

The Destruction of a Famed Gaza Bookstore Severs a Crucial Lifeline

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The destruction of a rare bookstore selling English books isn't the worst tragedy to hit Gaza this week. But for its people, it is a manifestation of a multidimensional war that disconnects besieged Palestinians from the world.

Hanya Aljamal couldn't help crying while leafing through the pages of one of the last books she picked up from Samir Mansour bookstore in Gaza on her last visit a month ago.

Among all the books that helped her to endure the Palestinian strip's 14-year siege, *Man's Search for Meaning* stood out as a spiritual guide on how to survive harrowing circumstances. In the case of the book's author, Viktor Frankl, it was the mass murder of six million Jews, the Holocaust, that took away his parents and his wife to concentration camps.

“Nothing in the world makes this okay, no possible reason can,” Aljamal, a 24-year-old translator and writer, thought to herself while reading the book.

Almost a month later, Samir Mansour Library, the only bookstore where she could pick up an English copy of Frankl's book in Gaza, was to be destroyed by an Israeli air strike. As her friends sent pictures of the books buried in the rubble on May 18, Aljamal wept again – this time fearing that her sadness was invalid as people were dying all over the densely populated territory.

This wasn't the first tragedy in Gaza in the last ten days, of course. The loud rockets that keep Aljamal up at night have wiped out entire families, including 67 children.

Recalling the book, Aljamal sobs in a voice note sent to TRT World, “I think about what's happening to us right now and I think this is not okay too.”

Every destruction leaves another mark. “You never get used to it,” she says.

On top of the killings, the destruction of the Samir Mansour bookstore, which housed the largest English collection of literature in Gaza, makes her think that it's a manifestation of Israel's multidimensional war that takes aim at making Gaza even more isolated.



Samir Mansour, the owner of the publishing house and bookstore that owns the largest collection of English literature in besieged Gaza looks at a book in front of the remains of his store that has been destroyed by Israeli air strikes. May 20, 2021, Gaza, Palestine. (Mohammed Samir Mansour)

“Even under blockade, it made us feel as a part of the world,” she says.

Whenever she walked past, she used to check the books on display in the big glass window and sometimes find herself absorbed by the enclave’s only English selection for hours. Mansour’s bookstore, also a publishing house, says they were unable to save any books from the large collection.

“Israel aims to kill. If not, it aims to make life unbearable,” Aljamal says.

Samir Mansour’s bookshop was not the only one affected. Others, including the Iqraa library, were either completely or partially destroyed in Al Thalatin Street, lovingly known as al Maktabat street, which literally translates to “the bookstores street.”

Even though Gaza’s siege has been a reality for over a decade, this is one of the times when people in Gaza feel what that siege truly means. The enclave’s borders are impassable, and no watercraft is allowed to set sail to help transport passengers to other places.

What can leave Gaza now are only the rockets bound for Israel. Before the firing of the first rocket, Hamas, the group that controls the enclave, warned Tel Aviv to withdraw its security forces attacking worshippers in Jerusalem’s Al Aqsa mosque.

Instead, Israeli police stormed the mosque, firing stun grenades at worshippers on a night that Muslims consider the holiest of the year. Tel Aviv’s brutal offensive has killed over 227 Palestinians so far and Hamas air strikes have killed 12 people in Israel.

What can enter Gaza is also limited. The international aid that has been restricted under the blockade since 2007 is now largely blocked from reaching Gaza.



An English copy of British crime novelist Agatha Christie's book "Curtain" buried in the rubble of the Samir Mansour publishing house and bookstore that housed the largest collection of English literature, May 20, 2021, Gaza, Palestine. (Mohammed Samir Mansour)

But up until the bombardment, the 21-year-old bookshop was able to provide a fair amount of things Gazans craved due to the siege: getting Palestinian voices out from Gaza. and bringing the world's literature into Gaza.

"Samir Mansour bookstore and other libraries gave us a reason to live," one writer from Gaza, Hedaya Shamun, says. Under a blockade, getting published is a massive challenge; holding physical copies of prints is a luxury.

"I was over the moon when my novel was printed in Egypt. But I couldn't get a copy of the book except after 6 months – it was transferred from a friend to a friend until they could give me some amount of copies," Shamun recounts her previous experience with publishing.

"I couldn't prepare for the signature party because I didn't have any copies of the books," she says. The writer was exhausted from the cost of printing her successive book, *Daughter of the Sea*.

But the bookshop's owner, Mansour, then made things easier for Shamun. He printed Shamun's novel and placed them in his bookstore, too.

"He gave me a good amount of copies so I was able to launch my own signature parties [this time]," she says.



Khatwa company, which shared the Kahil building with the Samir Mansour bookshop and publishing house, spray-painted its number on the rubble after an Israeli air strike turned the building in Gaza into a heap of rubble on May 18, 2021. (Mohammed Samir Mansour)

Efforts to rebuild amid a destruction

The shop was home to literary community meetings until the day the Israeli army informed Mansour that the Kahil building, where the bookstore is located, would be bombed alongside some educational centres belonging to the Islamic University.

“The occupation’s destruction of the library will negatively affect the community of readers and writers, which publishes books in its various fields and gives it the opportunity to participate in international exhibitions,” says Mohammed Samir, Mansour’s son.

Mohammed, who used to work with his father before the bombing, is extremely sad that Mansour’s childhood dream has gone to waste. The loss of their extensive collection is of huge regret to everyone.

The shop had already survived a major assault by Israel on Gaza in 2014; other buildings had not been so lucky. While a lot of the enclave was reduced to rubble, some places that came off worse had been rebuilt – but this was all before this latest operation which Palestinians confirm as the worst in its ferocity.

Aljamal, the Gazan translator, witnessed how long it took Gaza to get back on its feet amid a dire lack of funds.

“There is ten times more destruction this time,” she says in despair. “I keep thinking that if we survive, Gaza won’t.”

But the Mansour family is determined to keep rebuilding the bookstore and keep the literary spirit alive, even though the destruction is ongoing around them. They have the support of hundreds of booklovers inside and outside of Gaza.

A [crowdfunding page](#) set up by two human rights lawyers has already collected over \$8,000. The funds will eventually allow Mansour to rent a new plot and rebuild a library and bookshop. "All of the heart, creativity, and talent poured into this magical place is gone," the page called for action.

"Please help us raise funds to rebuild Gaza's community bookstore, bombed to pieces," Clive Stafford Smith, one of the crowdfunders [said](#).

"Who really believes you can bomb the world to peace?"

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