



Under the direction of Riccardo Bocco and Ibrahim Said

## De/Colonising Palestine Contemporary Debates

---

### Chapter Eighteen

## 'In Gaza, there is no Tomorrow': Youth Participation in Gaza's Great March of Return

Caitlin Procter

---

Publisher: Graduate Institute Publications  
Place of publication: Genève  
Published on OpenEdition Books: 21 mai 2025  
Series: eLivres de l'Institut  
Digital ISBN: 978-2-940600-51-9



<https://books.openedition.org>

Provided by Geneva Graduate Institute



### DIGITAL REFERENCE

Procter, Caitlin. "In Gaza, There Is No Tomorrow": Youth Participation in Gaza's Great March of Return". *De/Colonising/Palestine*, edited by Riccardo Bocco and Ibrahim Said, Graduate Institute Publications, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.4000/13zm9>.

---

This text was automatically generated on 28 juillet 2025.



The PDF format is issued under the Creative Commons - Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license unless otherwise stated.

## Chapter Eighteen

# **'In Gaza, there is no Tomorrow': Youth Participation in Gaza's Great March of Return**

---

Caitlin Procter

The Great March of Return was described by many in Gaza at the time as the most important popular uprising and demonstration of resistance since the second intifada. Based on interviews conducted in Gaza in late 2018 and 2019, this chapter concentrates on the perspectives of young people from refugee communities who took part in the march. The voices in this chapter present a range of perspectives on the meaning of the march, showing that the march was not necessarily an all-consuming event for these young people but rather a form of action that took place against a backdrop of ongoing everyday life. I argue that attention to these differences in perspective is critical to maintaining collectivity within this struggle and demand for justice and freedom.



## The Great March of Return

2019 | Light jet print mounted on matt diasec. 200 cm diameter. In the museum collection of The Arab World Institute in Paris, and the Contemporary Art Platform, Kuwait.

Source: **Steve Sabella**, <https://stevesabella.space/pages/the-great-march-of-return>

## Introduction

Bilal was shrouded in heavy blankets, sitting up on a small single bed in the corner of the main room of his family home, in the northern town of Beit Hanoun in Gaza. It was February 2019, and the room was cold and sparse. Bilal's family home was badly damaged during a bombing in 2014 and, like many families in Gaza, theirs had only recently managed to secure enough funds to start re-building. Beaming down at him from the otherwise raw concrete walls were three enormous posters of his own face—a photo taken while he was a student at Al Aqsa University—offered as a gift from his friends to celebrate his safe return from the hospital. Sixteen operations had not managed to re-graft the 14cm of bone missing from his left leg, a result of being shot with an explosive bullet during Gaza's Great March of Return. Pulling the heavy blankets aside, he used both arms to try to lift his leg, covered from his upper thigh to the ankle in heavy pins. In two months he would need further surgery. Bilal was twenty-five years old. He had left school when he was 13 to start working at a fruit and vegetable stall in the market in Beit Hanoun. Several years ago, he took over managing the stall, ensuring a modest but regular salary with which he could help support his family. As we talked, Bilal rocked back and forth incessantly, holding his left leg. He had suffered nerve damage from his bullet wounds and was trying to stimulate any kind of feeling in his leg. He knew he would probably never walk again (Interview2019a).

The Gaza Strip has been under blockade since 2007, when Israel declared the enclave to be a "hostile territory" following a Hamas coup.<sup>1</sup> Under this blockade of air, land, and sea, life in Gaza has become increasingly stifling. While movement within the enclave is heavily surveilled and regulated through checkpoints primarily operated by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, freedom of movement beyond Gaza is almost exclusively prevented by the siege. Particularly relevant in this sense is the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) – an administrative unit within the Israeli Military of Defense with a specific mandate to "implement the government's civilian policy within the territories of Judea and Samaria and toward the Gaza Strip."<sup>2</sup> Among its tasks, COGAT includes not only the policing of the movement of people in and out of Gaza, but also the entry and exit of all food and goods. This regulation has played a substantial role in the successful project of de-development in the Gaza Strip, which has slowly and systematically debased the possibility of an indigenous economy, eroding access to basic rights and needs among the population (Roy 2016). In 2015, the UN issued a report stating that Gaza would become "uninhabitable" by 2020 if the situation prevailing since the blockade began in 2007 continued (UNCTAD 2015). The report failed to compel the

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed history of Hamas's thirty-year transition from fringe military resistance to governance, see Baconi 2018.

<sup>2</sup> For further details, see: <http://www.cogat.mod.gov.il/en/about/Pages/default.aspx>.

international community to take substantive or meaningful action to address what has become a reality for the two million Palestinians locked inside the Gaza Strip. Access to clean water is almost non-existent, electricity hovers between six and eight hours a day in homes and workplaces throughout Gaza, and over a third of the population remains internally displaced since the 2014 Operation Protective Edge. At another level, the movement restrictions placed on Palestinians in Gaza by the siege make access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities beyond Gaza—and the import of vital goods and resources—practically impossible.

