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زبانهای اروپایی

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03.08.2024



Chris Hedges

Chris Hedges: A Diary of Genocide

An interview with Atef Abu Saif, the Palestinian novelist who chronicled his experience surviving the most recent onslaught in Gaza. Born in the besieged territory, Saif has known war his whole life.

Those that attempt to transmit the truth from war zones — whether factual or artistic — in the face of death, violence and sickness vanquish the lies told by the killers, determined to make those of us far from the carnage understand. This is why writers, photographers and journalists are targeted by aggressors in war, including the Israelis, for obliteration.

Atef Abu Saif, the Palestinian novelist who has served as the minister for culture in the Palestine Authority since 2019, chronicled his experience surviving the most recent onslaught in Gaza that has persisted since last October in his book, *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide*.

Born in Gaza, Saif has known war his whole life.

“I was born during war, and I might die during war, actually,” he tells me in this interview.

“This is our life as Palestinians.”

By detailing the trauma of his experience through horrifyingly vivid imagery and tragic tales of murdered loved ones and permanently injured family, Saif illustrates how life in Gaza, as he says, “is timeout for survival. The normal discourse is to be killed and for your house to be destroyed, like my house in this war. So what we live is like a timeout. It’s rest. So it’s not the normal thing to live.”

This spacey description of existing in the face of genocide is reflected in the minister for culture's words to his niece Wissam when she lost her legs and one of her hands after her family was bombed by the Israelis:

“We are all in a dream...all our dreams are terrifying.”

In this first episode of the new and independent iteration of *The Chris Hedges Report*, Saif and I explore these experiences, and the meaning behind them, in a substantive and powerful conversation. Through it, the texture of the genocide and the damage it inflicts on its victims is captured, as Saif's eloquence and vulnerability reveals the weight of the tragedy in a way that only facts and data simply would not be able to.

Transcript

Chris Hedges: There are scores of Palestinian writers, journalists and photographers, many of whom have been killed in the Israeli attacks on Gaza, who are determined to make us see and feel the horror of this genocide. They, in the end, will vanquish the lies told by the killers. Writing and photographing in wartime are acts of resistance, acts of faith. They affirm the belief that one day — a day the writers, journalists and photographers may never see — the words and images will evoke empathy, understanding, outrage and provide wisdom.

They chronicle not only the facts, although facts are important, but the texture, sacredness and grief of lives and communities lost. They tell the world what war is like, how those caught in its maw of death endure, how there are those who sacrifice for others and those who do not, what fear and hunger are like, what death is like.

They transmit the cries of children, the wails of grief of the mothers, the daily struggle in the face of savage industrial violence, the triumph of their humanity through filth, sickness, humiliation and fear. This is why writers, photographers and journalists are targeted by aggressors in war — including the Israelis — for obliteration. They stand as witnesses to evil, an evil the aggressors want buried and forgotten.

The Palestinian novelist Atef Abu Saif, along with his 15-year-old son Yasser, who live in the occupied West Bank, were visiting family in Gaza — where Atef was born — when Israel began its scorched earth campaign. Atef is no stranger to the violence of the Israeli occupiers. He did what writers do, including the professor and poet Refaat Alareer, who was killed, along with Refaat's brother, sister and her four children, in an airstrike on his sister's apartment building in Gaza on Dec. 7.

Atef described, for 85 days, the horror around him, producing a haunting and powerful work *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide*. Joining me from his home in Ramallah in occupied Palestine to speak about the genocide in Gaza and his book is Atef Abu Saif.

Atef Abu Saif: Thank you, Chris for this powerful introduction, which you just presented about the situation in Palestine and the role of authors, journalists, artists, photographers and they've been victims of the Israeli assault which is going on. Let's remember since 67 years, this war never stopped on the Palestinian people.

When my grandmother and grandfather were expelled from their town of Jaffa, and they were sent to the sands of Gaza to live in a refugee camp, then they died there, unfortunately. So this war never stopped and the war against Palestinian authors, intellectuals, artists, painters, and I would say, against Palestinian culture never stopped.

And we can remember, we can mention scores of Palestinian authors, starting with Ghassan Kanafani, who was in a Senate in 1967, Majed Sharar, of course, etc. it's a long list. But thank you very much for reminding us of this fact that the Palestinians who, of course, like international journalists who try to provide the truth from Palestine, were always as well targeted, like the American [Rachel] Corrie, if you remember her. This lady was killed in Rafah 15 years ago, etc. So whoever wants to transmit or to talk about what's actually happening in the occupied territories is subject to violence and to evil, and probably would be killed.

For me, as you said, I was born in a refugee camp, in Jabalia refugee camp in 1973 and I think when I was 2 months old, the war of 1973 started. So I would say, like most of the Palestinians, I was born during war, and I might die during war, actually. And this is how my shortlisted novel for the Arab Booker Prize, *A Suspended Life* starts.

