



Impressions from a day in Gaza

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Several weeks ago I had the opportunity to spend a day in Gaza with Andy Dwonch, the head of [Mercy Corps in Palestine](#). Mercy Corps is a large nonprofit organization based in Portland, with offices and missions in 45 countries. My trip was part of a brief advisory consultancy I am carrying out with the organization. Despite some vociferous lobbying by my family against visiting Gaza, I decided to do it.

Andy and I left Jerusalem at 6:30 am in order to be at the border crossing when it opened at 8:00. There are actually three stations to the crossing. The Israeli officials at the first station seemed most concerned about me. Although Andy had secured me a permit from the Israelis, the young woman at the crossing saw something that disturbed her and made about four phone calls and checked the computer repeatedly before finally letting me through. The next two stations, staffed by Palestine Authority and Hamas clerks, respectively, proceeded without incident. We had a car and driver waiting for us at the end to take us into Gaza City.

A word more on Mercy Corps: It receives a large percentage of its funding from the US government and is forbidden by law from having any contact with Hamas, meaning with anyone in the entire Gazan government. One can only imagine how this restriction complicates its dual mission of humanitarian relief and development.

The day was packed, especially because we had to leave by 3:00 pm, which would give just enough time to return to the Israeli border station before it closed at 3:30. That gave me exactly six hours in the city itself. Actually, Andy suggested on the way back to the border that we stop and take some pictures. The result of taking those few extra minutes was that I almost missed getting back into Israel. I was the last one through.

I was flooded with impressions as we drove into the old city of Gaza. The first was, unexpectedly, that it looked nothing like India. Given the severe poverty, even humanitarian crisis, that Gaza as a whole is experiencing, I had expected the obvious and wrenching poverty that I had seen in some Indian cities or many other

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Third World countries, for that matter—collapsing infrastructure, rickety shacks, a surfeit of beggars, children in rags, adults sleeping on the sidewalks.

At least in this part of the city and others that I saw later in the day, none of that was visible. Instead, I saw hordes of children going to school, university students walking in and out of the gates of the two universities—both the children and the university students reasonably dressed. I observed morning shoppers buying vegetables and fruits from stands, shopkeepers opening their shops, and people walking purposefully to wherever they were going for the start of the day. There were cranes and construction workers everywhere, with lots of uncompleted buildings being worked on. A garbage truck, with a UN sign on it, was making its rounds.

I saw almost no signs of authority on the streets. No police. No guns. No moral police. One person commented to me that in 2009 Hamas was omnipresent, with lots of moral policing on the streets. Since then, such surveillance has fallen off, but people have learned to be self-policing in their behavior in public, he said, just to be safe and not harassed.

There was the occasional bombed out building, from the 2014 War. One had the entire top of the building, several stories, simply blown off. But other than those, most buildings were in decent shape, and some apartment buildings were downright nice. There were definitely some “junkers” on the road, but most of the cars looked like late-model varieties. Some of the side streets were pocked and broken up; the main thoroughfares, though, were in good shape. There were almost no traffic lights, and traffic was a bit chaotic. I must add again that I was in Gaza City (both the old and new parts of the city) only and did not go to some of the outer areas and refugee camps where the bombing in the 2014 war was the heaviest and where, I understand, destruction was massive.

People were certainly not in rags. Men were mostly in chino-type pants and button-down shirts. With very few exceptions, women were covered with the hijab and burka. Perhaps 10-20 percent of them were in black with their faces totally covered. Incidentally, this sort of veiling was not a traditional practice in Palestinian society; it is very much a product of the “new fundamentalism.”

What struck me initially about all these people was that they were not hanging their heads; they did not look defeated and dejected. At the end of the day, I commented on this to Andy who said that this was his impression from his many trips to Gaza, as well, that people seem to remain hopeful in spite of it all. This is a very different dynamic from what he observes in the West Bank. I hope to go to Ramallah soon (again with Mercy Corps) and get some sense of this myself. I have been at a loss to explain this difference in mood. The best explanation I have heard—from an acquaintance who works often in the West Bank—is that, while under siege by the Israelis, Gazans do not experience the almost daily raids by the IDF that occur in the West Bank. Also, they no longer live in close proximity to settlements or have

to deal with daily challenges posed by checkpoints and access restrictions. The more obvious presence of the occupation in the West Bank may account for a greater sense of helplessness.