It is in this context that a generation of Palestinians in Gaza has grown up through three Israeli military attacks, in 2008, 2012, and 2014. The latest of these attacks was the most devastating, lasting 51 days between 8 July and the 26 August 2014. In these attacks, 2,251 Palestinians were killed, a further 11,231 were injured (ten percent of whom now suffer a permanent disability), and 18,000 homes were severely damaged or destroyed. At the height of the onslaught, 500,000 Palestinians became internally displaced persons (IDPs); by the end of the war, 100,000 Palestinians were left displaced (OHCHR 2015). Six years later, 30,000 Palestinians remain internally displaced in the Gaza Strip. Demolished buildings and streets are found across Gaza, and constant Israeli surveillance drones buzz overhead day and night. Spilling out of the already densely populated refugee camps, many families live under makeshift structures on the beach and on small patches of agricultural land. Gaza sits on the brink of a major public health crisis, where only three percent of the fresh-water along this stretch of the Mediterranean meets World Health Organization standards (Rand 2018). Households receive a maximum of eight non-consistent hours of electricity a day, with many families receiving only three or four hours and relying on generators when they can afford to do so. After 12 years of the Israeli-Egyptian blockade, unemployment in Gaza is among the highest in the world (World Bank 2019) and, almost exclusively, the young people interviewed during my research were unemployed.

Under the blockade, leaving and returning to the Gaza Strip has become almost impossible, but movement restrictions in Gaza in fact long pre-date the Hamas takeover in 2007. Since the start of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Israeli policies have consistently limited the possibility of domestic economic development, as part of a bid to preclude the possibility of a Palestinian state (Roy 2016), within which movement restrictions have played a key role. Later, in June 1989, Israel introduced a card system to restrict the movement of Palestinians in Gaza, limiting the number of individuals who could leave the Gaza Strip. After the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1994, Israel built a barrier around Gaza. Although it was still possible to get in and out, this access was conditional on permits and the crossings would regularly close without warning, leaving Palestinians trapped on either side. The bombing of the airport and seaport in Gaza in 2001 intensified the need for

access to goods and materials, which was made possible by a tunnel network (managed by different political factions between Gaza and Egypt) that had existed infrastructurally since the early 1980s (Pelham 2011). After the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Hamas set about formalising the tunnel economy through the Tunnel Affairs Commission, regulating the movement of goods and people through tunnels. Although Israel made concerted efforts to disrupt the tunnel network in Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009), it was not until Operation Protective Edge in 2014 that the tunnel network was substantially destroyed and largely stopped being used for the movement of people. Palestinians in Gaza have been trapped under the Israeli-Egyptian blockade since 2007, living in what is widely referred to as the largest open-air prison in the world.

The march was a critical resurgence of collectivism in Gaza and was widely described as a unifying force, or as a political awakening among Palestinians living under a 13- year Israeli-Egyptian siege. This chapter presents an analysis of the perspectives of female and male Palestinian youth in Gaza who took part in the the Great March of Return between 2018 and 2019. While in many ways what they experienced and shared of their participation in the march was closely linked to the overarching politics of the right of return, in other ways their perspectives shed light on other kinds of struggle. With the exception of one scholarly piece (Dana 2020) on the march, the vast majority of discussion of the collection of events that took place over this period of time were documented by journalists, human rights organisations, and humanitarian (primarily medical) organisations. The violence of the march was indeed spectacular, and capturing the attention of the world's media was often described by young people as an important outcome. Yet the narratives emerging from this documentation of why so many chose to participate, and continued to participate, as the march progressed from something non-violent to something very dangerous have not yet been explored. Doing so in fact helps to move beyond the 'moment' of the march itself, to look at how the experience of 73 years of settler colonialism that has systematically denied the right of return to Palestinian refugees has manifested in the lives of young Palestinians in Gaza.

This chapter draws from ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Gaza over a ten-month period between 2018 and 2019. The main focus of my research at the time was on the politics surrounding irregular mobility from Gaza, which was a study primarily undertaken with youth in refugee communities around Gaza. The Great March of Return was ongoing throughout this period of fieldwork. Although it was not the focus of my research during this time, all of the young people I came to meet in Gaza had joined the march in some capacity: to actively demonstrate, to bring food and water to the demonstrators, to cover the march as a journalist or photographer, as medics or paramedical volunteers, as taxi or bus drivers taking people to and from the march, or just to see what was happening. In addition to my other research, I

conducted 42 interviews with young people about the march and their participation in it, people that I had already come to know through my existing work in Gaza, or who were friends or family members of these interlocutors. These interviewees were aged 15-30, and the majority of them lived in refugee camps across Gaza—primarily in Khan Younis, Nusierat, Jabalia, and al Shati. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and English, and many of these interviews were undertaken with the support of a research assistant who has requested to remain anonymous. These interviews were generally carried out in people's homes, in community centres, or in quiet public spaces—most often, along the seafront. As with any research in Gaza, interviewees were very cautious about where they felt able to speak candidly, without being overheard or recorded. Many interviews were not orally recorded, but instead recorded with extensive notes.

