

“Accessing Healthcare in the West Bank and Gaza” and “Child of Despair” by Mohammed Abusaada and Noa Dotan

**Seekers
Presentations
for New Story
Leadership**



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Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

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Mohammed Abusaada: "Accessing Healthcare in the West Bank and Gaza"

Thank you for being here today and giving me the opportunity to share my experiences and the struggles faced by my people in accessing healthcare. My name is Mohammed, a Palestinian healthcare worker from Ramallah. For the past 30 years, I have witnessed the immense challenges that Palestinians endure when seeking medical care. Today, I want to shed light on the urgent need for equitable access to healthcare for Palestinians and the stories that have fueled my commitment to this cause.

Throughout my career, I have worked on coordinating Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to receive cancer treatments in Israeli hospitals. This work has given me a deep sense of duty to ensure that Palestinians have the same access to healthcare as our Israeli neighbors.

Helping these patients is like being in the middle of a football field, with the ball (or patient), being the football between bureaucratic processes of the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government. While at times, it is the PA impeding the process, at others it is Israeli authorities. The patient is the political football and loser regardless. Let me share a couple profoundly moving examples of this daily challenge for Palestinian patients and healthcare workers.

One example of this is Sameer, a man from Gaza, who was diagnosed with lung cancer and desperately needed specialized therapy that was unavailable in his local hospital. I worked closely with his medical team to refer him to hospitals in Israel that could provide the treatment he needed. However, as is the reality for all Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, Sameer had to navigate the incredibly challenging process of

obtaining a permit to enter Israel for treatment.

Despite his tireless efforts, this kind-hearted man waited for months, hoping to hear back about the status of his permit. Tragically, his cancer progressed, and he passed away while still awaiting the opportunity to enter Israel. His death fell heavily on my heart, bringing indescribable sadness. However, it also motivated me to work even harder to save my people. Sameer's story is not an isolated incident. Many Palestinians face similar fates, either losing their lives or being forced to delay essential treatment due to the numerous constraints imposed by the occupation.

In another case, the challenge was on the Palestinian side. The President of the Palestinian Authority suspended all patient referrals to Israeli hospitals – a completely political decision in response to the occupation. This resulted in hundreds of Palestinian patients with complex medical situations, such as cancer and congenital malformation being denied treatment. The Israeli Hadassa Medical Organization worked with me to appeal to the Palestinian Authority to grant the patient referrals. After obtaining the list of all patients seeking treatment for complex medical conditions, I was able to advocate on behalf of these patients with the Palestinian authorities and obtain life-saving permits to travel to Israel for treatment. I am proud to say that some of these very sick patients survived, although I have to acknowledge that given the state of public health in Palestinian territories, and the fact that funds for treatment are often denied or selectively applied, many of them were not able to continue their treatment.

The situation in Gaza is particularly dire. With a population density of 42,500 people per square mile, many of whom live below the poverty line, the demand for healthcare is overwhelming. However, the stringent Israeli border control makes it exceedingly difficult to import sufficient medicine and healthcare materials.

Even for those fortunate enough to secure Israeli entry permits, other significant barriers continue to impede their access to healthcare. Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank must navigate checkpoints to enter Israel. Moreover, they must arrange their own transportation to reach the hospitals, adding yet another layer of difficulty. While some hospitals provide support in these areas, not all do, leaving Palestinians to face these challenges alone.

As you can see from these two examples, patients in the West Bank and Gaza face real challenges obtaining critical care. Whether due to permit delays, or the challenges of transfers to hospital once permits are obtained, this should not be normal treatment of critical patients. Nevertheless, they are constant and relentless barriers to healthcare in the region. The bureaucratic hurdles they face can leave patients uncertain and anxious about their future. Many patients are trapped in a cycle of uncertainty, not knowing when or how they will receive the medical care they desperately need. I try everyday to lessen these burdens for them.

In closing, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for your undivided attention today. Thank you for taking the time to listen to my message and for your unwavering support of Palestinian healthcare. I feel compelled to share that these stories, these struggles, they stir emotions within me that words alone cannot capture. It is through our collective efforts that we can truly make a difference in the lives of countless Palestinians. As a project expert and field officer, I am committed to being on the ground, doing everything I can to ensure that healthcare becomes more accessible to those in need, simply because healthcare should not be seen as 'luxury' but a basic human right. Together, let us forge a path toward a healthier and more compassionate future for all. Thank you"

Noa Dotan: A Child of Despair

I am a child of despair. Although for most of my life, I did not know it. I was born in 1999 four years after former Prime Minister Rabin was murdered, and with him the national hope for peace. Binyamin Netanyahu has been prime minister for 15 years out of my 24 years of life. Today, as a political and aware Israeli it is obvious to me that my government is not interested in peace, that will secure my family's safety in our home. In fact in the last regional peace initiative, in 2022, there wasn't even a Palestinian representative. But the things I know today, that had led me to these conclusions, I only learned in recent years.

When I was 16 years old, I had the privilege to represent Israel to the American public. My peers and I were touring high schools and giving a presentation about Israel. The funniest part about those presentations was the questions we would receive. I remember a few, one girl asked if we were already married at the young age of 16, another asked if we rode camels to school. These questions were ridiculous, they were out of ignorance. And to that category, another set of questions was added, questions about the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.

