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## **Palestinians, Both Civilian and Military, are Transcending the Horror We've Unleashed**



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

In February, the public health specialist Muna Abed Alah published a [paper](#) in the journal *Current Psychology* titled “Shattered Hierarchy: How the Gaza Conflict Demolished Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs.” The idea of a hierarchy of needs—first published by the psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943 and subsequently modified in various ways by Maslow and others—has long been pervasive in the world of pop psychology, while some

in academia have poked holes in Maslow's logic. Now, Alah suggests that the Palestinians of Gaza have rendered the hierarchy of needs wholly obsolete.

Briefly, Maslow and others who followed have identified universal human needs—including but not limited to basic physiological requirements, safety, cognition, self-actualization, and transcendence—and listed those needs along with others in a precise order. They maintain that an individual's physiological needs (food, water, shelter, etc.) must be satisfied first and that each subsequent need can be fulfilled only after the needs that precede it in the list have been at least partially fulfilled.

Well, Alah writes, the people of Gaza have torn up and thrown away Maslow's blueprint. Regarding non-fulfillment of physiological needs, Alah of course cited Israel's campaigns depriving Palestinians of food, water, fuel, shelter, sleep, and other necessities. Safety was being totally erased by Israel's relentless bombing throughout Gaza. Endlessly repeated destruction of hospitals, assassination of medical personnel, and targeting of trucks and people that gather at [food-distribution](#) locations has prevented the satisfaction of both physiological and safety needs. With serial displacement of millions of people, separation of family members, and deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinians, the need for esteem has been swamped; people's sense of dignity and control over their lives has been wrecked. Israel's intentional bombing of schools and universities has blocked their pursuit of cognitive needs. Regarding the need for self-actualization, Alah wrote, "The relentless focus on mere survival in the face of constant threat overshadows any opportunity for self-fulfillment . . . In such an environment, where safety and basic needs are a daily struggle, the luxury of realizing personal potential becomes nearly impossible."

But what about transcendence, the peak of the hierarchy of needs? In Alah's words, it "involves connecting with something larger than oneself, including spiritual experiences, deep connections with others, and contributions to the broader society." With none of the prerequisites being satisfied, transcendence should have receded completely out of reach months ago, according to Maslow's thesis. Instead, Alah, observed, transcendence is the one need that was being realized:

"Amidst ongoing conflict and siege, achieving transcendence is notably difficult, yet it manifests itself in unique and meaningful ways. Despite the limitations in aid and resources, many people in Gaza have started to help each other, fostering a strong sense of community and solidarity. This mutual assistance not only addresses immediate needs but also serves as a powerful form of transcendence, allowing individuals to connect with and contribute to something greater than themselves."

The coordinated [service, heroism, and sacrifice](#) personified by Palestinian journalists, taxi drivers, first responders, and health care professionals during the war is by now legendary. But countless other people in all walks of life have demonstrated similar degrees of transcendence. In his article, Alah focused on the resilience of Gaza’s civilian population. Here, I’ll just add that the armed resistance forces in Gaza—encompassing the al Qassam Brigades ( Hamas’s armed wing) and others—*also* have transcended unbearable hardship by mounting an extraordinary collective effort.

### **“Something Greater than Themselves”**

A [report](#) released in August by Ground Truth Solutions and Arab World for Research and Development ([AWRAD](#)) revealed the extent of mutual aid occurring in Gaza over the past year. Conducted in June and July, the survey of 1,200 civilians confirmed that none of the fundamental needs at the base of Maslow’s hierarchy were being fulfilled in Gaza. As expected, when asked about their most immediate priorities, 90 to 99 percent of the respondents listed Maslow’s basic needs: food, water, shelter, and safety.

But more than 90 percent also listed priorities such as “care for marginalized groups” and “doing something to contribute or support.” A large share of people also provided food, water, help with daily affairs, electric power, housing, childcare, or psychosocial support to others in the community—and received such help from others. Community volunteer groups organized early in the conflict, and about one-third of respondents told interviewers they had benefited from support provided by these groups.

Displaced families or communities taking refuge in a new location said they’d found plenty of help. Local leaders and committees helped them set up tent encampments or “find other housing arrangements in host families.” Furthermore, “When asked about the most important resources available to them, people often mention community kitchens, which provide a means through which local aid groups can provide support and residents can pool resources to try and reach those in greatest need.”

At the time Ground Truth Solutions and AWRAD were conducting these interviews, the Israeli onslaught and aid blockade had been going on for nine months. When families and communities are forced to live with constant hunger and thirst, to go without medical care, to watch family members and compatriots die all around them for months on end, sustaining a functional society can become physically impossible. As a result, the report noted, “During in-depth discussions, both aid providers and community volunteers mentioned the erosion of mutual aid within communities as resources become scarcer.”

Burdens of scarcity, displacement, and death-risk accumulate over time. There's only so much that people can take, however brave and generous they are. But that doesn't mean the Palestinians are giving up. One woman told Ground Truth interviewers, "We are a mighty people who have dignity and we will prevail. We'll die standing like palm trees and we will not kneel." It may be that colonized people just don't fit Maslow's model. Alah himself noted that its "Western-centric origins may not adequately reflect the collective experiences of trauma and resilience that significantly influence societal dynamics in regions like Gaza, where cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in shaping communal responses to adversity."