## The Great March of Return

On 7 January 2018, a Palestinian intellectual, journalist, and activist in Gaza, Ahmad Abu Artema wrote the following post on Facebook, which is widely considered to have been the spark that led to the unfolding of the Great March of Return several months later:

What if 200,000 demonstrators accompanied by international media marched peacefully and breached the barbed wire fence east of Gaza to enter a few kilometers of our occupied land, carrying Palestinian flags and keys of return? What if they erected tents on the inside, established a tent city there, which they called *Bab al-Shams*, and were then joined by thousands of Palestinians from *al-dakhil*, and insisted on peacefully remaining there without resorting to any form of violence?

What could the occupation, bristling with arms do to a mass of humans advancing peacefully? Kill ten of them, twenty, or fifty? And then what? What could it do in the face of an unwavering mass peacefully marching? [We are] a people who want life and nothing more. Nothing can delay this idea but the shackles of our self-delusions. We are dying in this tiny besieged place, so why not bolt before the knife reaches our throats? Since they are plotting to kick us south after slaughtering us wholesale, why don't we preempt them and begin to run north?

If there must be a price to pay, then let it be in the direction of what is right, in the direction of returning to Palestine, where we can get new land and deepen the enemy's existential impasse. Once we implement this idea and achieve a historic breakthrough, we'll find out that we've wasted many years on hesitation and forbearance.

Revolt! You have nothing to lose but your chains. #Great\_March\_of\_Return. (Abusalim 2020)

This call was not the first of its kind but held a particular resonance at this time because of the political manoeuvres simultaneously taking place across Palestine, combined with the continually deteriorating living conditions across Gaza (Abusalim 2020). The origins of the march emerged within a framework of



political developments throughout Palestine orchestrated by the United States (US) Administration following the so-called “deal of the century.” In December 2017, President Donald Trump announced that Jerusalem would be considered as the capital of Israel (The White House 2017). Two weeks later, he proceeded to cut US funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) by 50 percent (United Nations 2018). The great march of return began on Land Day, 30 March 2018, a date commemorating the 1976 protest against land expropriation during which Israeli police and soldiers opened fire on Palestinian citizens of Israel, six of whom were killed. The march was initially organised through social media as a peaceful demonstration to which families came to participate with their children, sharing picnics and barbeques. It took place on what is referred to as the “fence” that separates the Gaza Strip from Israel: a fence which is made up of barbed wire and a one-kilometre buffer zone, punctuated by a system of surveillance towers. Tens of thousands of people, with diverse ideological backgrounds and political affiliations stood together, holding banners and flags bearing the names of the villages and towns from which their families had been ethnically cleansed in historic Palestine in 1948. The march was planned to last only until 15 May, marking the most important historic anniversary in the Palestinian calendar: the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nakba (catastrophe), which saw the ethnic cleansing of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their land in order to make way for the newly created state of Israel.

Buses were provided to collect people after Friday prayers and take them to the fence where a number of camps were established, from which food, drinks, and objects to be used during the protest were prepared and distributed. As time went on, the demonstrations became more structured and eventually organised by a “Higher National Committee” whose members included civil society, cultural and social organisations, student unions, women’s groups, and representatives of several political parties. As thousands marched, some with flags, others with slingshots, the air was filled with the sounds and smells of exploding tear gas canisters and explosive bullets fired by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), sometimes mingled with the sound of an ice cream truck moving between the different Palestinian camps. What started in the first few weeks as an event attended by families including young children bringing picnics and sharing songs and small theatre performances quickly became bloody.

According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (2020), during the first protest in November 2019 more than 35,600 demonstrators were injured, 7,996 with live ammunition—of whom Bilal was one. From the outset of the march, the IDF responded to those participating in the peaceful demonstration with both rubber and live bullets. Although the numbers participating in the march reduced after the brutal response of the Israeli military became apparent, demonstrations continued every Friday until late 2019. During this period, a staggering 36,143 Palestinians were injured. It is difficult to speak of the march in the past tense, as it never officially concluded. It is somewhat



chilling to remember leaving Gaza one Thursday through the Erez crossing in May 2019, when there was a huge hold up because of the quantity of international correspondents leaving Gaza declaring that the Great March of Return was “over now”—certainly after mid-2019, the world’s media had turned their attention elsewhere. At the time of writing, there are still protests along the fence, although these tend to be smaller in scale and far less frequent.

