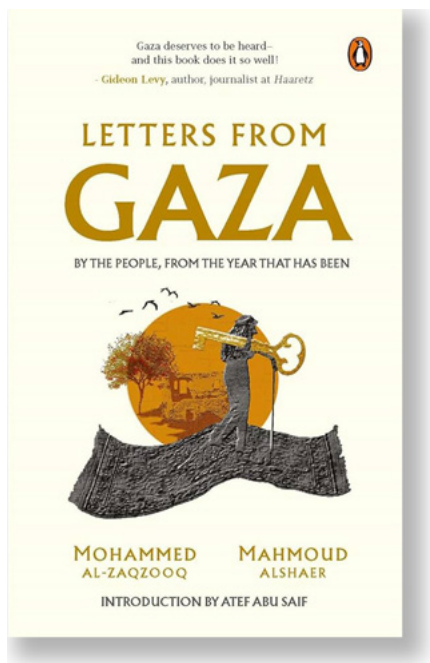




Letters to regain life

**Letters from Gaza: By the People, From the Year
that Has Been**

Edited by Mohammed Al-Zaqzooq and Mahmoud Alshaer

Penguin Books, Singapore, 2025, 188 pp., SGD 26.90

ISBN 978-9-815-32372-6

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homes, long cherished family homes: reduced to rubble. People climbing over the rubble looking for the missing. Looking for remains. (Once, hopefully only once, the horror of seeing a cat there devouring a piece of flesh.)

We see people on the move, people with their families squeezed into cars, trucks, carts; belongings weighing down bent backs and shoulders. Displaced people. Hungry, thirsty people. Frustrated, hurt, frightened, anxious, depressed, bewildered people. People in grief.

We see how different everyone looks now, family, friends, neighbours. Poet and researcher Mohammed Al-Zaqzooq, one of the two ‘curators’ of the volume, writes of living people with “dying faces” eaten by the sun, by pain, fear, and the trauma of destruction all around them. That is the transformation of the face; of the body. There is also the mind: the marks made on the soul are “...more cruel and painful, even if the body hid them behind skin and bones and blood vessels”.

This is what the letter writers hear. This is what we hear with them: Buzzing drones. Gunfire. Deafening explosions. The wailing sirens of ambulances. Prayers. Screams, now a child’s, now a woman’s. More explosions. The wailing of children, women, men. Bizarre orders on radio stations: ‘Go to the “safe zones”. Go south.’ The sound of news. Ominous silence. Then once again, the sound of shelling.

Numbers, one after the other, chain daily life: The days of the war. The numbers on the road. The number of

displacements. The numbers missing, or under the rubble. The numbers dead, injured, sick. The numbers who need food and water. The numbers of schools, hospitals and refugee camps demolished. The numbers of homes lost.

Numbers on the news. Here are the numbers later than the year this book was written. On 7 June 2025, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine reported 54,607 dead in Gaza; 125,341 injured; 1.9 million, over 90 per cent of the population, displaced.

But these are real people, not numbers. The writer Ahmed Mortaja tells us: “I don’t want my name, and my family name, to be reduced to mere numbers, whether odd or even.”

Questions confront the people, and the writers, like tormentors. Questions asked again and again, every hour of the day. What writer Yousri Alghoul describes as “big questions that never stopped, questions as immense as missiles...”

Uncertainty breeds one question after the other, questions without answers: “Where to go? Are they safe? Where are they? What will happen tonight? Tomorrow?”

Where do we go? The biggest question, the cruel one that came uninvited into a home, bringing uncertainty with it, sending the family packing, finding transport, searching for a place to go to. The question came home and made them homeless. It returns to taunt them at the first refuge, say a school. Again, at the

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second refuge, say a tent or a hospital. Again and again, sending them in search of a mythical ‘safe space’.

Where do we go? A question that brings fear with it.

The other big question, a hungry companion that can reduce anyone to despair: How do we feed the children? Get them water to drink? The questions are loaded with anxiety, frustration, fear. Every day ends with “a piece of bread dipped in exhaustion”. Is eating a crime? Again, listen to Ahmed Mortaja:

So many questions swirl around this fear, though I deliberately won’t raise them here, dear reader, so as to allow you to imagine them for yourself. Oh, how I miss imagination.

Poet and teacher Doha Kahlout has some blunt questions for us: “...does the world actually see us? ... If it does, then where is it? And if not, what is it doing?... How alone are we?”

Their reality demands we see more, imagine better, understand the reality of hunger, thirst, displacement, injury, broken families, death. Always death, too much of it.

Their reality demands we imagine – and understand – the injustice of collective punishment. The injustice of being pushed out of their homes and communities, pushed to starvation, forced to replay the catastrophe of their ancestors in 1948. The Nakba returns to push them out of their land. We, who have also fought to be free, can we not feel their desperate need for freedom?

Words and ideas that are part of people’s lives everywhere have grown distant, as if the common language of humanity has declared that the people of Gaza are aliens. Hunger and thirst, a “human-made hunger crisis”, has become war strategy. Everyone is a terrorist, even a newborn. Population transfer: an innocuous stand-in for ethnic cleansing. More words twisted beyond recognition: Childhood. Hospitals. Home. Land. International law. Justice. Humanitarian crisis. Safe zone. Aid. Words have turned rogue, become the tools of war crimes.

The bios of the editors, writers and translators of this book say a great deal; they are part of the letters. (For some, the bio is an obituary.)

Sumud. Modes of survival. Pretend the noise outside is fireworks, a celebration. A pretence that cannot last. Beesan Nateel, a young writer for children, asks us: “To whom will I tell everything that’s happening now? I’ll say we survived! What survival is this?” Ahmed Mortaja “survived a bombardment that destroyed his home. Emerging from the rubble, he began to write.” Yousri Alghoul’s personal library was destroyed in an airstrike. He salvaged as many of his books as he could from the rubble — and also the books from shattered schools.

And this book, these letters that come from brave people speaking to us from amid the rubble: These are “letters of life”, says the writer Atef Abu Saif; from people, not “breaking news”. They are “letters to regain life”. To regain life, they have to understand steadfastness and resilience; they have to turn one into flesh, the other into blood. That is how they continue to live, write, speak to us. When we see them, we see the human spirit. When we hear them, their stories regain life, become a part of ours. And when we speak our solidarity, we regain our humanity. ■