothers, the daily struggle in the face of savage industrial violence, the triumph of their humanity through filth, sickness, humiliation and fear. This is why writers, photographers and journalists are targeted by aggressors in war — including the Israelis — for obliteration. They stand as witnesses to evil, an evil the aggressors want buried and forgotten. They expose the lies. They condemn, even from the grave, their killers. Israel has killed at least 13 Palestinian [poets and writers](#) along with at least 67 [journalists and media workers](#) in Gaza, and three in Lebanon since Oct. 7.

I experienced futility and outrage when I covered war. I wondered if I had done enough, or if it was even worth the risk. But you go on because to do nothing is to be complicit. You report because you care. You will make it hard for the killers to deny their crimes.

This brings me to the Palestinian novelist and playwright Atef Abu Saif. He and his 15-year-old son Yasser, who live in the occupied West Bank, were visiting family in Gaza — where he was born — when Israel began its scorched earth campaign. Atef is no stranger to the violence of the Israeli occupiers. He was two months old during the 1973 war and [writes](#)

"I've been living through wars ever since. Just as life is a pause between two deaths, Palestine, as a place and as an idea, is a timeout in the middle of many wars."



During Operation Cast Lead, the 2008/2009 Israel assault on Gaza, Atef sheltered in the corridor of his Gaza family home for 22 nights with his wife, Hanna and two children, while Israel bombed and shelled. His [book](#) "The Drone Eats with Me: Diaries from a City Under Fire," is an account of Operation Protective Edge, the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza that [killed](#) 1,523 Palestinian civilians, including 519 children.

"Memories of war can be strangely positive, because to have them at all means you must have survived," he notes sardonically.

He again did what writers do, including the professor and poet [Refaat Alareer](#), who was [killed](#), along with Refaat's brother, sister and her four children, in an airstrike on his sister's apartment building in Gaza on Dec. 7. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor said that Alareer was [deliberately](#) targeted, "surgically bombed out of the entire building." His killing came after weeks of "death threats that Refaat received online and by phone from Israeli accounts." He had moved to his sister's because of the threats.

Refaat, whose doctorate was on the metaphysical poet [John Donne](#), wrote a poem in November, called "If I Must Die," which became his last will and testament. It has been translated into numerous languages. A reading of the poem by the actor Brian Cox has been [viewed](#) almost 30 million times.

If I must die,

you must live

to tell my story

to sell my things

to buy a piece of cloth

and some strings,
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze—
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself—
sees the kite, my kite you made,
flying up above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love
If I must die
let it bring hope
let it be a tale.

Atef, once again finding himself living amid the explosions and carnage from Israeli shells and bombs, doggedly publishes his observations and reflections. His accounts are often difficult to transmit because of Israel's blockage of Internet and phone service. They have appeared in [The Washington Post](#), [The New York Times](#), [The Nation](#) and [Slate](#).

On the first day of the Israeli bombardment, a friend, the young poet and musician Omar Abu Shawish, is killed, apparently in an Israeli naval bombardment, though later reports would say he was [killed](#) in an airstrike as he was walking to work. Atef wonders about the Israeli soldiers watching him and his family with "their infrared lenses and satellite photography." Can "they count the loafs of bread in my basket, or the number of falafel balls on my plate?" he wonders. He watches the crowds of dazed and confused families, their homes in rubble, carrying "mattresses, bags of clothes, food and drink." He stands mutely before "the supermarket, the bureau de change, the falafel shop, the fruit stalls, the perfume parlor, the sweets shop, the toy shop — all burned."

"Blood was everywhere, along with bits of kids' toys, cans from the supermarket, smashed fruit, broken bicycles and shattered perfume bottles," he [writes](#). "The place looked like a charcoal drawing of a town scorched by a dragon."

"I went to the Press House, where journalists were frantically downloading images and writing reports for their agencies. I was sitting with Bilal, the Press House manager, when an explosion shook the building. Windows shattered, and the ceiling collapsed onto us in

chunks. We ran toward the central hall. One of the journalists was bleeding, having been hit by flying glass. After 20 minutes, we ventured out to inspect the damage. I noticed that Ramadan decorations were still hanging in the street.”

“The city has become a wasteland of rubble and debris,” Atef, who has been the Palestinian Authority’s minister of culture since 2019, writes in the early days of the Israeli shelling of Gaza City. “Beautiful buildings fall like columns of smoke. I often think about the time I was shot as a kid, during the first intifada, and how my mother told me I actually died for a few minutes before being brought back to life. Maybe I can do the same this time, I think.”