From the outset of the march, the IDF responded to those participating in the peaceful demonstration with both rubber and live bullets. On 14 May, as the US opened their embassy in Jerusalem, the march resulted in the deadliest events on record in Gaza since 2014, with 60 Palestinians killed and 2,200 Palestinians injured. Although the numbers participating in the march reduced after the brutal response of the Israeli military became apparent, demonstrations continued every Friday until late 2019. Every Friday the health system in Gaza would be on high alert, waiting for the cases to roll in. Interspersed among the ad hoc tents set up to provide refreshments and demonstration materials were emergency medical points, run by the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, ready to triage the injuries that were sure to arrive. What started in the first few weeks as a family friendly event quickly became bloody. Every Friday, the health system in Gaza would be on high alert, waiting for the cases to roll in. The Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights established a Commission of Inquiry into the Great March of Return. On 18 May 2018, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution (S-28/1) in which it decided to urgently dispatch an independent, international commission of inquiry to investigate all alleged violations and abuses of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the context of the military assaults on the large-scale civilian protests that began on 30 March 2018. The Commission found “reasonable grounds to believe that during these weekly demonstrations, the IDF killed and gravely injured civilians who were neither participating directly in hostilities nor posing an imminent threat to life” (UNHRC 2019). Among those shot were children, paramedics, journalists, and persons with disabilities. The Commission found that the use of lethal force in response was rarely necessary or proportionate, and that the IDF violated international human rights law in most instances the Commission investigated.

## **Tangible claims within a political awakening**

Doa’a was a young woman in her early twenties, who spent her days working in an embroidery cooperative in the refugee camp where she lived. She only got paid when her pieces sold—but she was glad to have a reason to be out of the house and spending time with other women at the cooperative, many of whom were the same age as her. Doa’a had been taking part in the march almost every Friday for the past year when we met. When the march

first began, she joined her colleagues from the cooperative in preparing food on Friday mornings to take with them to the march, which they served in one of the tents affiliated with a women's association from the refugee camp. This was one of many tents, hosted among others by civil society organisations, human rights organisations, labour unions, refugee committees and political parties, pitched along the fence and providing food, drinks, spaces for people to meet and talk, and activities for children:

For me the march isn't about politics, its more emotional than that. It's about living in dignity. It's about raising our voices, showing the world we are still here, and that yes, we are this desperate for a change that we will protest in this way against the strongest army in the world. We have nothing here – nothing to do, nothing to unite us, nothing to focus on – barely anyone has a job, it is becoming impossible to get married, and there is no money for anything. The march gives us something to talk about, something to do. (Interview 2019b)

As our conversation continued, Doa'a explained that she didn't necessarily expect tangible changes as a result of the march. After a year, the only change she could point to was a slight increase in electricity. While this was to be celebrated, she immediately pointed out that a side effect was that a number of her friends chose not to join the march anymore, instead preferring to stay at home on Fridays and make the most of the power to study, or to catch up with friends online. "If you don't think anything will change, then why continue to risk your life to participate," I asked. "If you're young in Gaza, you have three choices: you wait to be killed by an air strike, you try to escape and probably die trying, or you try to change the situation here. And maybe you die trying to make a change, but you're going to die anyway, so what difference does it make? In Gaza, there is no tomorrow" (Interview 2019b).

In discussing the march with young people who took part, a number of narratives began to emerge that jarred somewhat with the overarching political statements about the march of return. While some, like Doa'a, framed the march in terms of a political awakening, particularly among youth in Gaza, many others saw it in more practical terms. Few saw a possibility that such a movement could lead to any lasting, meaningful political change. The individuals whose voices and experiences represent the core narratives that emerged throughout these interviews; namely, the experience of boredom in Gaza, and the march providing something to do; the hope that the march could lead to concessions regarding the amount of materials permitted to enter Gaza, and therefore creating more jobs; the belief that injuries from the march would equate to much-needed financial support; and decisions to stop participating because the risks outweighed the potential gains. It is critical to stress that these motivations were intricately bound up in individual narratives and personal histories. The intention here is not to propose a one-dimensional lens through which to understand youth participation in the march—these narratives were also gathered at particular moments in time, with perspectives always contingent on

specific sets of circumstances. What was striking throughout these interviews, however, was the strength of alternative explanations of motivation and participation in the march, which clashed with the overarching meta-narrative of the march. Engagement with these explanations, I suggest, helps to move beyond the 'moment' of the march itself, to look instead at how the experience of 73 years of settler colonialism that has systematically denied the right of return to Palestinian refugees has manifested in the lives of young Palestinians in Gaza.

