

Opinion Articles

Body and Body Politic in Gaza: Testaments of a New Epoch

Ghada Ageel

His body remains detained, much like the numerous bodies of Palestinian detainees who perished in the confines of Israeli jails and whose remains have been withheld. Withholding bodies is but part of a systematic Israeli policy since 1967. Imprisoning bodies in graveyards for years after their deaths—whether due to torture, assassination, illness, or dying before completing their prison sentences—is exemplified by the cemeteries of numbers.

Dr. Adnan Al-Bursh is more than just a casualty of Israel's relentless onslaught against Palestinian civilians. He is one of the hundreds of health workers and thousands of civil society leaders who were systematically targeted since the slaughter began. Since October 7, 2023, 340 attacks have been launched on healthcare facilities and workers. The healthcare sector has collapsed with only 9 hospitals partially operational, 130 ambulances destroyed, and 500 healthcare workers have become martyrs, hundreds injured, and over 310 detained (Jadou, 2024).

The harshness of the killing of healthcare workers symbolizes the body politic of the Palestinian steadfastness and embodies the essence of the bold vision of the Palestinian collective, deeply rooted in the spirit of Al-Bursh. Based on recent data gathered from news sources, social media, and websites, his story unfolds.

Before he was taken from us, Dr. Adnan Al-Bursh, 49, was a luminary in the medical field, a distinguished surgeon, and the head of the orthopedic departments at both Shifa Medical Complex and the Islamic University in Gaza. He worked tirelessly at Al-Shifa Hospital until it became a target of Israeli attacks. In November 2023, during the first Israeli invasion into the hospital, Dr. Al-Bursh was forced to evacuate following the orders of the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF). He temporarily relocated to the south, but eventually returned to the north. According to his nephew Mohammed, Dr. Al-Bursh kept moving from one hospital in Gaza to another, each falling victim of IOF destruction. Ultimately, he ended up at Al-Awda Hospital in Jabalia Refugee Camp, where he continued his work of tending to the injured and saving lives (Khaddar et.al, 2024).

During the first Israeli invasion into Al-Shifa Hospital, Mohammad told CNN Israeli soldiers had told the medical staff, including Dr. Al-Bursh that they could either leave the hospital and go south, or face arrest. He followed orders and went south temporarily, eventually returning to the north of Gaza when he felt the roads were safe, Mohammad said.

- Dr. Ghada Ageel, Visiting Professor, University of Alberta, Canada. Email: ageel@ualberta.ca.

- Copyright 2024, all data in this article is protected and permission for use must be obtained through Al-Quds University (www.alquds.edu).

In December 2023, the IOF invaded Jabalia Camp and arrested Dr. Al-Bursh in Al-Awda Hospital. For over four months, he languished in captivity until he was declared deceased by Israeli prison authorities at Ofer Prison on April 19th leaving behind a wife and five young children, the youngest is three years old.

Dr. Al-Bursh's body is representative of the Palestinian body politic, targeted by Israel, with the intent to destroy it. In the poem "The Last Train has Stopped" Mahmoud Darwish yearned to be able to free his body from his homeland. But he never achieved this goal as for Palestinians, this is an impossible task because the wounds of the body and the wounds of the nation are experienced as one and the same. Likewise, the resistance to these wounds is as one - embodied in the spirit of steadfastness and sumoud (resilience).

This is the spirit which, in his last post on X, Dr. Al-Bursh, encapsulates the collective Palestinian narrative, affirming their enduring presence on their land and their steadfast commitment to living with dignity. He posted a cartoon image of him wearing his scrubs in the midst of Gaza's destruction, with a note that reads, "We will die standing, and we will not kneel... All that remains in the valley are its stones, and we are its stones."

Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, many of Gaza's civil society leaders- both those who have perished as a shaheed (martyr) and those who continue to witness the unfolding genocide as shahid (witness)- consistently articulate a unified sentiment akin to Dr. Al-Bursh's- resilience, in all its forms and shapes is the path for a free Palestine.

Heba Abu Nada, a young writer and poet from Gaza, was tragically killed by an Israeli strike in November 2023. From the largest open-air prison in the world and amidst the ongoing genocide, Heba courageously echoed Dr. Al-Bursh's bold stance. In one of her social media posts, she wrote "we in Gaza are either martyrs or witnesses. We are all waiting for where we will end. Know that we are satisfied and steadfast; and inform the world that we are people who have rights" (Hikayet Shahid).

The testimonies provided by Gazans about the pervasive violence inflicted on Palestinian bodies is not new. The dialectic of lived history of genocide and the historical memory of 1948 has never been as accurate as it is now: The Baptist Hospital massacre, Al Shifa massacre; the flour massacre; Rafah Tent massacre - all these live on our bodies as the massacres of Deir Yaseen, Tantura, Bureir and Beit Daras (for more details see Khalidi, *All That Remains*, 1992). What is truly striking is the clear and firm response to that violence on behalf of the collective Palestinian body.

