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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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05.09.2024

## On the Frontline of Resistance: The Women of Palestine



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During her acceptance speech in August at the Democratic National Convention, Vice President Kamala Harris heaped praise on her mother. She spoke proudly of a childhood full of promise, forged by a single mother who taught her to dream big.

As Harris paid homage to her mother, I thought of how Israel has done everything in its power to insure that there be no childhood “full of promise” for Palestinian children. During the time she accepted the presidential nomination, across the ocean, Israel accelerated its genocidal war on Gazan families.

The Democratic standard-bearer advocates for a women’s right to an abortion and decries sexism and racism, but has no explanation as to why the United States continues to

buttress an Israeli regime populated with right-wing racists eager to kill women and babies in Gaza.

Emphasis at the convention was on freedom, joy and just futures for all Americans. Possibilities and visions the Biden-Harris administration, has denied all Palestinian mothers, fathers and children owing to their embrace of apartheid Israel.

Despite countless [United Nations reports](#) on the state of Palestinian women in Occupied Palestine, little has changed. The struggle for freedom and self-determination for their progeny and themselves did not begin on 7 October 2023. Women have always been the bedrock of Palestinian life. They have held their community together despite more than seven decades of Israeli occupation and terrorism. The women of Occupied Palestine deserve safe and secure futures, where families can finally thrive.

Israel's war on Gaza has spared no one. It has, however, impacted women in unprecedented ways. They bear the disproportionate burden of responsibilities for their families, children and elders. Thousands of women have become widows, forced into the role of provider and protector. It is mothers and adult women who are tasked with finding ever-scarce food, yet they eat last and less than everyone else.

Against the constant fear of death, sickness, hunger, exhaustion and loss, the women of Gaza struggle to keep their families alive and united and their children shielded from the psychological trauma of war. The faces of children seen in the morning, may be gone forever by evening.

Israel's war on Gaza has been described as a "[war on women](#)." Two mothers are killed [every hour](#). Of the reported 40,786 (2 September) killed since 7 October, [70 percent](#) have been women and children, leaving families anguished and their children with diminished protection.

Nearly one million women and girls have been displaced and are living in extremely overcrowded shelters with little or no privacy, access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene.

It is close to impossible to impart the suffering that women have endured. The thoughts of United Nations Women Special Representative in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, [Maryse Guimond](#), may help: "I barely recognized women who I knew before the war. The last nine months [July 2024] is embedded on their faces, on their bodies." Faced with death, destruction and displacement, women in Gaza, she added, "show remarkable strength and humanity in their struggle to survive, with hope and solidarity amidst the devastation."

One of the greatest fears of both parents and children is loss. It is easy to grasp the panic of a parent whose child has wandered off in a crowded bazaar or to visualize the fear on the face of a child separated from a parent—the source of love, protection and security.

Every [10 minutes](#) a Palestinian child is killed or wounded in Gaza. [Save the Children](#) estimates that up to 21,000 are missing—17,000 unaccompanied and separated from their families and approximately 4,000 buried under the rubble. Another [19,000](#) have been made orphans.

Israel's war on women, has also been a war on children. The ethnic cleansing of generations of Palestinian children has been ongoing since Israel declared statehood in 1948.

Some mothers have reported that their children are frightened of bedtime, because the worst airstrikes in Gaza come at night. And that after decades of Israeli attacks many children have learned to distinguish between airstrikes, missiles, drones and other weapons.

There are no restful nights in worn-torn Gaza. It has been reported that mothers sleep with their shoes on. To save their children, they must be able to run quickly from Israeli bombs dropped during the night.

Israel's [policy of deprivation](#) predates 7 October. Before the current war, it allowed just enough water and food imports into the Strip to keep Palestinians at subsistence nutrition, just enough calories to prevent starvation.

Israel has continued to use starvation as a weapon of war. On 9 October 2023, [Defense Minister Yoav Gallant](#) made the regime's intentions clear when he announced a complete siege of the Strip, justifying the country's illegal and inhumane actions by stating, "We are fighting against human animals and will behave accordingly."

Intentionally starving civilians, "depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including willfully impeding relief supplies," is a [war crime](#), according to international humanitarian law and laws of war and has been outlawed by [UN Security Council Resolution 2417](#) (2018). The United States, however, has rendered international law hollow, UN resolutions and the United Nations body toothless through its veto power on behalf of Israel.

One can only imagine the despair of mothers and fathers who find themselves powerless to provide food for their starving children. Facing unprecedented hunger, Palestinians have resorted to eating grass, weeds and [animal feed](#) to keep their children and themselves alive.