Mohammed, Ibrahim, Saleh, Said, and Ahmad were brothers in their early to mid-twenties living in the same home in Nusierat refugee camp. The all participated in the march every Friday for over a year and had no intention of stopping. From their perspective, participation was not about asking for liberation, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, or even lifting the blockade on Gaza. What they were demanding through their participation in the march was more limited than that: they wanted more goods allowed to pass in and out of Gaza to create more jobs. The bigger political ideas behind the march had always seemed unattainable. Instead, the brothers agreed that they thought the march was a good opportunity to put pressure on Israel, and they hoped the result of this would be a slight easing of the restrictions imposed by the blockade. Saleh explained:

The march is *al-fadi* (in vain), the situation is only getting worse – we know that. We also don't need to end the siege – the siege will never end, we know that too. We just need the borders to be open for more materials to come into Gaza. If we can have some more jobs in construction, then this is what will improve our lives for the future. (Interview 2019f)

Aged between 19 and 28, all five of them had been working in construction since they were teenagers. Construction is a key industry in Gaza, and a primary source of employment among male youth even though the work itself is highly irregular. As a result of the march, all five of the brothers had sustained injuries leaving them unable to walk without crutches. Mohammed had his right leg amputated after he was shot on 15 May; Ibrahim had undergone 16 operations to try and reconstruct the missing 12 cm of bone in his left leg; Said sustained nerve damage from his thigh downwards, leaving no feeling in his foot; Saleh had undergone five operations to try and reconstruct his knee cap; and Ahmed had both legs in pins. As we spoke at their home in Rafah, their mother lingered by the door to the kitchen, bringing trays of drinks and snacks in and out. All but one of her sons were married with children, and now they were all living under one roof as she tried to support them. Small financial support grants from Qatar in the immediate aftermath of their injuries had helped to pay the rent for a few months, but now this money had dried up. The brothers joked at the irony that they took part in the march fundamentally because they thought it could lead to future work opportunities. Now with their injuries, they knew they would be unlikely to work again.

Alongside the idea that the march could lead to some easing of the blockade, which might allow the creation of more jobs in Gaza, others—particularly younger adolescents—were convinced that financial incentives would be offered if they were injured, and that this was a way through which they could support their families. Rami, Ahmad, and Ibrahim were friends from school in the Al-Shati refugee camp. Now in their early twenties, they had all left school at 13, and had been working a variety of jobs in Gaza city to support their families. Rami worked in construction, when he could find opportunities to do so. Ahmad spent the summer months walking up and down the beach in Gaza city selling sweetcorn, and the winters selling sandwiches outside one of the universities. Ibrahim drove a small donkey and cart, sometimes alone and sometimes with his uncle, selling vegetables and fruit in the east of Gaza city. All three had sustained serious injuries from being shot in the legs during the march. Rami was shot in both legs with explosive bullets. He still had pieces of shrapnel wedged into his left leg, even though he had undergone three operations, including one in Egypt for which he received money from the Ministry of Health. Ahmed was barely able to walk because of his injuries, his friends supporting him on both sides to help him sit down and stand up. Ibrahim was awaiting nerve surgery on his leg in Turkey, having regular physiotherapy in the meantime.

The three friends began participating in the march long before it became 'official' and countered the prominence that Abu Artema's Facebook post had been given for being the 'start' of the march. Whenever we spoke about the march, they debated between themselves their reasons for still participating, in spite of their injuries. Rami explained:

We've been going to the fence for ages – we used to go on Tuesdays and on Fridays, we've been there for months, since long before everyone else started marching. Then suddenly everyone else wanted to go to, and they made it something more political. To be honest, here in Gaza there is really not very much to do, in the evenings, if you are not working...life is very boring day to day. And so going to the fence was something to do. It just became a habit to go there, for me, *ya'ani 'aadi*, when we used to go I never really thought of it as something political – its just what you do. This is not something political, it is what we did because, well, we just did it, it is an ordinary thing to do. (Interview 2019d)

Rami had recently returned from Egypt and was on a waiting list to travel again to receive further surgery, but he was not optimistic that this would happen soon. He had waited six months the first time. When he was working, he had been able to earn around 60 shekels (around 13 Euros) per day, although there were usually only a handful of workdays each month. He said that he was certain never to work again in construction, even if the surgery went well and managed to remove all the shrapnel from his leg. Ibrahim was less convinced by his friend's narrative about going to the march only out of boredom:

It's not just that...it is for something bigger, but...how can I put it. Maybe, day by day, one day it will lead us somewhere different. Like it did with Jerusalem [referencing the protests that led to the dismantling of security gates around the entrance to Al Aqsa several months earlier]. But I agree, there is nothing to do here – and all our friends are there. I don't really have expectations that this thing will change our lives. (Interview 2019d)

