“I am 22, I lost 22 people”

Zainab al-Qolaq tells her story of (not) surviving an Israeli airstrike on Gaza

May 2022
At exactly 1:00 am, on 16 May 2021, Israeli jets bombarded a densely populated residential area in the centre of Gaza City, Al-Wehda Street, without any prior warning. The bombardment lasted for just a few minutes but killed 43 people (19 of whom were children), including 14 women and nine girls.

Believing that staying at the lower floors would protect them from the bombardment, all 35 members of the al-Qolaq family gathered in two adjacent residential buildings. Zainab was 22 years old at this time, she was preparing for her final exams prior to graduation from the English department at her university.

That night, Zainab lost 22 members of her family including her mother, her only sister, two of her brothers, and many other uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents. In a blank of an eye, a big part of her family was wiped out. She survived alongside her father Shukri, her brother Osama, and 10 other relatives.

Zainab remained under the rubble of her home for 12 hours during which she struggled to breathe. She knew nothing about the status of her family. During the first few hours of being trapped, Zainab was able to communicate with a paramedic through her phone—which was still in her hand—before its battery died, she screamed for help for hours until she ultimately lost her voice. Civil defense crews managed to dig through three floors and ceilings for hours to rescue her.

Months later, Zeinab passed her final exams at the university but did not celebrate the graduation she had once longed for. Zainab wore a graduation gown at her home feeling lifeless without her mother and siblings, and described herself as a «corpse in a gown.»

This publication was produced with the support of Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor and UN Women Palestine

* The views and opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of Euro-Med Monitor, UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

* During the operation launched by Israel on the Gaza Strip from 10–21 May 2021, 256 Palestinians were killed, including 40 women and 66 children. (As of 3 June 2021).
My mom Amal, my sister Hanaa, my brother Ahmed, and my older brother Taher. My grandpa Ameen, my grandma Saadia, and my aunt Bahaa. My cousins: Zaid, Adam, their mother Doaa, and their father Ezzat. My aunt Khitam, my uncle Fawaz, his son Abdel Hamid, his other son Sameh, his wife Ayat, and their child Qusai. My cousin Reham, in the middle. My cousins: Hala, Rola, Yara and their father Muhammad. I imagined my relatives inside these shrouds, one by one, as I painted each of them and said goodbye to the relative I imagined inside. Twenty-two shrouds, for 22 lives that passed away overnight. These shrouds are not the same, though you might think they are—each wrapping represents a loved relative of mine.
Screams, panic, crying, and the devastating sounds of missiles. Children and women were the most terrified. They had not yet realized what was happening as the flashing lights roared before their eyes.

This is the voice of my mother, the hand of my sister, the look on the faces of my two brothers, the shape of the wall before cracking open, the ground that swallowed us up, the building that collapsed on top of us, the ceiling that broke our backs, the stones that cut our skin, the ashes that we inhaled, our trapped bodies, the complete darkness, the blood that flowed, the lack of air, the smell of the rubble, the dirt that we swallowed, the damned stones that separated me from my beloved ones, my screams, my conflicting thoughts, my screams, my conflicting thoughts, my screams, my screams, until I lost my voice, and the screams died away.

This is what one o’clock in the morning reminds me of - when the Israeli airstrikes bombarded my home, when I lost 22 members of my family, and when I, too, was fighting death.
It has been 12 months already. A number that freaks me out. One year has passed!
The passing of days and the sunrising each morning troubles me, I am still hoping to open my eyes, as I used to, to my mother’s smile and affection. I am still longing for one hug from Hana. I used to stay up late with Ahmed, who would ease away the worries and pain of life by his infectious laughs. His laughter still echoes in my ears, so much so that I sometimes turn around to see if he is really there.
I miss having coffee with Taher and sit one more time to discuss a thousand topics that we started but never finished talking about. Yet, we always ended our conversations with a laugh.
He was no ordinary brother. I lost my older brother and my best friend. Wherever I look, I cannot help but remember one of them. My soul has perished from longing. The pain of loss grows inside me, intensifies with time, never settles down, does not wear off, and won’t stop eating me up inside.
I am nothing but an ever-widening cracks of pain, a cluster of scars that never heals.
Of all the graduation ceremony scenarios I pictured, I never imagined a cemetery being the place where I tell my family that I have finally graduated and share with them what was meant to be a joyous feeling.