Dr. Basel Mahdy was one of three brothers, all gynaecologists, who worked in a private maternity hospital in the middle-class suburb of Al-Rimal in Gaza City. He was killed alongside his brother Raed, Raed's wife Iman, their seven adult and young children: Samira, a dentist and soon-to-be bride; Yousef, who had just finished his master's degree; Ahmad, a medical school student; and Amer, Abderrahmane, Mohamed and Mira, all schoolchildren. The attack also claimed the life of over a dozen of displaced people who sought shelter in the maternity hospital, last November. Many of those displaced were the families of women in the late stages of pregnancy expecting to give birth. They resorted to hospital when the north was attacked, and Dr. Basel and his two other brothers opened their door for them. In his final Facebook post, Dr. Basel wrote "No one will die ahead of time. However, some die lacking the basic tenets of dignity and humanity. This is a shame" (Ageel, 2023).

One of the most basic principles of international law is that civilian infrastructure must be protected. This is especially the case with hospitals. As the World Health Organization has said: "The world cannot stand silent while these hospitals, which should be safe havens, are transformed into scenes of death, devastation and despair" (World Health Organization, 2023). The deliberate nature of these attacks on hospitals can be construed not simply as a marker of excessive violence but of genocidal intent. The intent is to destroy both the body politic and the bodies of newborn or unborn Palestinians.

In response to this horror, Dr. Basil and his team defended their principles, humanity, dignity even at the expense of their own lives. It was their choice, their vision and their stance. In Arabic, the name Basel means "valiant". Dr. Basel was a man who lived up to his name by always standing tall in the face of oppression defending dignity and humanity. One of the survivors of this massacre was Dr. Yousef, the brother of Dr. Basel and Dr. Raed. He went outside the hospital building to take a break and smoke a cigarette when the hospital was struck. He survived to be shahid (witness) and to tell the story of the Mahdy Hospital.

Living in occupied and besieged Gaza, held for years under blockade, and experiencing the unfolding human eradication, Palestinian civil society leaders including the young generation have expressed the difficulty of their lives and limited choices, a reality they have lived long before October 7th. Despite that harsh reality, this generation remains undeterred in their demands and resolute in their refusal to compromise their rights. Reflecting this determination, journalist Amna Hmaid, 33, a formidable feminist voice, a poet, a mother, an activist and an author whose impact transcended the realms of journalism penned on her Facebook page just before her tragic demise:

My choices have always been a mix of bitter and astonishing experiences. Though these current junctures are fraught with difficulty and fate hangs in the balance, I have never been one to waver, to bend, to retreat, or to falter. Nothing will deter me from upholding the sanctity of sacraments and carrying and delivering the message that I deeply realised at a young age.

On April 24th Amna's home was targeted by several missiles. She was killed alongside her eldest son Mahdi, 11. Before her murder, the Israeli Channel 14 published Amna's photo in a clip it broadcast to incite against her and a group of Palestinian journalists who were working at Al-Shifa Hospital documenting the crimes against humanity. The threat against Amna did not deter her and she continued her work embodying a clear vision of a new generation who "refuse to kneel" and prefer to die standing up, to echo Dr. Al-Bursh's words (Ageel, 2024).

This determination to resist by fulfilling their duties regardless of the consequences is a constant feature of the testimonies shared by Gazan young leaders who were executed by the IOF. Dr. Hammam Alloh, 36, described as a "beacon of light" as described by fellow doctor, Ben Thompson, from Doctors Without Borders who worked with him in Gaza last September, exemplified this commitment and vision. Dr. Hammam, a Gazan nephrologist and kidney specialist refused to heed Israeli directives to evacuate Al-Shifa Hospital, continuing to care for his patients. He was killed alongside his father, brother-in-law and father-in-law in an Israeli artillery strike on his home that is not far away from Shifa (Democracy Now, 2023).

Despite the IOF's relentless and systematic attacks on Al-Shifa Hospital and its medical teams, Dr. Hammam was resolute in his commitment to stay and resist the orders. Echoing Dr. Al-Bursh sentiments "we are the stones of the valley," he remained at Al-Shifa Hospital to serve his patients and treat the wounded. Responding to Amy Goodman's question on Democracy Now, "Why don't you go with your family south"? Dr. Hamam answered: "If I go, who treats my patients, you think I went to medical school for 14 years so I can only think about my life not my patients? I am asking you Mam do you think this is the reason I went to medical school to think about my life? This is not the reason I become a doctor" (Democracy Now, 2023).