Naim, who is the main character of the novel, was born during war, and he dies during war, and this is, this is our life as Palestinian. What we live is time out for survival. We don't survive. The normal discourse is to be killed and for your house to be destroyed, like my house in this war. So what we live is like a timeout. It's rest. So it's not the normal thing to live. So it's not normal to live. So I was born during the war, then I, of course, Chris, I remember the first time I was arrested. Actually, I was, I would say, 9 years old. I was in the elementary school when the Israeli army, this was 1982 I think, yeah, it was the Beirut war at that time, and they attacked our school. We were in the elementary school and, of course, I was 9 years old.

I remember my mom was telling the captain when she came to the Israeli occupation force basement. She said he doesn't understand politics, you know, because she wanted me to... anyway, I spent like one day, then they released us. We were like 10 students, 10 pupils at that time. Then, of course, when the First Intifada came, I was like most of the people my age, the young boys and women in my years, in my time, we were throwing stones at the

soldiers, and I was shot at three times. One of them actually picked the grave for me and was supposed to be buried in the grave.

And then suddenly, I remember it was a British surgeon. She was in, where we call it, you know, this hospital where, where the Israeli massacre, 500 people. We call it the British hospital, the Baptist Hospital in Gaza. Then she said he's alive and I went under surgery for 12 hours, etc. Then I survived, you know? Some would say I'm the son of death, you know, just take him for that. So I know, how does it feel that what you live is something that you are not granted. You took from the mouth of death, you know?

And obviously I remember that when I was trying to protect my kid Yasser who happened to be with me during my visit to Gaza when the war broke out. And so every time I have to think of that, he should not be killed, because I would be responsible for this, because I missed that. And of course, you feel helpless.

And many times I just was sitting like this in the tent. And I think, you know, if a rocket came from an Israeli helicopter or drone or whatever, and will kill it's not my fault. I was trying to convince myself that we humans, we cannot, we could not control our fate. And unfortunately, it's not even this thing that controls our fate, in our case, it's the Israeli army which controls the fate of the Palestinians in Gaza because it is this side which [inaudible] them, this side which destroys them.

And of course, killing and assassination and destruction never stop them in Gaza. And I can tell hundreds of stories which I witnessed myself during my 50 years of my age, you know? My grandfather, from my mother's side, was killed in the 1967 war, and I didn't tell you this, even when we met, but he was injured in the Nakba, can you believe it? He was in Jaffa at that time. He was like, I think, 16 years old, and he was injured when, at that time they call it the Israelis gangs before the establishment of Israel, they attacked our neighborhood in Jaffa, and he was injured. And actually it was in the newspaper, I have a cut of the newspaper in Jaffa. And he was injured in his leg, this was in 1948, it was April, early April, 1948. Then he was killed in 1967, when the Israeli army occupied Gaza after the Six-Day War.

So many stories to be told about this and always, one has to remind himself that you know life is precious and you have to live it, and you have to struggle with it. And even in moments, you know, I remember when I was in Israeli jail, I was in the First Intifada for like, I would say five months or four months.

Chris Hedges: How old were you, Atef?

Atef Abu Saif: Yeah, at that time, I was 18 years old, I would say. I was just finishing high school, as you say it in America and I wanted to join the university then. Anyway, I was sent

to the Israeli jail in Negev, which we call it, Ktzi'ot, they call it, in Hebrew, and we call it Ansar 3. And yes, always about narrative as well, struggle against, about narrative terms and terminology. Anyway, but I was, at that time, in Israel this year and my brother, Naim, was in Gaza central prison.

And I remember my mother at that time, she was like a girl of 42 years old, and she was visiting us on that day. At nine o'clock in the morning, she came to visit me. I was not transferred to Negev jail, I was still in the Gaza arrestment, you know, which is near the beach. It was raining. It was January. She was 42 years old, and she was sick at that time. Anyway, she died later on, and she has to visit my brother in the afternoon in the other jail. And so it's a tale of, you know, life is a tale of pain, but what other choices did she have? This is always, I remind myself, her two sons are in jail, and she has no other choice, only to visit them and to kiss them, even from far, to see them and to give them power. And actually, she was stronger than us when she was telling us, my brother would be released.

And I remember her statement, it's amazing, she said, listen, a prison is never built on anybody. It means, you know, it's not like a grave when it's filled, you know, you will leave it at a certain moment. And unfortunately, when my brother left it, she had already passed away and she couldn't see him.

And one of the stories about peace and war, if you want to talk about that, I remember her demonstrating in support of Oslo Accords. This was 1993 when they signed. It was November, it was before Arafat arrived in Gaza, and she went happily demonstrating the Oslo Accords, and I was at the university at that time and I was telling her, "Wow, you became a very political activist." She said, "No, I support Oslo because it's going to release my son." And unfortunately, she died two years later without her son being released. And this can tell the whole story of the peace process, how it was disappointing for many Palestinians. So our life is a life of searching for your life or for your time out. Actually, the title of my book in Arabic, goes *Time Out for Survival*, you know, searching for this time out, you know, during the catastrophic war or the genocide, which you live in. And it's the same story, unfortunately, and this is sad to say, I'm gonna tell my grandchild if I happen to have one, the same story that my grandmother told me about her being forced to leave Jaffa, and how she left her villa, which it still exists until now in Jaffa and is inhabited by Jewish-Polish, from Poland. And I saw it a couple of times, of course, and I even had this structure, which the engineer made and I put it on the cover of one of my novels. And anyway, she had to leave her villa and to walk down, to walk all the way south to Gaza on the sand, and to live in a

tent, where we used to live in a villa on the beach, etc. When she was rich, she died very poor.