### **No Choice but to Fight**

The Palestinian armed resistance too is exemplifying transcendence. As part of a great tradition established by wars of liberation throughout history, they have held their own against a far larger, more powerful army—one equipped and supported by the world's biggest military-industrial complex, that of the United States and other Western powers.

Gaza's fighters have so far thwarted the occupiers' efforts to depopulate Gaza. They are mounting fierce resistance against the army's attempt to drive all Palestinians from northern Gaza into the South, annex and resettle the North with Israelis, and let the South become one big, uninhabitable "[deportation camp](#)" (somehow inhabited by millions of Palestinians until they are pushed out).

The Palestinians are fighting with antitank weapons, rifles, and mortars that they designed and manufactured themselves. In so-called "return to sender" missions, they're blowing up IDF tanks and troops using "barrel bombs" filled with explosives they've [recycled](#) from the Israeli "dud" munitions that litter Gaza's landscape. They've also gained remote control of Israeli drones, landed, reprogrammed, and armed them, and then sent them back out to attack IDF sites. In these and many other ways, the resistance forces have shown great resourcefulness.

They've shown not only [ingenuity](#) but great courage as well. In resistance [videos](#) (starting at the 2 hr 6 min mark in this one), we can see fighter after fighter dash from a bombed-out building across dozens of meters of open ground, highly exposed to drone fire, lugging a 45-pound, locally manufactured explosive device. They place them just a few feet behind an IDF tank, dash back across the open ground, and take cover just before the bomb explodes.

The resistance fighters attack only military targets that threaten the people of Gaza. After they strike, and IDF ambulances and medevac helicopters arrive to carry away the wounded and dead, the resistance fighters film from a distance but do not attack them.

Some readers might object to the inclusion of resistance fighters among examples of how people of Gaza are rising above their demolished hierarchy of needs. But focus on the than 2 million-plus people who have lived through more than 13 months of unspeakable horrors—preceded by 18 years of open-air imprisonment and a blockade that has deprived them of fundamental human needs, a siege punctuated by deadly IDF bombing campaigns in 2006, 2008-9, 2012, 2014, and 2021, along with massacres of nonviolent protesters in 2018. (And Israel’s unlawful occupation of Gaza goes back another four decades, to 1967.) No population that’s been under deadly siege and bombing for two decades would accept an open-ended continuation of such savagery without fighting back.

The death and destruction that occurred during the Palestinian resistance’s October 7, 2023 military action could never justify Israel’s attempted eradication of an entire society—even if one chose to believe every one of the now-[debunked claims](#) that the Israeli military, government, and press have made about that day.

Even if on that day the resistance had committed every act of which the Israelis have falsely accused them, the latter’s genocidal campaign of the past 13 months (and counting) is a monumentally extreme violation of two [fundamental principles of international conflict](#): *proportionality* (retaliation must not be disproportionately more severe than the acts being retaliated against) and *distinction* (military targets may be attacked, but civilians or civilian targets must not).

### **In Gaza, Nonviolence Is a Nonstarter**

My friend Justin Podur, author of the 2019 Gaza novel *Siegebreakers*, points to the 2018 mass protest known as the Great March of Return as conclusive evidence that [nonviolence had no chance of ending](#) the Israeli occupation of Gaza—that, indeed, nonviolence has never freed a people from a violent colonial power.

Every Friday for a year starting in March, 2018, Palestinians, by the tens of thousands on some days, carried out nonviolent actions at various points along the giant fence that (along with a sea and air blockade), separates Gaza from the rest of the world. The groups protested on their own land, along their own side of the barrier. By sticking to wholly nonviolent resistance, March of Return protesters did what many around the world are constantly urging the people of Gaza to do. But starting on the very first Friday, Israeli forces on the other side of the fence fired with abandon at the unarmed protesters. Over the



next twelve months, the troops shot and wounded [30,000](#) people, [killing 266](#). The dead included dozens of children. Though a horrific massacre, it was just a peek-preview of the crimes Israel would commit against Gaza's civilian population during this genocide half a decade later.

The Israeli regime will use any excuse at any time to kill, maim, or displace Palestinians. The regime, not the resistance, is the driving force behind the conflict. In Podur's words, "the slaughter of Palestinians at the Great March of Return was not the fault of the nonviolent protesters any more than the genocide in 2023-24 was the fault of the Palestinian armed groups."

Recently, the Palestinian journalist [Abubaker Abed](#), who reports from Deir al-Balah in central Gaza, was asked if he has a message for Westerners who demand that those of us protesting the genocide answer the question, "But do you condemn Hamas?" He responded,

"Regardless of political affiliations, do you really condemn someone who defends you and has your back against a terrorist state? Israel has been butchering, dehumanizing, torturing, and bombing us for 76 years. And has imposed a strict siege on us in Gaza for 17 years. In this context, where does this question even fit? It's incredibly enraging that people are trying to justify Israel's genocide by asking such silly questions."

Those of us who live in a country that's supplying unlimited support for Israel's all-out military assault and starvation campaign have no right to demand that the Palestinians refrain from fighting back. Our time is better spent demanding a total embargo on the provision of arms, money, or anything else to Israel. We too are responsible for bombing Gaza's people out of access to their basic Maslow needs. Now, to do nothing more than celebrate the valiant perseverance into which we ourselves have forced them would be a hollow gesture indeed. And to engage in pious tut-tutting over their armed resistance would be immeasurably worse.

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