Ahmad had spent most of the last ten years working with his father, selling sweetcorn on the corniche along the sea front in Gaza. In the summer of 2018, he was shot in the leg, sending shrapnel through his thigh that remains there to this day. Limping clumsily in his loose tracksuit bottoms and sandals, we sat on plastic chairs outside his family home in al-Shati refugee camp on the edge of Gaza city. He had just returned from Egypt, where he had travelled for surgery promised by a charitable foundation. After four months waiting, the operation still had not taken place, and his family had run out of money to support him. He had been making a living selling corn before the injury, with which he was able to support his family. His injury meant that he could no longer stand or walk around to deal with customers, and now his family were struggling to pay their rent. But for Ahmad, his injury was not severe enough:

There are so many injuries now from the march, that you only get financial support if you're one of the worst cases. So I'm going back to the March on Friday. (Interview 2019c)

An amputation, he reasoned, might lead to more financial support. Ahmed understood that if he sustained an injury leading to amputation or paralysis, then he would be eligible to receive up to 1,200 shekels (around 300 Euros) a month from Hamas. He was certain that some other people in his community were receiving this amount, and since he thought he would be unlikely to be able to financially support his family again anyway, this seemed to him the only solution.

As much as these everyday struggles shaped decisions to participate, they also shaped decisions not to do so. Indeed, living in extreme precarity is not systematically synonymous with an absence of personal projects, and among several interlocutors I interviewed, taking part in the march was seen as disrupting those. Abdullah was a qualified social worker with a master's degree, who had only managed to find occasional work as a taxi driver since graduating five years earlier. More of his friends than he could count were now living with a serious injury, having lost a leg, or the ability to walk, or sustained serious damage to their internal organs that meant they were largely bed-bound. As a taxi driver in the Khan Younis refugee camp where he lived, he made seven shekels (around €1.50) on a good day. This was just enough to buy bread for the family, and sometimes a sweet treat for one of his younger siblings:

I've supported Hamas my whole life, but there is no goal with this march – they're using it only as a tool to divert attention from the internal crisis in Gaza. If people were not marching on the border, they would be marching in the streets demanding their salaries, better services, more electricity. The march is a tactic for diverting the attention of the people. It doesn't mean I don't believe in the right of return – of course I do – of course this is what everyone in Gaza dreams of. I just don't believe our leaders have any real investment in this idea anymore. They only want to retain their own power in Gaza, and we are just the pawns in this game. (Interview 2019b)

Instead of risking an injury that seemed to him an inevitability if he participated, Abdullah turned his energies to trying to securing any regular form of employment. He told me that he had just applied for a job as a guard for an organisation working in the camp—a job requiring no prior qualifications or training. More than 500 people in the camp had applied for the role.

Abdullah's anger towards Hamas' involvement in the march was echoed in different ways by many other young people. Rana was an activist in her early 20s, who had been involved in organising drama activities for children along the fence during the early weeks of the March. Once Hamas began to speak of the march however, she stopped joining on Fridays:

I saw them at the march from the start, there were a lot of Hamas and Islamic Jihad affiliates there from the beginning – but they were never the ones 'doing the work' – they were never the ones going to the fence. The opposite! The politicians were the ones hiding away behind the smoke from the burning tyres! It was like a shield for them. The people actually at the fence are not political people at all – they are people with no money and no hope. (Interview 2019e)

In comments echoed by many young people, Rana suggested that what the march had really achieved was a great benefit to Hamas, by distracting people from the reality of their everyday lives. Meanwhile people were severely injured, and whatever limited compensation money was made available would surely never be enough to make up for the increased unemployment that would come as a result.

Towards the summer of 2019, I met with Doa'a again. Several months into the march, her brother had been shot in the leg with an explosive bullet, which shattered 12cm of bone, requiring multiple rounds of surgery and metal plates to hold it together. Doa'a had stopped working at the cooperative in order to care for him, although this meant her family now had no income at all. Her brother could no longer work because of his injury, and her father had long been unemployed. Her brother continued to attend the march with their father most Fridays, although Doa'a rarely joined them anymore:

The march now is *al fadi* [she describes it as meaningless in contrast to how it was at the beginning]. The only thing it achieved was debilitating the potential workers among Gaza's youth. Now there is even more pressure at home than there was before – because

we have even less money, and more care responsibilities. My mother is exhausted, I'm exhausted. To be honest, sometimes I still go to the march but only to accompany my brother because he wants to go. If we have electricity at home on a Friday, I prefer to rest and talk to my friends on Instagram and Tiktok. (Interview 2019g)