As I prepared for my final exams, I couldn’t imagine that I wouldn’t be able to tell my mother how grateful I was for all the nights she slept on my bedside to reassure me, for every cup of coffee she brought me late at night while I was studying. I never told my sister Hana that her talks and prayers comforted me when I was anxious about the upcoming exams. I had never imagined that a long-awaited dream would turn into a terrible nightmare, that I would end my years of education as a lifeless corpse in a gown.
My memories consume me. My attempts fail me. Whenever I want to bridge the rift in my soul, I realize that it is only deepening. You do not know what it means to hug your sister or brother, to reassure them while your own heart is trembling—to tell them not to be afraid, though you are terrified!

They turn to you to tell a story or make them laugh, like you used to, but you look at them and wish you could ask for the same—for one of them to distract you from reality with a story, any story.

They may have removed the rubble above me, but who will remove the scattered rubble from my heart?
Only a year ago, I was surrounded by everyone I loved. It was the last time we were all together; I have photos and videos documenting the laughter of that day. I have photos in which no one is left alive but me. Loss renders us lifeless. The night haunts us, and its tragedies swallow us up.
Perhaps what is most agonizing dilemma about my family is that they would flood you with affection, the young never gets old in their eyes. They would feed you love and affection with every slice of bread. Being a child of this family means you would receive a great amount of love inherited from generation to generation. It means your heart would be closely attached to every one of them. It means they are present in every little detail of your life.

On a day like this, I would get a kiss from my mother before I fall asleep and a hug from my sister when I wake up, a long loving letter from my older brother that would warm my heart and a murmur and laughter from my younger brother. I would get a warm hug from my grandmother and kisses from my grandfather. I would walk around serenaded by their prayers, along with my aunt’s sweet words. I would hear prayers from my other aunt, as my mother would tell me the details of my birth again and again, her eyes shining and her love overflowing...

Hanged clothes scare me. I cry over their absent souls.
Dear civil defense worker, thank you for being able to notice that I moved the tip of my foot attached to my entire exhausted body, my head pinned between large stones, and my voice lost, when everyone thought I was merely a dead body.

Thank you for being able to notice me at the last second as I saw the bulldozer’s claw digging so close that I quivered, feeling its warmth, and when I was completely unable to let out the trapped scream inside me. Thank you for yelling that I was not a dead body, and asking them to find another way to get me out!

Thank you to the civil defense worker who insisted on saving my father despite the difficult situation and the lack of proper equipment—the person who almost suffocated while trying to deliver oxygen to my father.

Thanks to all the civil defense workers who pulled my family and myself out from the rubble we were buried under, considering it was almost impossible to save us, and despite the bombs that were still raining down on us from the jets above.

I know how trivial a “thank you” is compared to what you have done, nothing is enough to reward you for your efforts.
Twelve whole hours of which I relived detail by detail while painting these. I hear the voice of the paramedic who was trying to locate me under the rubble, and I feel suffocated again. I turn around looking for the source of the overpowering smell of ash and dirt that agonized me. I look at the ground and imagine it falling beneath my feet. I grab my phone, clinging to it, and type in the number of the paramedic. Just in case...!

I remember the last thing I said to him before my phone battery died. I can hear the sound of my phone falling from my hand hitting the stones below. I can see myself helplessly trying. I see myself powerless. My phone battery dies, and I am still stuck under the rubble. And I am still trying. I see myself in pitch darkness, in great pain, with deep opened wounds. I lose my voice. I struggle to catch a single breath. I swallow dirt. And I keep trying. To this day, I am still trying.
These are my drawings, an artistically interpreted quotation of what I carry in me, and these are my writings, a simple expression of my silence. Perhaps you will applaud my tragedy and praise my pain, the art I hate.

Peace and mercy upon the souls of my mother, my sister, my brothers and my family

Special thanks and gratitude to my dear father Shokry, to my companion and brother Osama, to my mentor artist Ahmed Al-Sahhar, and to Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor and UN Women Palestine for their constant support and help towards the realization of this project.
Around 70% of civilian victims of armed conflicts are women and children\(^1\).

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