The fascinating people I met during the day actually related to Israel in what I considered a very interesting fashion. In conversation after conversation, there was a kind of by-the-way acknowledgment of the destructiveness of Israel's policies and, for sure, a general hatred for Israel. But what was striking was how everyone quickly went on from those sorts of almost off-handed comments to criticize how the Hamas government or the people themselves are also responsible for the state of affairs. There was no obsessing about Israel, which I found interesting. Indeed, there might even be a general acceptance of Israel in terms of realizing that Israel will long be part of their future.

Besides riding through and around Gaza City, I was ushered to four meetings in the city. All the Gazans I met did not talk politics explicitly. But, in the first and last meetings, those I met with went out of their way to express their objections to Hamas policies and outright opposition to Hamas generally.

The first meeting was with Omar Shaban, the director of a think tank, [Pal-Think for Strategic Studies](#). Here is how Pal-Think describes itself: "Pal-Think for Strategic Studies is an independent and non-profit think and do tank, based in Gaza, Palestine. It was established in March 2007. Pal-Think's mission is to promote rational thinking, peace, freedom, and prosperity through dialogue on public issues, as well as producing policy recommendations for the decision-makers in Palestine and the Middle East. The main objective of Pal-Think is to conduct research on thematic issues that serve as a basis for policy debates on matters that are important to the Palestinians, the region, and the international community."

The offices were in an apartment/office building—quite nice. It partners with, and receives funding from, at least nine outside institutions, practically all of which are European. My friend Elie Podeh, a professor at the Hebrew University, a board member at the Mitvim Institute and, I should add, author of a fascinating new book, [Chances for Peace: Missed Opportunities in the Arab-Israeli Conflict](#), recommended that I meet with Shaban.

Omar is a fascinating man. Despite the blockade, he manages to travel widely in the Arab World, Europe, and the United States. He also writes extensively, including pieces for the likes of the Brookings Institution. In his report published by Brookings, he wrote of the languishing efforts to rebuild Gaza (my impression is that efforts at rebuilding have picked up considerably in the year since he wrote his Brookings report, in part because of the easing of the blockade on building materials, according to a UN briefing I attended before the visit). One of his suggestions for getting the reconstruction effort on track was to create a collaborative Gaza Reconstruction Council, which would oversee the building. A major theme in Omar's thinking is greater involvement of civil society.

Certainly, a running refrain through the day was Hamas's stymying the growth of independent actors and institutions in society not under its direct control. Actually, I think that the idea of such a Council also makes sense for a reason not stated in Omar's report—the ability of an internationalized independent group to put Israelis' minds at ease that construction materials would not be used to build tunnels and other military installations.

As an aside, there have been persistent rumors and reports that Turkey and Israel are engaging in reconciliation talks and that an agreement is near. Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, at the moment seems more favorable to resuming relations than Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, who fears pushback from Greece, Egypt, and probably most important, Russia. In any case, the rumors also indicate that a central Turkish demand in the negotiations is the ending of the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Of course, the Israelis must be asking for mechanisms and guarantees to prevent imports from being used for military purposes in the event that the siege is lifted. I raised the possibility of a reconciliation agreement with the accompanying lifting of the blockade with people throughout the day to elicit their thoughts. Most expressed a wait-and-see attitude. I think a certain understandable cynicism pervades the thinking of most Gazans. The blockade, in force now for almost a decade, looks all but permanent to them.

In speaking of conditions and government policy in Gaza, Omar did not seem constrained at all in expressing his opinions, at least in the confines of his office. There was a bit of weariness to him. I imagine that he has spoken numerous times to outsiders like me and expressed his opinion in print—all without significant changes on the ground.

From Pal-Think, we drove to the massive [UNRWA](#) compound in the city. UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, which provides assistance and relief to some five million Palestinian refugees around the region. There I met with Siobahn Parnell, the deputy director of UNRWA Gaza (she actually left that position shortly after my visit). Siobahn is from Virginia and held the job for a number of years. She described UNRWA's scope in Gaza, which is massive. It has a staff of 12,500, by far the biggest non-government employer in Gaza. It runs 21 health centers, and a quarter of a million students attend its 257 schools. The Agency feeds 960,000 of the 1.3 million refugees in Gaza. Services also include relief and social services, microfinance, and camp infrastructure and improvement. UNRWA maintains much of Gaza's infrastructure inside the eight refugee camps, which may help explain both the building boom and the decent shape of many roads and buildings.

