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Hi, Michael | ✕

Israelis have seemingly grown accustomed to the atrocities of the Gaza war while continuing their day-to-day lives

Michael Sfar | Oct 28, 2024 2:26 pm IST | 🔔 Follow



A Palestinian boy wounded in an Israeli strike at Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza City, on Saturday. Credit: Mahmoud Sameer/Reuters

Last week, the Israeli military bombed the town of Beit Lahiya, in the northern Gaza Strip. According to local health services some 80 people were killed by the bombs. In

videos broadcasted by Al Jazeera, currently off-air in Israel but whose reports are readily available on YouTube, little children are seen pulled out of the rubble, their entire bodies covered in whitish-grey powdered debris. Some will not survive. Others will, but will lose a parent or both parents and will join tens of thousands Gazan children orphaned by the war.

Initial reports of the shelling are from 1 A.M., but I do not know at what time it actually took place, so I do not know whether, when our pilot dropped the bombs, I was watching the fourth season third episode of HBO's wonderful Italian production "My Brilliant Friend," or already in bed, reading one of Georges Simenon's detective stories. But I can estimate with some precision what I was doing during the mass killing that took place the evening before that.

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The Israeli military was laying siege at the time on two hospitals in the Jabalya refugee camp, cutting off electricity and shelling their surroundings. According to local health services in the camp, the shelling killed 46 people (21 of whom were women and children). Well, while all this was happening in Jabalya, my family and I were having Asian food we had ordered from a Tel Aviv restaurant, and later on I watched a late-1980s action movie with my youngest son, so he'd get to know the cinematic masterpieces I grew up on.

Already by the early days of the war it became clear that Israeli warfare will not succumb to restrictions dictated by international law. Three days after the outbreak of the war, I warned in an article in this newspaper: "In no context could such a move be legal or moral. Even a siege, a military strategy that can be legal under certain conditions, cannot include depriving civilians in the besieged area the necessities of survival." Ten days later, I cautioned that "The incomprehensible cruelty that we've been exposed to... has penetrated our soul. And like nuclear fuel, it has spiraled us on our way to a moral hell." I wrote these words without realizing the depth of the abyss we were racing for.

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In the following weeks and months, Israel lost all semblance of humanity. Its justifiable war of defense has turned into a ruthless campaign of vengeance against 2.3 million people. For over a year, the Israeli military's fire policy in the world's densest, poorest strip seems guided by Channel 14 panelists. The battlefield is laden with horrifying evidence of unprecedented war crimes: the repeated forced uprooting of some million and a half Gazans from their homes and then from places they have escaped to, with no commitment to allow their return when the fighting is over; the bombings that, even if, according to the IDF spokesperson, intended to hit Hamas operatives, do in fact kill, with blood-freezing indifference, dozens of citizens in every attack; the war strategy, which occasionally includes intentional deprivation of humanitarian aid and the use of starvation as a method of warfare to force military gains; the medieval siege laid by Israel in recent weeks in the northern Gaza Strip, killing and starving thousands of children, women, elderly and innocent men.



Children injured during an Israeli operation in the Jabalia refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip await treatment at Al-Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza City on October 21, 2024. Credit: AFP/Omar Al-Qattaa

Dresden pales in comparison to what we have done in Gaza. We have bombed indiscriminately, pulverized blatantly civilian targets and obliterated civilian infrastructure that makes life possible in the Gaza Strip, that became one huge

Ground Zero. We have killed some two percent of its population, the vast majority of victims being civilians.

And the worst thing is, we have grown used to that. Israelis do not bat an eye when they hear reports of dozens of children and women killed in a bombing. They just don't care. These attacks, where dozens of human beings, who just like us love, dream, hurt, have family and friends – are slaughtered (I have no other word) by our military, became a routine. Any death of "innocent bystanders" used to be extensively reported, even raising public debate. Today, a year into the war, reports of displaced persons' camps in which refugees were burned (and it is not a metaphor!) hardly make it to the fleeting war updates on news websites. We are exterminating, yes, e-x-t-e-r-m-i-n-a-t-i-n-g, life in the Gaza Strip. And the best HBO series keep appearing on our streaming platforms.



An Israeli with a rifle uses a laptop at a cafe, in Tel Aviv, Israel, May 30, 2024. Credit: Marko Djurica/REUTERS

I have always asked myself (as many before me) what "ordinary" people's lives looked like while their country was committing atrocities, how it felt an hour away from daily mass killings. Were people on the other side of the siege living "normal" lives? Still going to the movies, having coffee with friends? Why didn't they rebel, confront implements of destruction and stop them with their bodies? I've never had an answer to this question, since I wasn't living in such a country. So, there it is, I now know.

I must report that life still consists of banalities. Buying a new pair of shoes for the kid, fixing the car, a family quarrel around the holyday dinner table and a morning coffee at a café nearby. True, we hear air-raid alarms and painful news of fallen soldiers, a lot of Israelis are displaced, and thoughts of our hostages leave you breathless. This routine merely amplifies the contrast: how does the sun rise up in the morning, and coffee and croissants are still being sold at cafés while our sisters and brothers are rotting away in the hell of the Gaza tunnels?

Very few Israelis object to this cruel war. A war that is turning the lives of hundreds of thousands in Gaza into hell, and also prevents the return of our hostages. Few manage to see through the nationalistic, militaristic indoctrination of mainstream Israeli media, whose betrayal of its calling and its conscious decision not to tell us anything of what we are doing in Gaza will go down in history books. Very few hear the voices coming from Gaza; and they, too, are paralyzed. This war has arrived at the stage of dead checking Gazan society, and still, we can't think of anything other than signing petitions, demonstrating, filing petitions and writing opinion pieces. But that, as someone once told me about my High Court of Justice petitions, is tantamount to an attempt to drain the ocean with a teaspoon.

Generations of Israelis will have to live with what we have done in Gaza over the last year. Generations of Israelis will have to explain to their children and grandchildren why we behaved that way. Some will have to explain why they didn't refuse to bomb. And some will have to explain why they didn't do more to stop the horror.

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