Furthermore, 11 months of war has extracted an immense cost on Gaza's already battered health care system, with women feeling it most profoundly. It should be noted that before the October siege, Israel denied Palestinians the basic right to health, contravening international humanitarian and human rights laws.

Israel's 16-year blockade and five prior wars on the enclave devastated Palestinian lives and left [the country's health care structure](#) and services teetering on the brink. For nearly 20 years it controlled the people and goods allowed in and out, including medical supplies, equipment and services.

Currently, with [only a third](#) of Gaza's hospitals barely functioning, with a lack of clean water, electricity, fuel and medical supplies, the health care system is near collapse and diseases have surged.

In August, the Gaza Strip experienced its [first case of polio](#) in 25 years, when 11-month-old, Abdul Rahman Abu Al-Jidyan, contracted the highly infectious disease. Displaced more than five times, Abdul's mother, Navin Abu Al-Jidyan, along with her husband and eight children, have been living in a tent in Deir al-Belah in central Gaza.

During a limited humanitarian pause, the World Health Organization and its partners began, on the first day of September, a difficult campaign to inoculate around 640,000 children under the age of ten.

According to the [U.S. Center for Disease Control](#), three doses of the vaccine are needed to achieve 99-100 percent effectiveness; unlikely in this very brief ceasefire. Unsurprisingly, Israel has provided vaccinations to its soldiers, with boosters offered to those deployed in Gaza.

Abdul's mother correctly understood the futility of the vaccination efforts, saying [what good will this measure](#) do, "We live in a place where hygiene levels are completely non-existent. The water is polluted, sewage runs between tents, the place is filled with insects and epidemics,... We live in hell."

Jidyan, and other mothers in Gaza, are keenly aware that when the vaccination effort ends, Israel will once again begin bombing and killing the children who had just been vaccinated.

Water has also been used as a [weapon of war](#). It is essential to both physical and spiritual health. The protocol and rituals around which a Muslim's life revolves have been violently disrupted. Water deprivation has made the obligatory ritual of ablution (ceremonial washing) before prayer impossible.

The paucity of water—reduced by 94 percent—and sanitation have been especially difficult for the more than [690,000](#) women and girls of reproductive age. Pregnant and lactating women and their newborns are especially vulnerable.

Menstrual periods have [become an ordeal](#) for Gaza’s women and girls, where privacy and essential feminine hygiene products are wanting. Forced to use diapers or scraps of cloth during their periods, many have developed skin and urinary tract infections. They have been wearing the same stained clothes and undergarments for months. Some women have resorted to shaving their heads, because of a dearth of cleaning products.

The daily toil is best expressed by 18-year-old, [Samar Shalhoub](#), a displaced Gaza resident: “We’ve gone back to the Stone Age. There’s no security, no food, no water, no hygiene,” she said, “I’m ashamed, I feel humiliated.”

The challenges facing pregnant women are insurmountable. Decimation of the health care system has left an estimated 50,000 pregnant women with no access to basic health, prenatal and nutrition requirements. An aid organization, [Islamic Relief Worldwide](#), has described their travails and indignities, including repeated displacements, malnourishment and the stress and fear of constant bombardments.

Women, with no functioning hospitals, have been forced to give birth on floors of overcrowded and makeshift medical centers, in tents and in other traumatizing settings. Others have endured cesarean sections without anesthetics or pain medicines.

Interestingly, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an [advisory report](#) in August 2024 warning that parental stress had become a serious health issue in the United States. At once, I thought of the stark contrast between the conditions parents in the United States are facing compared to that of Palestinian mothers and fathers whose movements and very lives are being controlled by a brutal occupying army; and where, on a daily basis, they are forced to make life-and-death decisions regarding their children and themselves. Gazans do not control their physical reality, one in which Israeli violence is unremitting.

The Surgeon General also wrote that “raising children is sacred work.” For eleven long months, the parents of Gaza have valiantly carried out the sacred work of keeping their children alive.

Women have been the political spine of the struggle for freedom and liberation of Palestine across generations. It has been their strength, resilience and fearlessness that

have kept the resistance alive. Israel has targeted them knowing that they are the pillar that sustains Palestinian life.

Members of the American political class, like Kamala Harris, continue to give Tel Aviv immunity and the tools of war to commit genocide and to unabashedly violate international laws.

Palestinians, women and men, are quite aware that they stand on their own against Israeli genocide and apartheid. And that they cannot trust American politicians, no matter their gender.

SEPTEMBER 4, 2024