So I have to tell the same story that she told me to my grandchild in the future but, again, what other options do you have? You have to live this life, to struggle to live and to do all that you can to survive, because life is worth doing, you know? It's not an adventure, or it's not a journey, it's not an act, of course, like Shakespeare would say, we don't do our part and we leave the stage. It's just what we are made for.



A Diary of Genocide w/ Atef Abu Saif | The Chris Hedges Report. (Screenshot)

Chris Hedges: I want to talk, before we talk about October 7, this wasn't the first Israeli assault on Gaza that you endured and wrote about, you have a previous book. But I want you to talk a little bit about that assault. I think, what was it, 2018 if I'm correct, and compare it to what's happening now. But let's talk about that first book that you did, where, day by day, you chronicle the relentless shelling, bombardment and killing that Israel carried out.

Atef Abu Saif: Yeah, as I told you, I lived all the wars of Gaza, but even the previous attacks I was writing about, but I never published them, and I still have them. I hope they still exist somewhere in Gaza, you know, but 2014 war, because in the summer, 10 years ago, actually it started like these days, it was very massive and very huge and very aggressive for us.

We experienced many Israel attacks. But that time, you know, it all happened all of a sudden and the attacks took place everywhere. And the Israeli army invaded Gaza for the first time since the Oslo Accords, you know, they invaded the city from the south, from the valley of Gaza, we call it. I was writing daily what happened, because I felt I'm gonna die at that point, like at this time, but this time it was more... Now we can talk about comparing the two wars, but sometimes it's ridiculous to compare wars, because, you know, they aim, of course, to kill you.

So sometimes death is closer to you than other occasions, but it's always seeking to catch you. So 2014 war, for us, was the first massive war we attended or we witnessed or we experienced and we felt its danger, that we're going to die. I remember many times because, you know, at that time, I was more engaged and I wasn't living in the refugee camp Jabalia, where I was born. And, yeah, at that time, I can tell scores of stories where I helped in rescuing some people, you know, from death. We took them from under the rubble and many times I would get a head without a body or a hand without... You know, it's awful.

But on many occasions, Chris, I was not sure if I was alive or dead, especially when you carry the bodies, you know? And I remember one time I had to take a shower like 15 times or 12 times, you know?

At that time, we didn't have problems with electricity and water like we did in this war. Because this war, yeah, I think it was not a war, it was an elimination. Because they wanted to eliminate Gaza. So this is, in the current war, genocide. They stopped water, electricity and people, they don't talk about this, Chris, even the press now, they don't say that it's now, in a couple of days, it will be 300 days for war. People, they don't say it's 300 days without electricity and water in Gaza, running water. But at that time, in 2014, we had a kind of regular water supply. It will be kept for a couple of days, but we still have it. So many times when, after washing myself, like 12 times, I remember the family name, it was the Balata family, they were living near the graveyard of the camp and [inaudible] Russian.

Then I had nightmares and then I couldn't sleep because I saw the hands, the hair without a head, like [inaudible] I would carry it. Then in the night, I had to wake up, I'm not sure if I'm dead or alive, and I approach electricity and I wanted to touch it. So I said if I'm alive, then, of course, I nearly did it. But then in the last minute, I said, yeah, but what if I died? If I'm alive, then I did, I became dead, you know, after touching it, so, what is the point? So what if I'm dead? So I said, No, I'm not going to. But at that time, I don't like to say this, it was a rehearsal for the coming war, it was like an exercise, you know?

So when the current war started, I remember I was in the press house, Belal Jadalla, whom the Israel army assassinated later on, he was the head of the press club in Gaza, what we call press house, and to whom I dedicated the book, actually, and we were trying to compare the current world with 2014 war, because 2014 war is all what we have in our memory about a massive war. Then, of course Belal at the time was dead, and it was my other friends, we were saying, listen, if this war doesn't stop on the 51st day, which is the length of the previous war, then this is different.

And of course, what we were doing, we were just indulging, or we were trying to calm ourselves that this war is not going to last for 51 days, like when we were in the tents, my grandaunt, great grandaunt, greataunt Noor, she would ask me, “Oh, do you think we’re going to spend Ramadan here?” Because she doesn’t want to spend Ramadan in the tent. And by the way, Noor, she lived her childhood in a tent, and she lived in, spent the last couple of months of her life in the tent, like my mother-in-law as well, who was born in 1948 in Majdal Asqalan in Ashkelon, and she was carried by her mom to Gaza, where she lived the first three years of her life in a tent.