## A march for return, a march for dignity

Whabe's (2020) recent work on the politics of *karameh* (dignity) establishes a fresh lens to approach actions and decisions that are rooted in resistance to the Israeli state, and to analyse narratives that fundamentally revolve around the question inherent for Palestinians living through a settler colonial project seeking their erasure: how do we uphold dignity for ourselves and our community in the face of abject violence, dehumanisation, and humiliation? (Whabe 2020, 336). This approach is useful here because it also creates space for understanding the many other lenses through which young people engaged in the march, encompassed by the right of return but broken down into more tangible claims linked to everyday struggles to live in dignity. As in any protest movement, motivations for participation are embedded in diverse social and economic needs. By looking from above, protest movements might appear to be set or determined entities, consciously striving and mobilising to obtain a specific goal—but in reality, they seldom are. Often, participation wavers and people's aspirations are more modest than those of the movements' slogans. What we can see by analysing youth participation in the Great March of Return is that many of these young people explicitly linked their participation to the everyday struggles that more immediately preoccupied them: things to do, ways to spend time, access to employment, and how to economically support their families. As Wright (2018) argues, certain kinds of protest may be easily recognisable, made up of individuals engaged in a particular moment of struggle—a form of activism. But while it is critical of course to follow the complexities and dilemmas of these clearly "political" engagements in moments of protest, it is also critical to focus on the everyday that takes place around them: in people's leisure spaces, in time with friends and family, and in the banal forms of action and communication that constitute the often invisible backdrop to what we generally recognise as activism.

Understanding events, protests, and social movements ethnographically have the potential to go in a number of directions. Anthropologists have long studied protests, either with the aim of using them as a lens to study society at large, or to independently instigate social transformations (Kapferer 2015). Other ethnographies, particularly in the Middle East, have focussed more on the performative aesthetics of protests, including songs, videos, images, and discussion of performative violence—both among protestors, and those involved in documenting protests (Spellman et al 2014). The Great March of Return was characterised by the spectacular juxtaposition of a peaceful march



by Palestinians in Gaza with the gunfire of the Israeli military. Participation in the march was overtly framed within Palestinian political discourse, by Palestinian and international media, and by civil society organisations in Gaza as the praxis of resistance. The goals of the march were explicit from the organisers' perspective, and this was certainly an objective shared by many young people participating. For others, as the brutal Israeli military response to the march became apparent, the decision around whether or not they could or should take part were bound up in a complex network constituting their individual and collective identities. This is precisely the contribution of the ethnographic study of social movements, in taking analysis directly to the sites of individual and community perceptions, in order to understand the considerations, doubts, aspirations, and meaning-giving both of those who participate and those who do not (Salman and Assies 2017). This establishes a space for understanding how individuals manage to produce other knowledges and practices, away from the spectacle of violence that characterises protest (Maruquez 2020). In this case, it creates an opportunity to consider how the fundamental denial of rights to Palestinians in Gaza has manifested in the experiences of youth growing up under blockade, which is a key tool within the Israeli state's settler colonial project. From the narratives presented by these young people who took part in the march, it seems clear that, while the political engineering of the Israeli settler colonial state project has created a social condition of precarity for Palestinians in both political and economic terms, the Great March of Return reveals a yet another layer of the precarious way of life Palestinians in Gaza have been forced to endure. For young people participating in the march, the precarity they lived was not only because of the political status quo, or because of the structural imposition of the de-development of Gaza's economic foundation, but rather because of a profoundly existential precarity surrounding what possible future there could be for Gaza.

## Conclusion

By highlighting different kinds of everyday struggle, this chapter has unpacked some of the micro-dynamics that were embedded in the Great March of Return, in order to account for people's perceptions of and attitudes towards the popular framing discourses of the march. This, from an anthropological perspective, is key information critical to understanding the potential and scope of the movement itself. As the narratives of young people throughout this chapter show, a great deal is at stake in traditional forms of political participation, including political protest, which come to be representative of more tangible pragmatic needs. Making room for this broader understanding does not detract from the overarching politics of the march. On the contrary, I believe it rather establishes different ways of understanding precisely what the experience of dignity systematically denied means in practice.

Conversations about the march with young people clearly broke down the meta-narrative of return into different angles and approaches. This produced competing narratives about what the march was for, why it was important to participate or not, and perhaps most of all showing that the march was not necessarily an all-consuming event for these young people, but rather a form of action that took place against a backdrop of ongoing everyday life. There can be a tendency in discussions of Gaza to treat all Palestinians in the same category, with attention to class, gender, political, and ideological division often cast aside. The Great March of Return in Gaza is a space to understand these multiple narratives, as befits any movement of struggle that crosses class and gendered divides. The demand of return was also a space for multiple struggles to play out, highlighting what how the lived experience of the siege differently manifests among young people in Gaza, and creating space for different ways of articulating what is ultimately a united struggle for dignity.

