

# Libraries in Gaza: Between Despair and Hope

## The Edward Said Public Library, Gaza's Only English Language Library

Presentation for the American Library Association  
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By Mosab Abu Toha

### An Invitation to Join Me in Gaza: A Welcome to All Librarians

اهلا ومرحبا بكم في كلمتي عن مكتبة ادوارد سعيد العامة وواقع المكتبات العامة في غزة هنا في مؤتمر رابطة المكتبات الأمريكية النصف شتوي في فيلاديلفيا

That, as you probably know, was Arabic. And this is what I said to you: “Hello and welcome to my speech about the Edward Said Library and Public Libraries in Gaza—here at the midwinter conference of the American Library Association in Philadelphia.”

Let me see how much you understand when I say it in Arabic again:

اهلا ومرحبا بكم في كلمتي عن مكتبة ادوارد سعيد العامة وواقع المكتبات العامة في غزة هنا في مؤتمر رابطة المكتبات الأمريكية النصف شتوي في فيلاديلفيا.

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Figure 1. Mosab Abu Toha at ALA Midwinter Meeting, 2020. Photo by Mark Hudson

That wasn't so difficult, was it? I appreciate your invitation. And now I would like to take you on a little journey to the Middle East, where I came from only a few months ago.

Allow me a one-minute overview of the Gaza Strip, a coastal enclave in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, sitting right next to Egypt, with two million people living in crowded conditions on an area of only 140 square miles. For comparison, I found that Gaza is almost the same size as the entire greater Philadelphia area, which is about 143 square miles.

I must be open with you about life in Gaza, even though many of the facts may make some of you feel uncomfortable. Unfortunately, the Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank experience the deadly consequences of the occupation many times—without ever knowing what will come next. In 2014, during the third wave of bombing attacks on Gaza in less than ten years by the Israeli forces, more than 2,200 people were killed and more than eleven thousand were injured, according to the United Nations. Thousands of children were traumatized. As a father of two children with a third one on its way in April, I can tell you how terrible those scenarios are for little kids and their parents. Now, visualize the university where *you*



Figure 2. Mosab's home library, August 2014. Photo by Mosab Abu Toha.

studied. One day, a neighboring country bombs your alma mater. As a student, what would you do?

### **“Rising from the Ashes of Books”: The Edward Said Library**

What you *imagined* about the destruction of your university, many of us *experienced* in the summer of 2014. My family and I did not get killed like many others because we had left our house a few hours before the bombing—unaware of what was to come. Our neighbor’s house got hit with an F-16 bomb, which severely damaged our house, too. Afterwards, I raced inside and found my personal books scattered on the floor, with shrapnel decorating torn books and my favorite old carpet. The Israeli forces had targeted important educational institutions of ours, including several schools of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (also known as UNRWA). One night during the raids, on July 30, 2014, in an UNRWA school in the Jabaliya camp, the Abu Hussein Elementary School, my family and I were sleeping in classroom “C.” At dawn, the Israeli Army bombed classroom “A” with mortar shells. 15 people were killed and 90 were wounded. Because of the summer heat and the overcrowded classrooms, some of the families had been sleeping in the school playground. A dozen of those men, women, and children, who thought they would be safe in the school, all died that morning. A terrifying day with many funerals.

### **Books Trying to Survive**

My alma mater, the Islamic University of Gaza, was bombarded a month later, on August 2, 2014. In the few hours of silence after the bombings, I rushed toward my university. The building, bombed and in ruins, was not safe to enter, but nevertheless, I risked it and carefully



Figure 3. Mosab Abu Toha in the English Department at the Islamic University of Gaza, August 2014. Photo by Adham Al-Ashqar.

walked through the rubble. One of the first few things I saw shook me deeply—books, smoldering like birds with broken wings that had been firebombed, trying to survive under heavy cement blocks. I had never even imagined that books could be harmed so ruthlessly. As I stepped closer to the English Department, I found a copy of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, partly torn and covered with dust. I cleaned it. I embraced it. I'm not ashamed to say that I cried about my lifeline to American literature that had survived. Later, I discovered it was the same book one of my instructors had used while lecturing.

### **Turning the Destruction of our University into Something Positive**

When I returned home, I opened Facebook and posted my photo with that book and another one of my badly damaged book collection. To my delight, old friends and strangers from around the world responded. I felt like crying every single time when people, some of whom I had never met, offered their support. Within a short period of time after the bombing, donated books from around the English-speaking world piled up in my room. The idea occurred to me to create a public English-language library that everyone in Gaza could use.

Everything we in Gaza had experienced—not only being bombed frequently and regularly cut off from electricity, but deliberately deprived of culture through a shortage of libraries, library books, and access to vital informational resources abroad—made me a man of action. I no longer saw myself as just a Palestinian student of British and American literature, but a librarian-in-the-making, determined to create a new library, an *English* language library—something that did not exist in Gaza. I knew I had to push ahead and turn the destruction of our university into something positive. I knew that with the help of friends from abroad and my friends in Gaza, I could build Gaza's only English-language library. And the book parcels kept coming in—each one opening new worlds.