And unfortunately, she died in a tent and then I mentioned about her in my book, but she was dead when I finished my book, when I left Gaza. So my great aunt would ask, “Oh, are we going to spend Ramadan here?” Then after Ramadan over the phone, she will tell me, Atef we going to spend [inaudible]? Every time now, people in Gaza, my sister Asia, will ask, she was asking me today, do you think we’re going to remember the first anniversary of the war here? Which means October 7, will come when [inaudible] yeah, I’m sorry for being long.



Atef Abu Saif on The Chris Hedges Report. (Screenshot)

Chris Hedges: No, you go as long as you want. I want to talk about Refaat [Alareer] before we talk about your book. He was clearly tracked and assassinated by Israelis, along, of course, with his sister and her family. But just speak a little bit about him before we begin.

Atef Abu Saif: Yeah, I happened to know Refaat from this project, “We’re Not Numbers,” which was, the title of the project was taken from one of my articles in *The New York Times* at that time, in the 2014 war. I was titling every day. And I think Refaat was reporting daily, as you know, from Gaza, he was very active in telling the Palestinian truth simply.

He was not exaggerating, he was not even political, like poets will do, you know, just he was doing it. He was writing about what happened to his neighbors and to his family in person, I think, in one of his articles, even when his mom was telling him, don't speak in the press, because this is dangerous and we might be killed. And, yeah, it's sad that we lose our voice because it's not that the killer wants to hide his crime. He doesn't want the future crimes to be heard of.

So the assassination of Refaat, like the assassination of Belal Jadalla as well, the head of the press house in Gaza, was transmitting news from Gaza in five, six languages, not him, the people working with him. Same thing, of course, with the other other poets like Saleem Al-Naffa and you talked about artists, writers, photographers, etc.

So Shireen Abu Akleh before, if you remember in Jenin as well, she was assassinated. So the fight against the truth, or terrorizing the truth itself, so it hides by itself, so nobody dares to touch it, nobody dares to speak about it, and nobody because the word is stronger than the poet, believe me. And many people do not remember the names of the fighters, but they remember the names of the poets, the journalists, the filmmakers who spoke about them, transmitted the truth about their life, their pain, their soul, their suffering.

So Refaat was, yeah, I think he believed in what he did. And, you know, as he said in his poem, if I must die, you know. So the truth would be like the kite, which he referred to, flying in the sky, and with a long tail, long white tail, so a kid from Gaza can see it from any other place on the Gaza beach. And so this is hope, because the truth never dies, Chris, even if they kill the transmitter, the truth never dies. It will find another transmitter, another brave, brave, courageous person, to transmit it and to get it and to tell it, you know? And we Palestinians, I have to say, we're very grateful to our artists and poets, mainly, who transmitted our pain in the last 100 years.

And remember, it's not only the Israelis, even the British army was putting Palestinian poets in jail in the '20s and '30s, like [inaudible] and like [inaudible] and those great poets of the '20s and '30s of the Palestinian life in the '20s and '30s and [inaudible] Nazareth, they were put in jail at that time. So always the truth. And it's not always Israelis.

All oppressors, all killers, they kill the truth before killing... I always, Chris, said, okay, nobody can understand why you kill your fellow man, your fellow human being, but this war, but why do you destroy castles, for example, in Gaza? The Qasr al-Basha Palace, even when Napoleon Bonaparte entered Gaza, he used it as his office. The Turkish, they were using it as a military office, the British as well. So nobody knows why you destroy it. It doesn't harm you. It doesn't and you occupied it already, you were there.

The tanks were there, and they didn't even shell it from very far, by the way. The tanks stood in front of the historic wall of the castle. It's a castle as we call it, Basha Palace, we call it, and it's a museum, by the way, where you had Phoenician jars and Crusades swords. And it's from all different ages, Islamic [inaudible], you know, monuments. So nobody understands why you can't stand in front of a historic palace where there is no resistance, no army, nothing, then you destroy it.

Hey, even if you're insane, you sit there and you enjoy your coffee as a winner, or he's not a winner. But let's assume you won the war. You sit there and you enjoy the city or on the hill or in the middle of Gaza City. And you can see [inaudible] on your left hand [side] etc.

No one can understand why you destroy, the soldiers go inside one of the artist studios, it's in the video, and they enjoy destroying the damn thing. For God's sake, you enjoy stealing it, you take it, you hide it. You don't enjoy just making colors of the painting. You bleed and you enjoy the bleeding colors of the painting. So it's something, you know, and again, this is not new.

This always happened to us, for six, seven years, when the painting in my grandfather's house in Jaffa was destroyed, when the painting of the Palestinian newspapers were destroyed as well. And then we're repeating the same story, we're repeating the same pain and I hope this is not going to happen in the future. I hope this world will put an end to all this pain and long journey of displacement.

Chris Hedges: I mean, in settler colonial projects, they must destroy the culture, identity, history of those they occupy. That's the way they affirm their own supremacy, or they impose their own supremacy by destroying the Palestinians who are indigenous to Palestine.

