

“We don’t want to be remembered as victims”

Lecture by Dr Yousef Aljamal at the “Switzerland-Palestinian Society” in Zurich

by Ursula Cross

At the invitation of the “Switzerland-Palestine Society”,¹ Yousef Aljamal, who grew up in the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza, spoke on 28 January 2024 about personal stories, stubborn Palestinians, people’s pride in their history and his hope in young people around the world.

“My stories are intended to make it easier for people to imagine life in an occupied territory”. With these words Dr Aljamal started his lecture.

Introducing Yousef Aljamal

In the refugee camp, Aljamal attended a school run by the *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East* (UNRWA). His family lived in Block A of a former prison from the First World War. The entrance and exit were the old prison gates. That was his home. Thanks to the school, he was later able to study. First at the *Islamic University* in Gaza. This was followed by a master’s degree in Malaysia on the subject of “BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions)” and a year ago he completed a degree in Turkey on the subject of “Terrorism and Liberation Movements in the Middle East”. Today he lives in Turkey with his wife.

He has many family members and friends in the Gaza Strip. By 18 October 2023, he had already lost nine family members in the unspeakable war, all of them civilians.

Friendship with the Israeli “son of the general”

Since 2013, he has had a close friendship with the Israeli *Miko Peled*, author of the impressive book “The General’s Son”, whose grandfather was a leader of the Zionist movement and one of the signatories of the Israeli Declaration of Independence of 1948.

His father, *Matti Peled*, was one of the generals of the Six-Day War. In the last decades of his life, he campaigned vigorously for reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians and for a just peace based on equality.

Israelis are not allowed to travel to Palestine. One day it was Yousef Aljamal who smuggled Miko Peled through the tunnels to Gaza so that



Yousef Aljamal: “Gaza should be remembered as a place of hope”. (Picture UC)

he could give a few lectures there. This had never happened before: a Jewish Israeli speaking to people in Gaza.

Reporting of other special contacts

Yousef Aljamal became an early member of the collective *We Are Not Numbers*, together with the Palestinian poet *Refaat Alareer*, who was killed by a targeted Israeli attack on 6 December 2023, shortly after he had published the poem “If I must die”. The prominent opposition figure had written this poem in 2011.

Together, Aljamal and the poet Alareer have made several promotional tours in the USA to present Alareer’s books, to which Aljamal also contributed. For example, “Gaza writes back” (2014) and “Light in Gaza: Writings Born of Fire” (2022). Refaat Alareer was known as “The Voice of Gaza”.



Refaat Alareer, Palestinian poet.
(Picture mad)

If I must die

If I must die,
you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings,
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze—
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself—
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up
above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love.
If I must die
let it bring hope
let it be a tale.

Yousef Aljamal has translated several books. Today, he publishes regularly for various media and participates twice a week in the *PalCast* podcast together with Irishman *Tony Groves*.

Yousef Aljamal's family history

“Before 1948, mainly farmers lived in this area. They grew fruit, vegetables, and grain. My grandfather was one of the small farmers. In that fateful year, all the inhabitants of the village were forcibly expelled. My grandfather was shot dead, and my family lived scattered for 20 years after that, unable to see each other. They were only reunited in 1967. My parents married in 1987 and a color-coded identification system restricted their freedom of movement to other family members. My mother had a green Gaza Identity Card (ID), my father a green West Bank ID. Originally, my mother had a blue Jerusalem ID. An Israeli permit had to be obtained for every trip. It took 12 years before my mother was able to visit her relatives in Jerusalem! When she had to travel to Israel for treatment of her breast cancer because there were no specialised hos-

pitals for cancer treatment in Gaza at the time, she was lucky that the permit was issued in time. Many did not receive permits. My sister would have needed a minor operation. Because she didn't get a travel permit for over a year, her disease was so advanced that she couldn't be saved. She was 26.

The Turkish hospital for cancer treatment in Gaza has since been bombed.”

To survive: shrewd, stubborn, and resilient

“My father earned his living as a simple laborer for the Israelis.

