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Night in Gaza

Mads Gilbert, privately published, Skyscraper Publications, 2015, PB, 190pp, £16.00, ISBN 978-0993153365.

Night in Gaza is medical doctor Mads Gilbert's account of what he witnessed in Gaza in the summer of 2014. On July 7, 2014, Israel launched a series of aerial attacks on Gaza and this attack is referred to as Operation Protective Edge, which lasted fifty-one days. The book was published almost one year after "Operation Protective Edge" and coinciding with the eighth anniversary of the blockade of Gaza. It was the most aggressive and destructive of all Israel's 12 wars on Gaza. Mads Gilbert's book presents and introduces the readers to the courageous, enduring and almost inconceivably strong spirit of Palestinian health workers and volunteers. The author, Mads Gilbert is a Norwegian doctor, and has worked at Al-Shifa Hospital, the principal emergency receiving hospital in the Gaza Strip.

This book is a photo story, it depicts images and stories that would otherwise may not be covered or given much attention by Western mass media. Mads Gilbert used just a small black camera to capture every moment of the two weeks that he spent dealing with casualties, repairing serious injuries, and trying to save lives at Al-Shifa Hospital. As well as taking photos of his two week experience he also kept a daily journal featuring eye-witness accounts of damages caused by the Israeli attack and moving accounts from his interaction with Palestinian civilians.¹ Through this book Gilbert has provided us with a partially biased but nonetheless raw and authentic insight into the plight of the Palestinian people and the healthcare system during July 2014.

This book is an example of the compelling genre of conflict literature by surgeons and doctors who have served during the unimaginable horrors of war. His style is non-judgemental and informative; he describes his experiences using a mixture of narrative, clinical experiences, pen portraits, over 120 photographs, and data from official reports. Amidst the sounds of bombs and screaming and seeing bodies torn to pieces, a society reduced to rubble; regardless he was able to see and document the camaraderie, dignity, human courage and unflinching resolve.

Gilbert makes it very clear from the first page of the book that this is not to be taken as an academic piece or a journalistic piece:

¹ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Night-Gaza-Mads-Gilbert/dp/1566560756>

*“This book is a testimony, not an academic thesis or a neutral journalistic report This book is my account of what I witnessed in Gaza in the summer of 2014. It is the story of some of the human cost paid by the Palestinian people for enduring the Israeli occupation ”*²

He clearly states that his motives to go over and his use his skills and practice his profession was to show solidarity and to aid those who are already providing medical assistance to the injured-on ground. He is a firm believer that one’s profession is to be used for the greater good and to serve humanity.

*“The medical profession cannot and should not be detached from society; it should be a living force, a tool for living good lives and for making changes that serve justice ”*³

Gilbert makes it clear that by using his profession he has already taken sides in this conflict, there was no way he could stay neutral.

*“I am not neutral. I have taken a side. This book is a plea: in favor of the Palestinians. ”*⁴

Gilbert captures the moment where a Palestinian nurse can be seen giving the victory salute as Gilbert deals with an emergency. The photograph is captioned: *“The health workers see themselves as part of the popular resistance.”* The State of Israel sees the medical profession as a political tool. If Israel’s politicization of medicine is designed ultimately to further the Zionist project of dispossession and conquest, Gilbert’s political stance is, on the contrary, taken in defence of Palestinian rights and universal human values.

While this experience of unease followed by relief recurs throughout the book, there are also profoundly disturbing photographs of the dying and the dead. Gilbert outlines that:

“Every single image in this book has been evaluated by senior medical staff at al-Shifa and by the Palestinian ministry of health with regard to whether it is ethically justifiable to publish them and to whether patient confidentiality has been respected. I have received official authorization for all the pictures included in this book. Names have generally been omitted.”

The many photographs are mostly supplied with indications of the time at which they were taken. Sometimes there are many pages consisting only of photographs with captions, and sometimes several pages of uninterrupted text.

There are vivid portraits of individuals, for example Dr. Sobhi Skaik who has led al-Shifa hospital *“through four wars”* and *“is undoubtedly one of the world’s most experienced war surgeons.”* or Dr. Mohammad Abou-Arab, a Palestinian with Norwegian citizenship, *“a*

² Gilbert, Mads. (2015). PREFACE: Testimony, Night in Gaza (pp. 6). Skyscraper Publications.

³ Gilbert, Mads. (2015). PREFACE: Testimony, Night in Gaza (pp. 7). Skyscraper Publications.

⁴ Mads Gilbert, privately published, Skyscraper Publications, 2015, PB, ISBN 978-0993153365

natural authority figure” who “*gives all of himself and his unstoppable work capacity day and night.*” among many other examples in the book.

Mads Gilbert describes some harrowing experiences and work circumstances. At times he and his Palestinian colleagues would have to operate with nothing but the light they got from the screens of their phones to there being a shortage of everything from medicines to bedsheets. The 2014 war resulted in huge damage in the health sector with 17 hospitals, 56 primary healthcare facilities and 45 ambulances damaged or destroyed in Israeli strikes.

Where the text is most powerful and memorable is when Gilbert gives voice to individual Palestinians. Gilbert never loses the sight of the purpose of this project, which is to give the Palestinian people a voice and an honest and authentic portrayal. During the time he spent attending to patients he also used this as an opportunity to meet patients he had treated in previous conflicts. He recalls visiting Samar in Brussels years after he treated her in January 2009 during Operation Cast Lead. She remembers every moment even though she was only four at the time. He remembered her distinctly coming into the hospital alone at just the age of four from an area in northern Gaza. She came into the theatre room with wounds to her chest and internal bleeding. There was major damage done to her spinal cord which left her without feeling from the waist down and caused her to lose the use of her legs. He remembered her crying and calling out for her mother shortly after her operation and that moment never left him. He made sure to keep up with her progress and was fortunate enough to meet her in her home in Brussels. It’s through actions like these that show us that Gilbert was doing this because he genuinely loved and had compassion for these people.

Night in Gaza is not the definitive account of that 51-day conflict in the summer of 2014. It does not pretend to be.⁵ It is difficult not to have sympathy and to feel solidarity towards the people of Palestine after reading the book. For this reason, however, it can be perceived as a form of Pro-Palestine propaganda. However, I have come to the conclusion that this is an honest, authentic and somewhat-bias documentation of a medical doctor’s experience serving during Operation Protective Edge. The structure of the book is very balanced, we get a mixture of photograph and text to give the whole project a well-rounded feel and detailed account. *Night in Gaza* provides a realistic, genuine, heart wrenching and absorbing window into suffering that happened to the people of Palestine during Operation Protective Edge that otherwise would not have been shown by Western mainstream media.

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4684016/>