Siobahn remained upbeat, despite the extraordinary challenges UNRWA faces and the large number of portfolios she held. She expressed clear awareness about UNRWA's need to be transparent to both donors and the community, including the United States, the biggest government donor to UNRWA with a total contribution

of over \$380 million in 2015. That meant, in particular, strong oversight of all materials coming in for UNRWA building projects.

The next stop was a Mercy Corps-sponsored project, [Gaza Sky Geeks](#). The project is an incubator for fledgling companies, largely Internet-based. I met with about a dozen male and female CEOs of these startups, all in their late twenties or early thirties. The session, in which I interacted with each of them as they described their projects, was undoubtedly the highlight of the day.

My favorite project was one called [Walk and Charge](#). It involved a device connected to one's smart phone, which straps onto one's arm while walking. It then uses the energy expended by the body to charge the phone. It also has an app, which has several functions including telling walkers how far they have to go to fully charge the phone. Several other companies produced electronic games for the Arab world, one of which explicitly aimed to become the Zynga for Arabic speakers. One project was a website addressing the serious issue of obesity of women in the Arab world. It included menus of traditional foods but with low-calorie versions and fitness programs for women. Another app turned shopkeepers' smart phones into cash registers, allowing them to track their inventories. One CEO described the creation of an AirBnB-like company but for office space. Yet another was an interactive comic book site in Arabic for creators and consumers.

I found most of the companies truly inventive. The blockade has ironically increased the value of the Internet and sophisticated computer skills, as these young people see the Internet as a way to leapfrog the siege. For most, their market is the Arab world but some have global ambitions. The high value on schooling in Gaza—there is near-universal literacy, I was told—and the high number of students going to universities result in youth with ideas and sophisticated skills. The dearth of other job opportunities—unemployment, including for university graduates, is massive in Gaza—may also lead them into the startup world. I thought how unfortunate it is that these young people, who seek to make Gaza into the Silicon Valley of the Arab world, live a stone's throw from Israel, which calls itself Startup Nation, but with no contact at all with Israeli startups and software engineers.

My final meeting was with a fascinating character, Atef Abu Saif. Atef holds a Ph.D. in political science from the European University Institute in Florence, having worked with a friend of mine, Professor Phillipe Schmitter. Atef is also a novelist. He now teaches political science at Al-Azhar Gaza University and writes frequently, including for the *New York Times* and *Slate*. An open member of Fatah (although critical of the Fatah leadership), he has clashed with Hamas on a number of occasions, landing him in jail for short stints.

Atef's main contention is that there are actually two Gazas. One is the one run by Hamas and includes its supporters. He noted, for example, that there has been a mosque-building binge, leading to a total of 879 mosques in the Strip by 2014, as

compared to two public libraries. In his words, "Gaza has become one huge mosque." The second Gaza consists of the Palestinian public in Gaza, engaged in all sorts of cultural and social activities outside Hamas's orbit. If not quite a civil society, he intimated, there is a lot that goes on beneath the radar.

Saif lived in relative obscurity until his latest novel, [*A Suspended Life*](#), was short-listed for last year's International Prize for Arabic Literature, popularly called the Arabic Man Booker Prize. Immediately, he was thrust into the role of celebrity throughout the Arab world. Not yet translated into English, the story pushes his idea of two Gazas. The book did not go over well with Hamas authorities in Gaza and, at one point, he was seized traveling to the award ceremony. The entire scene was photographed while he was holding a copy of the book. The picture spread virally throughout the Arab world, and since that time he has not been bothered by the authorities. The Israeli press reported on the book, eager to know what kind of literature would come out of Gaza and, indeed, surprised that such cultural products actually emanate from Gaza. What was remarkable too, he said, was that interviewers from the Arab media discovered it was not just breaking news that could come out of Gaza; a notable novel, recognized widely in the Arab world, could emanate from Gaza as well.

My day ended with a drive through the city and a mad dash to the Israeli border crossing. The six hours in Gaza were definitely insufficient, and I hope I have an opportunity to return this spring.