

This war was different

“This war was different,” Latif whispered, after not having spoken for over a week. We had just sat down after a drive through the destroyed village of Khuza’a, east of Khan Younis. This village used to be a model Palestinian agricultural village, with open fields and green everywhere, and known for its delicious fruit and vegetables. A place where many people from Khan Younis would go to for their Friday family picnics.

It certainly brought back memories of when I used to visit Gaza back in the '90s. Memories which quickly became blurred with the overwhelming images of demolished houses, dozens of big trees uprooted and smashed, fruit trees destroyed and farms and gardens ruined.

A lot of what our resource persons in Gaza had said during my seven-day visit in November had been going round in my mind. And, indeed, Latif was not the first one to reflect about the war in the summer of 2014 in a similar way but somehow, listening to this young man, I suddenly felt the magnitude of the meaning of these four words: “*This war was different*”.

Throughout the war over the summer, we had been in contact with each other via regular Facebook chats. And as the violence kept increasing, his status updates gradually became more alarming. First, there were images of people’s houses being destroyed but after two weeks there were horrific images of people not having any place to hide. On a personal level, there were postings of the damage to his house which later on turned into postings of his family home being damaged beyond repair.

That was the moment I felt my conversation with him and many others living in Gaza was becoming less and less meaningful. What is it you can actually say to kids of his generation that could sound reassuring or comforting? Words become meaningless, and listening and Facebook *liking* seemed the only right thing to do when horrific atrocities to the people you care about unfold in front of your very eyes via social media.

Listening to Latif, I imagined what it must have been like for him to grow up in Gaza. He was 13 when the first war started and since then, has had to undergo a continual cycle of violence and destruction (in 2006, 2008, 2012) . Now, at his coming of age, he had survived yet another Israeli operation. And indeed it was survival. He had to run for his life when his neighbour’s home was bombed while he was still sleeping.

The meaning of these operations are somewhat distorted anyway by the fact that there is already in place, since 2006, the collective punishment of the 1.8 million inhabitants of Gaza, which is referred to as the “blockade”. Sealed off from the outside world, the majority of Gazans are not permitted to leave. It has also kept the Gazan economy on the brink of collapse without quite pushing it over the edge.

On top of that, there is the constant feeling of insecurity in anticipation of yet another attack. Increased destruction to the livelihood of entire villages and neighbourhoods and further destruction of water and electricity infrastructure ensure that the Strip remains nothing more than a humanitarian disaster.

“There’s no safe place, there’s nowhere to go”, Latif continues and along with that he starts to talk about his dream. A dream which is similar to many of his generation, a dream about living far away from Gaza. A dream which essentially is about leading a life free from fear. A fundamental human right according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but evidently not a right granted to the 1.8 million Palestinians living in Gaza.

Driving back to our hotel, our resource person insists, completely in line with the fabulous Palestinian hospitality, on stopping at a local fruit store to provide us with something good from Gaza. Still shaky from all the stories filled with fear and the images of destruction, I have a small conversation with our driver recollecting my first taste of delicious pomegranates from Gaza.

Turning around I look into his drained eyes while he expresses himself straight from the heart:

“There is only one thing that Gaza remains known for. And that is fear. Nothing else.”

Undeniably, this war felt different.



Neighbourhood of Shujiya, November 2014