

# I Was Born and Raised in Jabalia Refugee Camp Where Israel Killed 23 of My Relatives

“What other disasters need to happen before a ceasefire is enforced with steps towards accountability for all the genocide cheerleaders?”, asks Shahd Abusalama.

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*What is happening in Gaza is not a war. It is a genocide, accompanied by an ethnic cleansing campaign against the mostly refugee population in that besieged enclave.*

The process is targeting other Palestinian communities surviving under Israeli settler-colonial and military domination between the river and the sea.

No one is spared from Israel’s killing machines: children, women, elderly people, journalists, doctors, paramedics, fire fighters. Nowhere in Gaza is safe: residential buildings have been levelled, UNRWA schools sheltering the displaced have been hit.

Hospitals, churches, mosques, bakeries, universities, ambulances, too. My parents and extended family are amongst over a million people who have been forcibly displaced – nearly half of Gaza’s entire population.

They have fled to Al-Nusairat refugee camp, which is “south of Gaza river” according to Israel’s criminal military order, but they are at close encounters with death every day amid relentless Israeli bombardment.

There is no time to process all the horrors of the past four weeks, but my family survivors

keep stressing that “time passing means more bloodshed”.

On 23 October, my cousins and their little angels were amongst 23 relatives killed while asleep at their own homes in Jabalia refugee camp.

My family’s survivors couldn’t give a goodbye or a proper funeral as Israel’s killing machines have haunted them. My auntie’s son Khalil is the only survivor of his family.

The lifeless bodies of his wife Heba (35) and children Leen (12), Jihad (10) and Sham (5) were pulled from under the rubble after six hours.

Heba, a skilled nurse at the Indonesian hospital, and her children had left their home and sought refuge at the home of another cousin Rana, who is married to Heba’s brother Jawad.

Jawad survived but Rana (40) was killed, alongside two of her five children, the little ones, Mohammed (5) and Naama (7), while the twin girls Jana and Jinan (12) and Husni (10), survived with wounds.



Children of the author's cousins who were killed in Israeli's bombing of the Jabalia refugee camp on 23 October (Photo supplied)

On 1 November, my dear cousin Yousef Marwan Abusalama succumbed to his wounds at the Indonesian hospital. Four days before, on 27 October, Israel bombed nearby, destroying homes and killing over 22 of our neighbours and injuring many including him.

Yousef's only fault is his Palestinian refugee identity. He was sitting outside his home in Jabalia refugee camp, originally my grandparents' where my older siblings Majed and Majd and I were born.

Israel bombed nearby, destroying homes and killing over 22 of our neighbours. Yousef joined them in heaven after the shrapnel in his spine had caused infection and unbearable pain. The doctors took him for an operation at 1am. He left the surgery room at 6am and cried to death.

This caring, handsome, young and strong man clung to life for four days fearing he'd break our hearts. He truly did.

Jabalia refugee camp is where my grandparents who are *Nakba* survivors from Beit Jirja and Ashdod waited to return. Israel banned their internationally-recognised right of return, sentenced them to a life of oppression in Gaza, then bombed their grandchildren to death.

I spent many hours of calls with Yousef during this genocidal war, bringing us closer than ever. He kept me informed about my uncle Marwan's family whom I love so much, and our home at Al-Saftawi which hosted Yousef during his final years.

I was sitting with my cousin Yousef on the messenger app the night before his injury, collecting pictures and making a list of the names and ages of 23 relatives who were killed on 23 October. He didn't want our martyrs to be forgotten and reduced to numbers.

I called my family a thousand times desperate to cry with them but failed miserably amid the blackout. I am grateful, however, I managed to speak to my dear uncle Marwan and auntie Haniyya, Yousef's parents, whom I love dearly as well as all his siblings.

It was heartbreaking hearing them comfort themselves, in tears, that Yousef is better than us, a martyr. They are convinced that he could have lived if Israel didn't push hospitals in Gaza to a breaking, catastrophic point.

While Yousef had a bed, his parents saw doctors treating the wounded on the floor, and were shy about calling for medical attention as they saw them overwhelmed, racing against time to save lives.

In grave violation of international law, Israel has placed Gaza under a total siege, cutting off electricity, fuel, water, internet and food. My family survivors reported that they're hungry, and they're alive but dead inside.

They're mostly hungry for the world to finally recognise their humanity and their rights to freedom, justice and equality, denied for 106 years of successive British and Israeli colonial domination.

Britain is aware of our grievances as they hold the historic responsibility for facilitating the culmination of the Zionist enterprise into the Jewish state of Israel on the ethnic cleansing of our grandparents.

We cannot forget the infamous Balfour Declaration of 1917 that initiated three decades of British colonial rule in Palestine during which apartheid between native Arabs and Jewish settlers was established.

This only ended the day before the new-born settler nation of Israel set off to dominate the Palestinians to this day, indefinitely.

There is no ending to upsetting news flowing from Gaza, or to emotions of alienation and abandonment as I see the whole world failing to save our survivors and push for a ceasefire.

It seems Israel is deploying the talking points of Hamas and human shields so successfully that world leaders have given an unequivocal green light for an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Palestinians, undermining international law and human rights conventions which have proven futile when it comes to the Palestinian cause.

When looking at the crackdown on the occupied West Bank and Palestinian citizens of Israel that goes hand in hand with the genocide in Gaza, it's clear Israel's target is not Hamas, it is the elimination of the Palestinians, a consistent thread running throughout our horrific encounter with Zionism.

Like Zionist leaders who historically repeated their need for "a land without Arabs", Israeli leaders have voiced and keep reiterating their intent to "destroy Gaza" before proceeding to inflict this horrific terror with no concern to Palestinian civilians.

Yet the international community is competing to justify and downplay Israel's relentless crimes as if history began on 7 October.

Meanwhile, Israel, backed by Western leaders and mainstream media, are deflecting from this genocide by attempts to cement the construction of anti-Zionism as antisemitism to protect Israel and its allies from accountability.

Zionists and racist British citizens feel encouraged by the political establishment that is showing unwavering support to Israel and are reproducing their anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic propaganda that turns myths into facts and the bully into the underdog.

Invoking the holocaust is not an excuse to unleash a genocide on the Palestinian people whom they have expected to dominate and repress for 75 years without any resistance.

I don't know what other disasters need to happen before a ceasefire is enforced with steps towards accountability for all those genocide cheerleaders.

There needs to be a serious reflection on Israel's inherently-criminal nature; a safe Jewish-only haven dependent on the oppression of the Palestinians is not sustainable.

[In the hours since publishing this article we have learnt that another member of Shahd's family has been killed, bringing the total to 24 dead.]

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*Shahd Abusalama is a Palestinian academic born and raised in Jabalia refugee camp, northern Gaza, and is currently based in London. She recently got a PhD from Sheffield Hallam University.*

*Featured image: The author's brother, Mohammed, and cousin, Yousef, who was killed in Israeli's bombing of the Jabalia refugee camp (Photo supplied)*

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