

Voices from Gaza

By [Rick Sterling](#)

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*The book **Gaza Writes Back** is a collection of short stories from 20 young Gazans. Although published in 2013, the book is highly relevant today. The stories reveal how the last five months is the culmination of a process which has been going on for decades.*

The title is curious: "Gaza Writes Back". Perhaps it is an alternative to "Gaza Fights Back". Certainly in the context of Gaza, writing is an important form of resistance to Israeli repression, occupation and massacres. The oppressor recognizes this as well. At least [ninety five journalists](#) and media workers have been killed in Gaza since October 7.

*The editor of **Gaza Writes Back** was an English literature and creative writing professor at Gaza's Islamic University named Refaat Alareer. Many of the contributors to this collection of short stories were Alareer's students.*

There are many references in the book to Israel's attacks on Gaza in 2008-9 named "Operation Cast Lead".

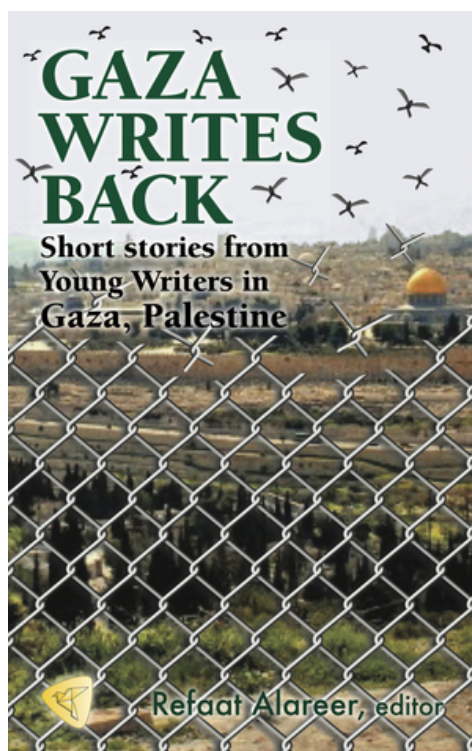
As the anthology was being printed and first distributed, Israel launched the massacre named "Operation Protective Edge". In six weeks, Israel killed 2,191 Palestinians and injured 11,231 while 71 Israelis were killed. Thirty Palestinians for every single Israeli. As editor Alareer says, "This book shows the world that despite Israel's continuous attempts to kill steadfastness in us, Palestinians keep going on, never surrendering to pain or death, and always seeing and seeking liberty and hope in the darkest of times."

The editor Alareer says, writing is "an act of resistance and an obligation to humanity to raise awareness among people blinded by the multi-million dollar Israeli campaign of 'hasbara' ('persuasion', or more accurately, disinformation.)"

Most of the stories recount difficult moments and experiences. That is natural because the

oppression in Gaza has been relentless for decades. Here is a concise summary of the [conditions in 2014](#) when this book came out: “If you lived in Gaza, how would YOU feel?”

It is impressive that Gazans continue to resist and maintain their humanity despite the efforts to dehumanize them.



The story “L is for Life” is about a young woman writing a letter to her father who died eleven years earlier. She speaks of her mother’s “bitter loneliness”. It reminds us that for every Palestinian killed there is pain and suffering caused to each of their friends and family. How many women and men share that “bitter loneliness” because their partners or children were killed? How many lives have been irreparably harmed by the injuries and amputations? The author travels to an orphanage that her late father spoke of and sees hope in the midst of destruction.

The story “One War Day” describes a mother who opens all the windows at night to avoid windows exploding inwards if there is an Israeli bombing. When the roof collapses the author’s brother is buried under the rubble with his hands still on the book he was reading.

The story “Spared” describes a girl whose mother insists she stay inside for lunch rather than go out where kids are playing soccer in the street. That saves her from death or injury when a bomb is dropped. Kids died and there were amputated limbs and scarred faces. “Our neighborhood was blown to smithereens in a split second. No more games played. No more goals. No more cheering. And my friends grew up in a second.”

In the story “A Wish for Insomnia” the writer imagines she is an Israeli soldier with post traumatic stress disorder. As the young writer imagines, there must be Israeli soldiers who take home the nightmare of what they have done just as there are US soldiers with the same mental and emotional disorder. The Palestinian author writes, “The past few weeks were agonizing for the family. Their father (the Israeli soldier) did not leave the bedroom. All they saw and heard of him was his screaming in the middle of the night, the noise of things breaking, and his moaning during the day.” He has nightmares and says, “We were sent in

tanks to Gaza.... We were instructed to shoot to kill and we shot almost every moving thing. We shot the water tanks, a couple of stray dogs, a cow, a dozen people, and there was that woman with her kid.... I wish I could know what happened to the kid. The kid cried the whole night. I kept hearing the commander's order in the background, but it was the little kid's voice that haunted me everywhere....."

The short story titled "Please Shoot to Kill" portrays family life and fear during nights and days of bombing and Israeli soldiers kicking down the door to their house with M16 rifles ready to fire.

It describes what it's like to see the soldiers ransacking the house then hitting the father. What it's like to see one's little sibling hit by shrapnel so badly the leg would be amputated. What it's like to have Apache helicopters overhead and Meerkhava tanks on the street. The father needs a kidney operation in Egypt but is unable to go there. Instead, a baby that needs surgery is allowed to go. "Laila did not hate the little baby who was sent instead of her father. She only hated Israel for making it so that the doctor had to choose. She only wished this baby would survive, grow up, and become a freedom fighter."

The story titled "From Beneath" describes the thoughts of a young woman under the rubble, unable to move and sensing what parts of her body have been crushed and how her life was coming to end.

The story "Lost at Once" is a love story giving insights into Gazan social class differences.

These are just a few of the twenty-three short stories in this fine book.

The editor, Professor Refaat Alareer, was also a moving poet and an influential voice with 83 thousand followers on Twitter/X. His twitter handle was [@ThisIsGaZa](#). In his last interview before being killed, Refaat said "I am an academic. Probably the toughest thing I have at home is an Expo marker. But if the Israelis invade, if they barge at us, charge at us, open the door to massacre us, I am going to use that marker to throw it at the Israeli soldiers, even if that that is the last thing I do. And this is the feeling of everybody. We are helpless. We have nothing to lose."

Refaat Alareer and his brother, sister and four of their children were killed in a targeted airstrike on 6 December 2023. His last poem is a testament to his courage and dedication. It has been widely remembered at demonstrations against Israel's genocide in Gaza.

IF I MUST DIE

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

Some of Refaat Alareer's outstanding academic lectures are [available](#) online. A tribute to him by his publisher Just World Books is online [here](#). The heading of Refaat Alareer's [twitter account](#) says, "I teach; therefore, I am. Have you read **Gaza Writes Back?**"

This book exemplifies courage and dignity in the face of hardship and repeated attacks. Each story is different but collectively they give a sense of continued dignity and hope despite suffering and pain. Ultimately, the stories are uplifting. It is a measure of Israel's lawlessness that they had to murder the editor of **Gaza Writes Back**.

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