He leaves his teenage son with family members.

“The Palestinian logic is that in wartime, we should all sleep in different places, so that if part of the family is killed, another part lives,” he writes. “The U.N. schools are getting more crowded with displaced families. The hope is that the U.N. flag will save them, though in previous wars, that hasn’t been the case.”

On Tuesday Oct. 17 he [writes](#):

I see death approaching, hear its steps growing louder. Just be done with it, I think. It’s the 11th day of the conflict, but all the days have merged into one: the same bombardment, the same fear, the same smell. On the news, I read the names of the dead on the ticker at the bottom of the screen. I wait for my name to appear.

In the morning, my phone rang. It was Rulla, a relative in the West Bank, telling me she had heard there’d been an airstrike in Talat Howa, a neighborhood on the south side of Gaza City where my cousin Hatem lives. Hatem is married to Huda, my wife’s only sister. He lives in a four-story building that also houses his mother and brothers and their families.

I called around, but no one’s phone was working. I walked to al-Shifa Hospital to read the names: Lists of the dead are pinned up daily outside a makeshift morgue. I could barely approach the building: Thousands of Gazans had made the hospital their home; its gardens, its hallways, every empty space or spare corner had a family in it. I gave up and headed toward Hatem’s.

Thirty minutes later, I was on his street. Rulla had been right. Huda and Hatem’s building had been hit only an hour earlier. The bodies of their daughter and grandchild had already been retrieved; the only known survivor was Wissam, one of their other daughters, who had been taken to the ICU. Wissam had gone straight into surgery, where both of her legs and her right hand had been amputated. Her graduation ceremony from art college had taken place only the day before. She has to spend the rest of her life without legs, with one hand. “What about the others?” I asked someone.

“We can’t find them,” came the reply.

Amid the rubble, we shouted: “Hello? Can anyone hear us?” We called out the names of those still missing, hoping some might still be alive. By the end of the day, we’d managed to find five bodies, including that of a 3-month-old. We went to the cemetery to bury them.

In the evening, I went to see Wissam in the hospital; she was barely awake. After half

an hour, she asked me: “Khalo [Uncle], I’m dreaming, right?”

I said, “We are all in a dream.”

“My dream is terrifying! Why?”

“All our dreams are terrifying.”

After 10 minutes of silence, she said, “Don’t lie to me, Khalo. In my dream, I don’t have legs. It’s true, isn’t it? I have no legs?”

“But you said it’s a dream.”

“I don’t like this dream, Khalo.”

I had to leave. For a long 10 minutes, I cried and cried. Overwhelmed by the horrors of the past few days, I walked out of the hospital and found myself wandering the streets. I thought idly, we could turn this city into a film set for war movies. Second World War films and end-of-the-world movies. We could hire it out to the best Hollywood directors. Doomsday on demand. Who could have the courage to tell Hanna, so far away in Ramallah, that her only sister had been killed? That her family had been killed? I phoned my colleague Manar and asked her to go to our house with a couple of friends and try to delay the news from getting to her. “Lie to her,” I told Manar. “Say the building was attacked by F-16s but the neighbors think Huda and Hatem were out at the time. Any lie that could help.”

Leaflets in Arabic dropped by Israeli helicopters float down from the sky. They announce that anyone who remains north of the Wadi waterway will be considered a partner to terrorism, “meaning,” Atef writes, “the Israelis can shoot on sight.” The electricity is cut. Food, fuel and water begin to run out. The wounded are operated on without anesthesia. There are no painkillers or sedatives. He visits his niece Wissam, racked with pain, in al-Shifa Hospital who asks him for a lethal injection. She says Allah will forgive her.

“But he will not forgive me, Wissam.”

“I am going to ask him to, on your behalf,” she says.

After airstrikes he joins the rescue teams “under the cricket-like hum of drones we couldn’t see in the sky.” A line from T.S Eliot, “a heap of broken images,” runs through his head. The injured and dead are “transported on three-wheeled bicycles or dragged along in carts by animals.”

“We picked up pieces of mutilated bodies and gathered them on a blanket; you find a leg here, a hand there, while the rest looks like minced meat,” he writes. “In the past week, many Gazans have started writing their names on their hands and legs, in pen or permanent marker, so they can be identified when death comes. This might seem macabre, but it makes perfect sense: We want to be remembered; we want our stories to be told; we seek dignity. At the very least, our names will be on our graves. The smell of unretrieved bodies under the ruins of a house hit last week remains in the air. The more time passes, the stronger the smell.”