Ataf Abu Saif: Yeah. Theoretically, you can understand this. But you're not doing this with joy, you know? They're doing it with joy and pleasure and why do you kill a poet? Why do you kill Refaat Alareer? He's a person who always wanted to seek to live in peace, who always wanted to write about love, but he didn't find love to write about it. He couldn't write a poem about the toy that he wanted to give as a gift to his daughter, because you took this gift at the checkpoint in Rafah when they were there.

So he couldn't write about stable and normal life. So why do you destroy a museum? And I know that the struggle of narrative, it's not physically you're superior even, narrative wise, you're superior, and you want your narrative and your tales to overwhelm the region.

But even thieves, of course, thieves take what is not theirs. But even thieves, they take the nice things from the houses they attack. And even the Colonials in history, they sometimes have little bit of respect to the indigenous culture, like stealing their culture, taking it. But for

God's sake, [inaudible] is one of our greatest poets now, living poet now. And I saw him, I would say, in the first month of the war. And his poems are taught and for our kids in the schools. He's a very good poet, he and his wife and his kids until now, under the rubble for more than 150 days. And just imagine our loss. He was great and he was at that time, six, and we celebrated his birthday together.

Actually, he was in Ramallah participating [inaudible] last September. He's 60 still. So he could draw another 100 poems, you know? And of course, many young... The other day, by the way, the 21st, a young Palestinian poet, Pilar. His name is [inaudible], I wrote in my Facebook account, I put his... He was killed in his house and he wrote very nice poems. He writes in Arabic. He used to write in Arabic. He's dead now, but just if you read his text, how he was afraid of that, how he was trying to calm down his sister.

He's 26 years old. And then his house in the center, I think it is in Nuseirat refugee camp and he was killed there. So again, it's not... This war is targeting humans, the place, the [inaudible] of the place, the history of the place, and it targets the trees. If you plant guava or mango or whatever tree in your garden, it takes you 30 years to see it a full-fledged tree, you know? And suddenly someone comes and takes it out.

I remember my sister was telling me the other day on the phone when she realized that her house was destroyed in Beit Lahia. She's now 46 years old. She said, "I don't have time in my life to build a new house." She started with her husband to build the house when they got married when she was in the 20s of their age and they spent 25 years building the house.

She said, I don't have time now to build a new house. So there is no time to plant your new tree in the garden, even. So it's like this war is targeting everything in Gaza. It's targeting Gaza, and it's not targeting the political parties, not targeting the militia, it's not targeting a specific party or person or character or whatever, and it doesn't have any aim other than just eliminating Gaza and making life in Gaza impossible. Not for today or for tomorrow, for the next day or the day after, for scores of years to come. So people have to leave Gaza voluntarily after that.

Chris Hedges: I want to read a little bit from your book. It's an amazing work, and captures the texture, horror of the genocide. When it begins, you lose a friend, a young poet, musician. You wonder about the Israeli soldiers watching you and your family, "their infrared lenses and satellite photography. You ask, can they count the loaves of bread in my basket, the number of falafel balls on my plate? You watch a crowd of dazed and confused families, their homes and rubble, carrying mattresses, bags of clothes, food and

drink. The supermarket, the bureau of change, falafel shop, fruit stalls, perfume parlor, sweet shop, toy shop, all burned.”

You write,

“Blood was everywhere, along with bits of kids’ toys, cans from the supermarket, smashed fruit, broken bicycles, shattered perfume bottles, the place looked like a charcoal drawing of a town scorched by a dragon.”

This, of course, has been a level of destruction, despite the many assaults on Gaza, that is just apocalyptic. But talk about those first days. Did you realize at the beginning that this was different?

Atef Abu Saif: Yeah, actually, it’s funny, the war started while I was swimming in the beach. I remember that I didn’t go swimming the whole summer. So I was visiting Gaza, which was a regular visit for me. But it was my dad who passed away, by the way, Chris, during the war and mid-April, unfortunately, because of lack of food and lack of medicine.

Anyway, I was visiting my dad and my sisters. Then we were supposed to celebrate the Palestinian heritage there, which is October 7. And so I was there in the morning. I have to go to the beach. It was my first time at the beach and so I went swimming in the beach, then the war started. And for us, I remember I was calling my brother-in-law, get out of the water. We have to leave. It’s war, I told him. It was 6:30 in the morning. He said, “No, this is another escalation.”

I remember I left him inside the water. He said, “Go, go, go, leave me.” It’s because he lives nearby, in [inaudible], near the beach. So when I left, I was driving with my brother Muhammad. I think the policeman was asking us, what is happening? Nobody knows what is happening, you know?

But, of course, as the night falls, it gets very dark. We realize this is a different type of war, because even back to the 2014 war, it was not taking place in all the places at the same time. Gaza was targeted today, I remember, in 2014. Even in the 2008 war, Jabalia was targeted, then Gaza City, then Rafah, then Khan Younis but this war was everywhere, every single... I remember October 7 and October 8, the first two days of the war, shelling everywhere, all over. You couldn’t move.