## References

- Abusalim, J. 2020. "The Great March of Return: An Organizer's Perspective." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47, no. 4: 90-100.
- Al-Husseini, J. and Bocco, R. 2009. "The status of Palestinian refugees in the Near East: the right of return and UNRWA in perspective." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28(2-3): 260-285.
- Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights. 2022. "15 years too long: the devastating effects of Israel's closure and blockade on the Gaza Strip." Available via: <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/15-years-too-long-fact-sheet-devastating-effects-israels-closure-and-blockade-gaza-strip>
- Alloul, J. 2016. "Signs of visual resistance in Palestine: unsettling the settler colonial matrix." *Middle East Critique* 25(1): 23-44.
- Baconi, T. 2018. *Hamas Contained: The rise and pacification of Palestinian resistance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Dana, T. 2020. "A cruel invention: Israeli experiments on Gaza's Great March of Return." *Sociology of Islam* 8(2): 175-198.
- Darweish, M. and Rigby, A. 2015. *Popular protest in Palestine: the future of unarmed resistance*. London: Pluto Press.
- Human Rights Council. 2019. "Report of the detailed findings of the independent international Commission of inquiry on the protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territory." *Fortieth session*, 25 February–22 March.
- Interview. 2019a. Interview with author. 5 March.
- Interview. 2019b. Interview with the author. 22 March.

- Interview. 2019c. Interview with the author. 9 April.
- Interview. 2019d. Interview with the author. 10 April.
- Interview. 2019e. Interview with the author. 12 April.
- Interview. 2019f. Interview with the author. 25 April.
- Interview. 2019g. Interview with the author. 5 August.
- Laïdi-Hanieh, A (ed.). 2008. *Palestine, rien nous manques ici*. Paris: Editions Cercle d'Art.
- Mahmood, S. 2005. *Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Maruquez, F. 2020. "Anthropology and Chile's *Estallido Social*." *American Anthropologist* 122(3): 667-675.
- MSF. 2020. "Shattered limbs, shattered lives." Available via <https://www.msf.org/great-march-return-depth>.
- OHCHR. 2015. "The United Nations Independent Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza Conflict." Available via: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/coigazaconflict/pages/commissionofinquiry.aspx>.
- OCHA. 2018. "Humanitarian needs overview." Available via [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/2018/12/humanitarian\\_needs\\_overview\\_2019-%281%29.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/2018/12/humanitarian_needs_overview_2019-%281%29.pdf).
- OCHA. 2020. "Two years on: people injured and traumatized during the Great March of Return are still struggling". Available via <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/two-years-people-injured-and-traumatized-during-great-march-return-are-still-struggling>
- OCHA. 2022. "The humanitarian impact of 15 years of blockade". Available via <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/gaza-strip-humanitarian-impact-15-years-blockade-june-2022-enarhe>
- Patierno, N. 2015. 'Palestinian liberation theology: creative resistance to occupation'. *Islam and Christian-Muslim relations* 26(4): 443-464.
- Pelham, N. 2011. "Gaza's tunnel phenomenon: the unintended consequences of Israel's siege." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41(4).
- RAND Corporation. 2018. *The Public Health Impact of Gaza's Water Crisis*. Santa Monica: RAND.
- Roy, S. 2007. *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*. London: Pluto Press.
- Roy, S. 2016. *The Gaza Strip: A political economy of de-development*. Washington DC.: Institute for Palestine Studies.
- Salman, T., and W.J. Assies. 2017. "Anthropolgy and the study of social movements." In *Handbook of Social Movements Across Disciplines*, edited by C. Roggeband and B. Klandermans. Cham: Springer.

- Santos, M. 2018. 'Palestinian narratives of resistance: the Freedom theatre's challenge to Israeli settler colonisation'. *Settler Colonial Studies* 8(1):96-113.
- Scott, J. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Scott, J. 1989. 'Everyday forms of resistance'. *Copenhagen Papers* 4:33-62.
- Shwaikh, M. and Van Gils, M. 2016. 'Fighting without weapons: Palestinian documentary films and acts of resistance'. *Asian Affairs* 47(3): 443-464.
- Spellman, K., M. Webb, and P. Werbner (eds). 2014. *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.
- The United Nations. 2018. "UNRWA Faces Greatest Financial Crisis in Its History Following 2018 Funding Cuts." Press release, 9 November. Available via <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unrwa-faces-greatest-financial-crisis-in-its-history-following-2018-funding-cuts-commissioner%E2%80%91general-tells-fourth-committee-press-release/>.
- The White House. 2017. "Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem." June. Available via <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/>.
- UNCTAD. 2015. "Report on UNCTAD assistance to the Palestinian people: Developments in the economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory." Available via [https://unctad.org/meetings/en/SessionalDocuments/tdb62d3\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/meetings/en/SessionalDocuments/tdb62d3_en.pdf).
- Whabe, R. 2020. "The politics of *karameh*: Palestinian burial rites under the gun." *Critique of Anthropology* 40(3): 323-340.
- World Bank. 2019. "The World Bank in the West Bank and Gaza." Available via <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza>.