The scenes around him become surreal. On Nov. 19, day 44 of the assault, he [writes](#):

A man rides a horse toward me with the body of a dead teenager slung over the saddle in front. It seems it's his son, perhaps. It looks like a scene from a historical movie, only the horse is weak and barely able to move. He is back from no battle. He is no knight. His eyes are full of tears as he holds the little riding crop in one hand and the bridle in the other. I have an impulse to photograph him but then feel suddenly sick at the idea. He salutes no one. He barely looks up. He is too consumed with his own loss. Most people are using the camp's old cemetery; it's the safest and although it is technically long-since full, they have started digging shallower graves and burying the new dead on top of the old—keeping families together, of course.

On Nov. 21 after constant tank-shelling, he decides to flee the Jabaliya neighborhood in the north of Gaza for the south, with his son and mother-in-law who is in a wheelchair. They must pass through Israeli checkpoints, where soldiers randomly select men and boys from the line for detention.

"Scores of bodies are strewn along both sides of the road," he writes. "Rotting, it seems, into the ground. The smell is horrendous. A hand reaches out toward us from the window of a burned-out car, as if asking for something, from me specifically. I see what looks like two headless bodies in a car — limbs and precious body parts just thrown away and left to fester."

He tells his son Yasser: "Don't look. Just keep walking, son."

In early Dec. his family home is [destroyed](#) in an airstrike.

"The house a writer grows up in is a well from which to draw material. In each of my novels, whenever I wanted to depict a typical house in the camp, I conjured ours. I'd move the furniture around a bit, change the name of the alley, but who was I kidding? It was always our house."

"All the houses in Jabalya are small. They're built randomly, haphazardly, and they're not made to last. These houses replaced the tents that Palestinians like my grandmother Eisha lived in after the displacements of 1948. Those who built them always thought they'd soon be returning to the beautiful, spacious homes they'd left behind in the towns and villages of historic Palestine. That return never happened, despite our many rituals of hope, like safeguarding the key to the old family home. The future keeps betraying us, but the past is ours."

"Though I've lived in many cities around the world, and visited many more, that tiny ramshackle abode was the only place I ever felt at home'" he goes on. "Friends and colleagues always asked: Why don't you live in Europe or America? You have the opportunity. My students chimed in: Why did you return to Gaza? My answer was always the same: 'Because in Gaza, in an alleyway in the Saftawi neighborhood of Jabalya, there stands a little house that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.' If on doomsday God were to ask me where I would like to be sent, I wouldn't hesitate in saying, 'Home.' Now there is no home."

Atef is now trapped in southern Gaza with his son. His niece was transferred to a hospital in Egypt. Israel continues to pound Gaza with over 20,000 dead and 50,000 wounded. Atef continues to write.

The story of Christmas is the story of a poor woman, nine months pregnant, and her husband forced to leave their home in Nazareth in northern Galilee. The occupying Roman power has demanded they register for the census 90 miles away in Bethlehem. When they arrive there are no rooms. She gives birth in a stable. [King Herod](#) – who learned from the Magi of the birth of the messiah – orders his soldiers to hunt down every child two years old and under in Bethlehem and the vicinity and murder them. An angel warns Joseph in a dream to flee. The couple and infant escape under the cover of darkness and make the 40-mile journey to Egypt.

I was in a refugee camp in the early 1980s for Guatemalans who had fled the war into Honduras. The peasant farmers and their families, living in filth and mud, their villages and homes burned or abandoned, were decorating their tents with strips of colored paper to celebrate the [Massacre of the Innocents](#).

“Why is this such an important day?” I asked.

“It was on this day that Christ became a refugee,” a farmer answered.

The [Christmas story](#) was not written for the oppressors. It was written for the oppressed. We are called to protect the innocents. We are called to defy the occupying power. Atef, Refaat and those like them, who speak to us at the risk of death, echo this Biblical injunction. They speak so we will not be silent. They speak so we will take these words and images and hold them up to the principalities of the world — the media, politicians, diplomats, universities, the wealthy and privileged, the weapons manufacturers, the Pentagon and the Israel lobby groups — who are orchestrating the genocide in Gaza. The infant Christ is not lying today in straw, but a pile of broken concrete.

Evil has not changed down the millenia. Neither has goodness.

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