Once, Israeli soldiers forced him to dance in the middle of the crowded village, which was a great humiliation. He then asked the soldiers to clap their hands to get the mood going. When they put down their weapons to clap, my father quickly ran away and ended up hiding in an orange tree, where he was not discovered.

My cousin also did his doctorate in Malaysia. In October, he travelled to Gaza with his wife. Her family lived there, and she wanted to be there for the birth of her twins. Due to the bombing of the hospitals, she had to deliver the babies by caesarean section without any anesthesia. Then her house was bombed: the six-day-old twins, my cousin, his wife, and most of his family did not survive.

Many young Palestinians went to Greece. At 98% Gaza has one of the highest literacy rates in the Arab world. – It is said that the people of Gaza and Hebron are very stubborn.

In Gaza City there is a little-known metal statue of a Phoenix, which is known to rise from the ashes again and again. It is a symbol of the incredible resilience of the inhabitants in the face of ethnic cleansing, repression, and destruction.”



Phoenix Statue on Palestine Square in Gaza City.
(Picture Israa Mohammed Jamal)

“Gaza is the fourth oldest city in the world and used to have a seaport.

Alexander the Great needed three attempts to conquer Gaza. The third time he only succeeded thanks to a ruse. The story of Samson and Delilah also took place in Gaza.

There were many pagans. Supposedly, they were told that if they believed in God, i.e. became Christians, then it would rain. Many re-

sponded to this. During the First World War, Gaza was occupied by Great Britain and destroyed completely.

Gaza is also home to the third oldest church in the world.

Shortly before 7 October 2023, Roman tombs were excavated in the heart of Gaza.

The Palestinians are very proud of their history.”

Yousef Aljamal showed a map of the Gaza Strip and a few selected pictures, almost all with intact, positive images. “We don’t want to be remembered as victims. Nor do we want Gaza to be remembered as a sad place, but rather as a place of hope.”

This is reminiscent of the poem by his friend Refaat Alareer, which he read aloud.

UNRWA

“UNRWA is very important for the Palestinians. It has always been a symbol for Palestine. In Gaza, 30,000 people worked for UNRWA, be it in the medical sector or in schools. [Israel has always been against UNRWA because its existence reminds it of the many Palestinian refugee camps in the occupied areas and in surrounding countries.] If UNRWA were to be shut down now due to allegations of corruption, it would be a disaster. The Gaza problem must be solved first, then UNRWA can be stopped. 85% are displaced now, in the north people are starving.”

Mood in Turkey and Malaysia

Yousef Aljamal: “Many people are experiencing a wakeup call shaken by the thousands of people killed in the Gaza Strip. So, the ideals of Palestine, the idea of Palestine, cannot be extinguished.”

He describes the mood and sympathy he encounters. Turkey recognizes Palestine and gen-

erally supports Palestine: you see many flags, protests, Israeli Products are boycotted and there are calls for sanctions against Israel. In Malaysia, too, only a minority supports Israel; the vast majority sympathise with Palestine. Despite differing points of view, there is no heated atmosphere in Malaysia. Some people change their Visa cards to local credit cards. [Both countries support South Africa’s ICJ case against Israel. Edit.]

Discussion and outlook

What can be done? An elderly lady shows her solidarity and compassion by wearing a kufiya, a Palestinian scarf. You can complain to the Swiss Press Council about the unbelievably one-sided reporting. Another participant reminds us not to get lost in detail, for example in discussions. You don’t have to be politically motivated; you just have to be human and focus on the injustice and the many casualties.

Yousef Aljamal suggests:

“You have to ‘make noise’ like a child ‘makes noise’ with its mother when it wants something; you have to speak, protest. Young people are particularly important now. With social media, they can access and share information and video reports more directly. People’s stories need to be passed on.”

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ The *Swiss-Palestinian Society GSP* was founded in 1976. As a non-denominational and non-partisan, non-profit organisation, its aims are to strengthen relations with the Palestinian people and to inform its members and the Swiss public about the political, social, and cultural conditions in Palestine. Since 2001, its *Campaign Olive Oil from Palestine* has been helping to secure the livelihood of small Palestinian farmers.