I remember being angry at these questions, feeling that people from the outside, that didn't feel the fear of rockets, or buses blowing up, didn't deserve to have a stand, because they didn't know. But the older I got, the more I was humbled, releasing that although it is true that people from the outside couldn't truly know the Israeli experience, I had absolutely no clue about the Palestinian one.

I met my first Palestinian when I was 18, despite there being 2 million Palestinian citizens in Israel. Israel is very segregated in that manner. Even if unofficially, there are clearly Jewish cities and Arab cities, with different conditions, and different education systems. In my education system, we learned a very one-sided story of Israel's history, with the word Palestinians mentioned only a number of times,

and facts shown selectively to flatter the Israeli narrative. When we are younger, we have fewer tools to question what we are taught. It becomes our truth, our core belief, and any information that contradicts it is often overlooked. That's how I grew up to be ignorant about the lives of people living only a few kilometers away from me.

The first time I was forced to doubt my core beliefs didn't have anything to do with Palestinians, as oddly as it sounds. It was enrolling in the Israeli Army. As you might know, the Israeli army is mandatory and also celebrated in Israeli culture. So after I finished high school and a year of volunteering, I was thrilled to enroll and was assigned to be a soldier teacher. I was very happy about that because as a pacifist I had one principle that I was not willing to compromise on- I will not shoot a gun. When one enrolls, they first go through boot camp, regardless of the position. I heard a myth that there is a magical thing called weapon exemption that will allow me to complete the boot camp without weapon training. But, as you might have guessed, it was called a myth for a reason, and it did not exist.

The next month has become the hardest month of my life. I did not eat, I did not sleep. I just couldn't shake off the feeling that without my consent, I was forced to learn how to kill people. It was the first time in my life that I sacrificed my principles, and my heart was broken.

A few months after, when I was already in my position, I was deeply depressed, feeling that I am losing my individuality and identity. But luckily I did remember, that there is always a choice. And the choice I had to face was either fighting my way out of the army, doing whatever it takes, or staying for the next two years and losing myself. I decided to leave as an act of self-love, of persistence that my passion, joy, and hopefulness were far too precious so simply let go. I can tell you now, it was the best decision of my life.

I've met countless people finishing the army with their spirits broken, only wanting to escape, and taking years to recover. Our country needs people to loudly question this abnormal reality and to be politically engaged, not avoidant. This is just another form in which the current system harms the hope for peace.

After I left the army, I started my gradual process of awakening, learning more about the Nakba, the Occupation of the West Bank, the Siege on Gaza, and the systematic racism Palestinian citizens of Israel experience. I started to lead and take part in activism and saw on the ground what I never would have imagined only years before.

Allow me to share with you a little of what I learned:

We attack, so we are attacked so we attack, and the cycle is endless. Only last week the Israeli army attacked the city and refugee camp of Jenin, killing 7 people, 2 of them are minors. As a reaction, a Palestinian man killed three Israeli men and one minor near a settlement in the West Bank. A MINISTER in the ruling GOVERNMENT used the momentum to advance his agenda of civilian gunnery. Not more than a day later 400 settlers raided 12 Palestinian villages with arson and live fire.

More often than not, the acts of violent resistance from Palestinians, acts of desperate revenge is not out of blind hatred, it's out of hatred that was based on years of oppression, occupation, and siege. I am against all violence. No harm done to innocent people is ever justified. And it is obvious that actions that my government claims to do for my security are in practice against it. Actions like house demolitions of innocent people following bureaucracy torture, of child arrest, being the only country in the world that doesn't differentiate between minors and adults in the military justice system. And the list goes on.

These actions are not improving my security; they only add

more hatred and frustration to the cycle.

The Israeli- Palestinian conflict is one between an elephant and a mouse. If the elephant wants the mouse to quit biting him, he should probably lift his foot off of him. But the government doesn't seem to care about that bitten foot. We are the foot! Israeli citizens are! Israeli children near the Gaza strip that endure trauma from birth, my baby brother that will have to go to a war never meant to be over

My government gave up on my future, my public gave up on my future, and you, the American public did too. I can't blame you, there is no magic cure. An elephant cannot shake hands with a mouse.

Israel is considered to be the only democracy in the Middle East, but within the territory under Israeli sovereignty and military control 5 million Palestinians cannot vote. This is not the democracy that we dreamt of.

But I urge you to not despair because we didn't, we can't. We cannot see the Washington Monument from outside the door, but if we take one step, and another, and another, perhaps in the thousands step we will be able to see it in the horizon. In our case, these steps are honoring Palestinian human rights, and international law, and strengthening Palestinian economy. Let's take these steps together; this is our solution that will lead us to the promised land. I want you to do two things, one-support Palestinian human rights organizations. Two- write to your elected officials, and urge them to restrict the military aid to Israel, to not harm innocent people. Sending a clear message that you will not sit idle anymore, watching the Israeli government endanger human lives, Israeli and Palestinian alike. It's time for a new story, one in which being pro-Israel and pro-Palestine does not contradict.