And I had to stay in the press house at that time because I was in the [inaudible] quarter during the day. Then I couldn’t leave so I had to sleep in the press house between the disks of the journalist.

From the beginning, it was realized to be a very hard war, but in the previous wars, Chris, people were displaced from their places, but people living in the peripheries, near the border,

north border, or eastern border. And they used to come to stand at [inaudible] schools in Jabalia refugee camp, mainly.

And we never dreamt of the army getting inside Jabalia, by the way. It's like even during the war, even after a month of the war, we said, no, no, they will not be able to get, they were not there because this means killing, because we couldn't believe that the killer can be this savage.

We couldn't believe that any killer can be any human to this extent, to kill 1000s of people, to get to an overcrowded and overcrowded and inhabited place. So we couldn't believe that in this war, we're going to be displaced. If you ask me, even after two, three weeks of the war, I say no, come on, it's just another war for us.

But this tends to be not another war. For this, Palestinians usually compare this war to the Nakba War, where people were forced to leave. And even the same slogans, same sentences, phrases we use, I used to say, which was very similar to what my grandmother was saying in the Nakba, but my grandfather was saying, "Oh, it's just a couple of days then we come back." We were there. And this is what I was telling my kid, without thinking, this was natural, that we were coming back in a couple of days. And this is what my grandmother and all the old ladies and men were telling their kids in 1948.

So the only comparable situation for the people was the Nakba itself. However, in one of my articles later on, I said, No, we should not compare Nakba to anything, because in the Nakba, a political attack resulted afterward. But the elimination of the Palestinian, I would say, statehood or entity, and they established another entity.

So I said, we cannot compare Nakba to any other thing, but this is the only thing that comes to the people's mind, Nakba. Even the 1960 war doesn't come to their mind.

However, in the 1960 war, if you remember, half of the people of the West Bank were displaced to Jordan, and many of the Gazans, including my grandfather, Ibrahim, with my uncles, they were forced to leave Jabalia to Jordan, and just my father and my grandmother remained in Jabalia.

And I think, as I was always saying, I was lucky for this. I didn't live in diaspora or refugees outside Palestine. So the only comparable event in the minds of the Palestinians to this is the Nakba itself. And Nakba, for the Palestinians, is... you know you translate into English, like catastrophe, which is I would say, a soft word for it, for Nakba.

The Nakba is something, a catastrophe that comes very heavy from above. So it's something that you cannot afford. And that doesn't mean anything for you. So it's a very hard and harsh word, you know, and so for this, the Palestinians didn't call 1967 another Nakba. So they just

changed the one sound, Naksa. They changed the “P” sound with “S” sound, which means like being defeated, anyway.

So from very early, I told you, in the first two, three weeks, nobody expected that we’re going to be displaced. I didn’t, I cried when I crossed the checkpoint between south and north, and I was looking to the south, 1000s of people, women, men, kids, children, pregnant women crossing.

And it was with my kid carrying the wheelchair of my grandmother, sorry, my mother-in-law, who passed away later on. And we were carrying her, while she was handing her wheelchair, sitting firmly, trying not to fall. We were crossing the border.

Then, all the images which I heard of in the camp, I grew up in a refugee camp in the ’70s and ’80s, and so I hear hundreds of stories of people telling about their exodus from their villages and towns in southern Jaffa and all the villages south of Jaffa.

So all these stories were presented like you’re watching cinema movies, you know? But you’re watching 100 cinema movies at the same time, but they all reflect the same scene. They all show the same scene with different characters’ faces, and now, at the moment, I realized I’m one of those characters. I became another scene and another movie in this big screen show.

Chris Hedges: And as you’re walking, I remember from the book, you’re with your young son, who’s 15, and they’re bodies everywhere, and you tell him not to look.

Atef Abu Saif: You’ll see that if you do any movement, if you do any gestures, any sign, you would be killed. I remember I said I was arguing with my publisher, we nearly named the book, *A Coffee on Top of the Tank*, because the soldier was sitting on the top of the tank. I don’t know how you can enjoy having your coffee while desperate people, all men and women, grieving on the bodies of the persons while the other soldiers [inaudible] again, actually. Having her, 16, like this, and ready to shoot in any minute, you know?

So we nearly named the book that but then we were saying, we’re not naming... I remember my first first book was, *The Drone Is With Me*. So we said we’re not going to say the tank and the drone. So we have to discuss another title, but for this, you walk on those bodies, and you don’t want to be another dead as well.

So I was telling my kid not to [inaudible], because the soldier from now, then he will call say, “Hey, you, young man with a white t-shirt and glasses, long hair, jeans, trouser come here.” So of course, you might find like in the same frame, if you take a photo, take a cinema movie, you will find like five, six persons like this. But if the wrong person, then to the left of the

soldier, he will shoot him. Can you believe it? So the main person himself here, he should realize that he is the wanted one. He is the chosen one to be arrested.

