

The Bomb Squads: How to Survive a Gaza Refugee Camp

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The following article are excerpts from Baroud's upcoming book, "101 Ways to Survive a Refugee Camp."

We waited breathless. Breathing heavily was hazardous under these somewhat exceptional circumstances. The army, my father often advised, was sensitive to the slightest movements or sounds, including a whisper, a cough, or God forbid, a sneeze. Thus we sat completely still. Muneer, my younger brother was entrusted with the mission of peering through the rusty holes in the front door. It bothered me that I was not the one elected for the seemingly perilous mission. My father explained that Muneer was smaller and quicker, he could negotiate his way back and forth, seamlessly, between the observation ground and the room where everyone was hiding. The house's main door was riddled with holes; the upper half spoke of past battles between the neighbourhood's stone throwers and Israeli soldiers. The holes on the lower half, however were not those of bullets, but rust and corrosion. These holes often served us well. Muneer would lie on his belly and peek through them; he followed the movement of the soldiers as their military vehicles often used the space in front of our house. They pondered their moves from there, and often used our house' front step as a spot for lunch or tea. Worse, they often released their frustrations on the house's helpless residents, that being my family.

But this time the air is truly gloomy. Soldiers had never gathered in such numbers and remained for that long. Muneer, crawling back and forth, between the door and the kitchen - where we often hid - the only room with a concrete ceiling, thus much safer than the rest of the house - reported increasingly disturbing news. "There are men in white." He divulged the latest development with total bewilderment. "They are wearing masks. And there is a robot." For once, we felt in doubt of Muneer's version of events, which were most often sharp and truthful. Only my father seemed to understand. "Bomb squads," he whispered. His words left us in a state of dread and speechlessness. The sheer terror that we felt at that moment was of a new kind; a bomb only a few feet away from our house, and we couldn't escape for snipers were positioned all across the street, on the water-tower, behind the graves, everywhere. My mother hurried to her safe corner of reciting Quranic verses. She long argued that selected verses from the Quran were sure to create a protective shield between one and his enemies. My father was in no mood to scoff at her or anyone else. He looked as if he were in a trance. I cannot even begin to imagine what must've went through his head that day. He pulled a cigarette from a long, white pack of Kents and seemed past the point of ordinary nervousness. Even if the bomb was diffused, the soldiers would most certainly round up all the youth in the neighbourhood, as they had done repeatedly, starting with us, and herd everyone into the military camp's temporary holding facilities. Torture and beating to glean urgently needed information were surely to follow. My mom was still in her

corner, with audible words here and there breaking the frightening silence, things about God, and “my kids are the only thing I have in this life”, and other supplications. My father called on Muneer to join the rest of us, and decided to take on the mission of watching outside’s happenings as they unfolded, himself.

My father laid facedown for a long time. A military helicopter hovered in place for a little while and then disappeared, perhaps following a moving target, I thought. Helicopters were the best way to chase down fidayeen – freedom fighters – as they sought escape in the refugee camp’s orchards. Did they find the one who planted the bomb? But what about the bomb itself? News was still scarce and my father was still laying on the chipped tiles behind the door. Suddenly engines of military vehicles outside began charging one after the other. Some began moving away. The noise increasingly subsided. Foot soldiers seemed to be the only ones left behind. One could tell through the continuous murmurs and chatter. The bewilderment intensified, although this time with some hopeful prospects. Are we really meant to survive the unfolding ordeal? My father began making his way back, crawling back to the kitchen. He often crawled that way to show off some of his training in the army many years back. We looked at him with inquiring eyes. My mother abandoned her figurative corner for a few moments, and joined us. “Its our bag of trash,” my father said in a tone that was meant to dispel the mystery. “They thought our trash was a bomb.”

My father opted to throw our trash in the street just hours earlier. Garbage accumulated for weeks in our house as the military curfew kept us indoors without a chance to step foot outside. So a few hours earlier, he did what we had urged him to do for days, since we couldn’t cope with the suffocating odor. He opened the double doors for a few seconds and threw one black garbage bag as far as he could to the middle of the open space in front of the house. Little did he know that his desperado act would send the Israeli army on high alert; would invite bomb squads, helicopters and perhaps every available tank and military vehicle to our unsuspecting neighbored.

Within minutes, the serenity and silence of the military curfew was back. Except that watermelon rinds and my father’s used Kent packs and other items, were scattered about the street. “Whose God damn idea was it to throw the trash in the street?” my father mumbled. No one answered. My father puffed on his cigarette and quickly delved into a contemplating mode. “I have never seen such military build- up since the war of ‘67,” he said. His surreal look was interrupted by one hardly audible chuckle, and that was enough to ignite a storm of laughter among my brothers and even my mother which lasted for a long long time.

I took my turn peeking through the rust holes to get a piece of the excitement and follow the progress of the trash as it was scattered by the wind and hungry cats in every possible direction. “Hey guys, the chains of the tanks softened the area outside. It should be really good for soccer when the curfew is lifted,” I declared jubilantly.

And the curfew was indeed lifted, some forty days later.

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