Dr. Hammam will be forever a name ingrained in my memory and in my heart. On the morning of Sunday, November 12th, I received a plea, an SOS, from a friend of mine seeking my help in connecting them to any institutions in Gaza (as the Red Cross was unable to reach them) to evacuate Dr. Hammam to the hospital after an attack. Sadly, despite all my attempts, I could not reach anybody (Ageel, 2023). Dr. Hammam was left bleeding before his two children aged 5 and 4 years while his wife desperately phoned everyone she could think of. He succumbed to his fate becoming a shaheed (martyr) and a shahid (witness) who was able to tell the world a fraction of what the Palestinian body has endured. The full story however is yet to be told.

Before he was killed together with his two colleagues, also physicians, in the bombardment of Al-Awda Hospital, Dr. Mahamoud Abu Njila wrote on his Facebook: "We did everything we could. He who will stay until the end will tell the story." Telling the Palestinian story, the true and full version of it, is part of these leaders' (both shaheed and shahid) strategies for a free Palestine. Dr. Mahmoud's vision to keep the Palestinian story alive was also to be found in Rifaat al-Araeer's words and work, a professor of English literature, writer and poet. Rifaat, 44, lived all his life in his neighborhood Shuja'iyah in Northern Gaza, which he described as "the epitome of resurrection that refuses to kneel to Israel's barbarity." However, in early December he was forced to leave home and seek shelter in his sister's home in Al-Daraj neighborhood. On December the 7th, the home was targeted and Rifaat was killed alongside his brother Salah, his nephew Mohammed, his sister Asmaa and her three children: Alaa, Mohammed and Yehya. His final poem reads:

*If I must die,
you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings
(make it a white kite with a long tail),
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza,
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad, who left in a blaze -
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself -*

*sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love.
If I must die
let it bring hope,
let it be a story.*

In their words and actions, Gaza's representative of the Palestinians' body politic—comprising of scientists, doctors, professors, writers, activists, and journalists—are united in their unwavering pursuit of freedom through steadfastness and resilience. Despite the pervasive genocidal violence inflicted on their bodies, they resisted until their last breath, serving as diagnosticians of political ills, bearing witness to pain and anguish that transcend generations, and courageously confronting and seeking to transform these injustices. They imparted a vision that lays the groundwork for a new epoch. Though their voices have been silenced, their words and epics continue to resonate through the corridors and skies of Gaza and beyond, challenging oppressive systems and offering a collective vision for liberation. They stand as a testament to the indomitable spirit of Gaza, a compass guiding the Palestinian struggle for freedom.

Palestinians "will die standing," and "will not kneel" "All that remains in the valley are its stones." Rest in power Dr. Al-Bursh.

References:

- Ageel, G. (2023). *While the world has abandoned Gaza, its doctors have done the opposite. They are our heroes.* The Guardian, Nov, 25,2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/25/world-abandoned-gaza-doctors-heroes-palestinian-hospitals>.
- Ageel, G. (2024). *Remembering Palestinian journalist Amna Homaid.* AlJazeera, May, 26, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/5/26/remembering-palestinian-journalist-amna-homaid>.
- Ageel, G. (2023). *An SOS call from Gaza.* AlJazeera, Nov., 15, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/11/15/an-sos-call-from-gaza>
- Democracy now, Nov. 13, 2023 <https://x.com/democracynow/status/1724063499171528826>.
- Euro-Med Monitor (2024). *Flour massacre New evidence confirms Israel's full involvement in 'Flour Massacre' of starving Palestinian civilians,* March 6, 2024. <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/6207/New-evidence-confirms-Israel%E2%80%99s-full-involvement-in-%E2%80%98Flour-Massacre%E2%80%99-of-starving-Palestinian-civilians>
- Hikayet Shahid. https://t.me/hikayat_shaheed
- Jadou, Mohannad (2024). *Financial siege pushes Palestinian health sector towards collapse,* June 6, <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/144799>.
- Khadder, K., Salman, A. Saifi, Z. and Magramo, K. (2024). *Leading Gaza surgeon Adnan Al-Bursh dies in Israeli prison,* Fri May 3, 2024, CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/03/middleeast/gaza-surgeon-adnan-al-bursh-israeli-prison-intl-hnk/index.html>.
- Khalidi, Walid (ed.) (1992). *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948.* Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestien Studies.
- Palestinian Return centre Report (2023). *Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital Massacre in Gaza,* 21 Oct 2023. <https://prc.org.uk/upload/library/files/Alahli-Hospital-MassacreEN.pdf>.
- World Health Organization (2023). *WHO appalled by latest attack on Indonesian Hospital in Gaza,* <https://www.emro.who.int/media/news/who-appalled-by-latest-attack-on-indonesian-hospital-in-gaza.html#:~:text=The%20world%20cannot%20stand%20silent,and%20actively%20protect%2C%20health%20facilities>.