So the best way is not to move, not to look, just to keep looking straight until you pass. Just imagine this feeling when you realize that, now in the Olympic time, they're playing in Paris now, so if you cross the line of the race, this feeling, you know, that you made it, that you survived, you crossed the line.

But then I remember, I have some photos of this from my mother-in-law, when we're sitting after we crossed the checkpoint. We didn't realize we became displaced. A refugee like me, when I was born in Jabalia refugee camp, became a refugee again. And my mother-in-law became refugee as well.

So the moment we cross the point, the moment we realize that we will be beyond the sun, beyond the light, you know? And we're in darkness. And, of course, it's funny, from the first day we started to regret that we did it, that we should not cross the line. Actually, there is a bridge there. We call it the Salah al-Din bridge, it's named after the longest Street in Gaza, so we were regretting that we crossed the bridge. Is there a way to go back?

Chris Hedges: I just remember from your book you write about your house In Jabalia, and how you may change a little bit of the street here and there, and you write about why you always came back to Gaza. You have a PhD from a European university, you could have easily spent the rest of your life living outside of Palestine, but you didn't. And you write about that house, which, of course, has now been destroyed.

Atef Abu Saif: Yeah, I always had the chance to live abroad, but I never wanted it. It's not, I love New York, of course, I would say New York is one of my favorite cities. I've been there after 11 September directly, [inaudible]. And I love Rome, for example. I've been studying in Italy. And I love many places. I love Palestine as well.

And if I was telling myself, if everyone like me is going to leave Gaza, who will remain there? So against this brain drain and I don't like to be this author, intellectual, like many of the Arabs and third world authors, Chris, they sit in London having their precious life, or in Paris or in LA and join American life. Then they talk about the poor people back home.

If I have to, I might go to Italy, as I told you, to teach. I don't mind, but temporarily. I never wanted to stay abroad all my life. Why? Chris, believe me, Gaza is very beautiful. It's a very beautiful coastal city, and when we people from Gaza, we remember even the taste of coffee in Gaza. We would say, No, you know, all the coffee we have, I remember this guy, we had this talk. No, for God's sake, no coffee brand in Cairo is similar to the worst coffee brand in

Gaza, for example. And this is true, I'm convinced of this. Of course, you might be convinced otherwise. Everybody likes his mom the cook, dishes.

Everybody believes that his mother's dishes are the best. But she might not be, actually. But for this I like Gaza, it's where I belong, it's where I have responsibilities towards the people. Because there I was taught how to tell stories, by my neighbors, by my grandmother, Asia. And always I have felt, due to an obligation, to retell this, their stories, to re-narrate their pain and their suffering, transmit their grief and their loves, by the way, and their sense of humor as well.

So when my house was destroyed, I cried like, you know, this is normal. We're human in the end, you cannot stand, stand fast forever. So I was but I felt sorry for my characters, the characters in my novels. I said, if they came out of my books. They jumped from the novels, they wouldn't know the place.

Instead, where they lived in those alleys, which now is damaged unfortunately, those alleys and those little [inaudible] in between the houses where they lived all their life, but even when I was drawing, sometimes I would draw the map of the sea, or I would say, the stage, the theater of my novel, and always, I depict the same area, which is my neighborhood, which is we call it the Jaffa neighborhood, where all the people living there are originally coming from Jaffa, where they were refugees from Jaffa. So I said, Wow, now the streets are no more streets, the houses are no more there, the alleys are damaged. Everything has changed.

So if my characters walked, they wouldn't know the place of the house. And if they find that the house where they left and where they were born, actually, they will not recognize it. I used to sit down near the outdoor of the house, looking at the stairs, wooden stairs inside the house, which was to my room, actually. And then I started, always, to make up my stories. Since I was looking to the sky from the stairs as I was imagining myself walking up to the sky from the stairs. You know, Chris, I would tell you that the actual war starts after the war is finished.

My wife lost her only sister. She doesn't have sisters or brothers, and she's lost her mother as well. And until now, Chris, she cries every night, you know why? Because she wishes, until now, that somebody can take the bones of her sister and her husband and her kids and bury them because they are under the rubber since the seventh, eighth day of the war, ie, since 290 days, more or less. So all she wishes for is a grave to visit, to mourn there. So our soul, even, is postponed. Our pain is not given its duty. So after the war, people will have more time to mourn, to cry, to give respect to the beloved persons who passed in the war. So the actual war, even at the personal level, will start after the war is finished.

And of course just think of my dad's children, they don't have a place to stay. Even those married, those girls are boys who are married of my dad's, they don't, their houses were destroyed as well. So there is no place to go. What the people of the north will do, Chris, they will carry their tents on their shoulder, and they will walk to the north to set them back, again, to live near the rubble and the [inaudible] of their houses. So this is a very long pain, and this is what I'm saying.

The end of this war is to eliminate life from Gaza, to make it something impossible, to make it costing and taxing, you're not happy. You'll never feel happy, but your future. So it's a war against the future as well. It's not, remember, we talked about the war against the past, the memory, the narrative, through culture, destroying minimum sculptures, museums, killing authors, destroying libraries, the string that the archive of Gaza. It's not only against the past, it's against the future as well, to make the future something that will not come and will not exist for the Gazans.

Chris Hedges: So Atef, as you mentioned, you lose your sister-in-law and her husband when their building is bombed, you write the bodies of their daughter and grandchild had already been retrieved. The only known survivor was Wissam, one of their other daughters, who had been taken to the ICU.

Wissam had gone straight into surgery where both of her legs and her right hand had been amputated. Her graduation ceremony from Art College had taken place only the day before. She has to spend the rest of her life without legs, with one hand. And you visit her in the hospital, and she's barely awake, and after half an hour, she asks you, "I'm dreaming, right?" And you say, "we are all in a dream." And she says, "My dream is terrifying. Why?" And you answer, "all our dreams are terrifying."

After 10 minutes of silence, she said,

"Don't lie to me, uncle, in my dream, I don't have legs. It's true, isn't it? I have no legs."

But you said it's a dream, you tell her. I don't like this dream, uncle, and you write,

"I had to leave. For a long 10 minutes, I cried and cried overwhelmed by the horrors of the past few days. I walked out of the hospital and found myself wandering the streets. I thought idly, we could turn this city into a film set for war movies."

And then when you go back to visit her, and there are no painkillers or sedatives, and she's racked in pain, she asks you for a lethal injection, and she tells you that Allah will forgive her. And you answer, "but he will not forgive me, Wissam." And she answers, "I'm going to ask him on your behalf." I want you to talk a little bit about Wissam and that moment.

Atef Abu Saif: You know, I never read the book after I wrote it, I told you. I don't [inaudible]. I don't and even when I did talk about the book in Oman, Cairo, Morocco, my only condition was not to read part of the book, because they would ask you to read them. It's about your book.

So I was in Qatar, actually, where we managed, luckily, I communicated with some persons in the Qatar government, and they transmitted her to Qatar and hopefully, she's undergoing a few surgeries and operations in August, 15 August, to prepare her to have artificial limbs, legs.

And I remember how it goes, when I found my wife saying, she knew the news, it was in the news. She says, "Nobody survived, not even a single person." Then I went, "Well, Wissam survived. Can you believe it?"

You're talking to a person who lost all her family because she doesn't have brothers and sisters, so her only sister, and, of course, with her kids and her wife.

So for Wissam, when she was in the house, the bomb, the explosion took place, and she was thrown to the next house without legs or hand, and they carried her and they took her to the hospital. Of course, she was unconscious. So for her, the last thing she remembers, she was laying in bed opposite her mother, like they were like this and talking so she doesn't remember anything.

But I think later on, she told me in Cairo, when I visited the hospital in Cairo, she realized that when they carried her, she was with no legs and she felt that her legs were amputated. So for her, it's like most people, Chris, it's a nightmare, it's a movie.

It's something that you don't believe or you don't want, actually to believe. You wish this dream like this until now, because every night before I sleep, my wife has to cry and tell me, "Wow, what if this is a nightmare?" And after 300 days, because in this nightmare which she wants to wake up from, she lost... "You know Atef, when you catch your mobile, you find people to call from your family. But when I catch it, no person."

Her sister, only sister, her brother-in-law, the two kids who are not kids, that are 25, 28 the sons of her sister and her mother. It's her whole family. So it's only her [inaudible] father was still alive and he's a very old man for her.

So she says, "When you catch your mobile and you find numbers to call, I don't find numbers to call." So every night, she says, what Wissam said to me that day, what if this is a dream, nightmare, a horror movie? Even in this movie, I lost my legs, or in this nightmare, I lost my legs and my arm, but everybody, Chris, I know we are running out of time.

But when I left my dad in Jabalia, he refused to come with me to Rafah and the south and said, “Listen, Atef, I lived all my life here, and if Allah wants me to die, I will die, I’m not going to die anywhere.”

And he died, actually there, but he died because he didn’t find the bread to eat either. For 10 days, he was eating the animal seeds. The seeds, which you feed animals with. Anyway, I remember when I looked at his face for the last time before driving south. I was asking Allah, just one favor, which he didn’t do for me. I said just, I want to see him again, because I had this feeling I might not see him again.

And until now, many times I just think, wow, what if this is just another story I’m telling to the nation, to the readers, like I’m making up all this work as a writer, and you do it as a writer. What if this is just one of my creations, and I wish it is actually. And all our talk now is part of this, actually, is part of this fictitious universe I made to tell about.

Chris Hedges: Great. Thank you, Atef. That was Atef Abu Saif, we’re talking about his book, *Don’t Look Left: A Diary of Genocide*. I want to thank Sofia, Diego, Thomas and Max, who produced the show. You can find me at ChrisHedges.substack.com.

Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist who was a foreign correspondent for 15 years for *The New York Times*, where he served as the Middle East bureau chief and Balkan bureau chief for the paper. He previously worked overseas for *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and NPR. He is the host of show “The Chris Hedges Report.”

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August 2, 2024