### **Gaza's First English-language Library: The Edward Said Library**

As a result, I created a Facebook page, "Library and Bookshop for Gaza." Readers responded to the campaign by donating more books and sharing my plea on their Facebook pages. When the books I collected exceeded 600, I invited my Facebook friends to donate money so that I could rent a place for the books and buy bookshelves, desks, and chairs.

To express the respect and gratitude that we Palestinians have for Edward W. Said and his worldwide bridge-building, I named the library in honor of this great Palestinian American writer and academic—an important symbol of freedom and intellectual life in Palestine.

He stood for his oppressed people and against the occupiers, whether the Israeli government and their occupation or, later, the actions and inactions of the Palestinian Authority. Said could have lived a comfortable life, away from politics and debates. Instead, he spent his life advocating for Palestinian equality by teaching, writing many articles and books, and reaching out to anyone who was willing to listen and learn—one of the goals we have for our Edward Said Library.

I felt honored when Mariam Said, Edward Said's widow, expressed her gratitude upon learning about our efforts to establish the library. She donated money and a few of Edward's books to us—all signed "Gift from the Said Family." In late 2018, because the library lacked a legal status, she connected me with the Middle East Children's Alliance (MECA), which now functions as the U.S. sponsor and partner of the Edward Said library.

### **Articles about the Edward Said Library around the World Leading to More Book Donations**

On February 10, 2017, *Al Jazeera*, the first English-language news channel in the Middle East, wrote a story about me and the library, which gave us a worldwide audience and their support (Gadzo, 2017). So did *ArabLit Quarterly* ("Wanted: Library books for Palestine," 2017) and *StepFeed* (Nabbout, 2017), two publications geared predominantly toward Arabs in the English-speaking world. Many other news outlets followed suit and wrote about the evolving Edward Said Library, including *Cultural Weekly* (Chen, 2017) and *The Nation* (Pollitt, 2017) in the U.S. We even had articles about our Library written in Arabic, German, and Italian.

Shortly thereafter, I launched an official fundraising campaign. Within a relatively short time, donors from all over the world sent the money we urgently needed to establish the library and make it fully functional. A big thank you to everyone, especially fellow librarians, who supported us and the many of you who still show your solidarity by sending us more books for the people of all ages in Gaza.

### **Censorship and the Important Support of Noam Chomsky for the Edward Said Library**

Before I started the public library initiative, I met Professor Noam Chomsky, one of the world's most important intellectuals and a great role model of mine. He presented at "The First International Conference on Literature and Applied Linguistics" at the Islamic University of Gaza in 2012, while I was studying as an undergraduate there. I spoke with him for a minute and asked for his email address. After the 2014 war, I wrote to him and asked him for four of his books and

if he could sign them for me. He did that generously. When I started working on the public library, he donated more books and urgently needed money to build and strengthen our Edward Said Library. In April 2016, he sent a big parcel with some of his books. However, the Israeli authorities had decided that all mail to Gaza should be stopped. They claimed that the military groups in Gaza were getting materials that could be used for military ends.

I didn't think that the draconian Israeli ban would apply to books for children, linguists, and anyone interested in British and American literature, but I was wrong. Chomsky's books were held up by the Israelis from July 2016 until January 2017. A lot of book boxes, from various donors, never make it to us in Gaza. This shows you one example of the difficulties of building a library in an occupied country. In addition, while under Israeli control, books are sometimes left out in the open. If they arrive, they frequently come in such poor condition that I feel sad for my little friends, those books from abroad—but at least, they have made it to Gaza, however badly damaged.

In a normal situation—something that you in the U.S. would never call “normal”—although packages *should* only take about 10 business days, they arrive in Gaza often with a 7-, 8-, or 9-week delay. Many times, the mailing company's agent in Israel or the West Bank would call to tell me that they couldn't deliver the parcel to Gaza, but that I needed to send an individual to pick up the box in the West Bank. That's like asking the head of an American library to travel through Mexico to pick up a parcel in Guatemala, because Israel is a foreign country that does not allow us to travel there, except in very rare situations.

One striking example: in December 2017, a donor from Canada sent a shipment of 50 novels via FedEx. Gaza was listed as the final destination of the parcel. After it arrived in the West Bank, I got a message from the Palestinian subcontractor of the American multinational courier delivery service, saying “You need to pay 700 dollars, and someone needs to come and pick up the books for you in the West Bank.” I was stunned—another of the many Kafkaesque moments in Palestine. Desperate, I called the donor who told me the books and their shipment cost him 1,200 Canadian dollars. I then asked the Palestinian subcontractor what would happen to the books if I were unable to pay the money or pick them up from the West Bank. He told me point blank that they would simply destroy the books. We never received our books from Canada. Last year, I called the donor. He told me that he eventually got half of his books back. I am not sure whether we witnessed a classic case of exploitation of Palestinians by Palestinians, something that grieves me, or whether our success in making world literature available to Palestinians and

giving them a chance to think outside the box might have caused the Israeli government to hold back a great deal of mail as any books that enter Gaza must come through Israel and their censors.

### **Realities of the Edward Said Library in Gaza**

In the summer of 2017, with the assistance of my friend Shadi Salem, I first rented two tiny rooms for the library in a small apartment in Beit Lahia City in the north of the Gaza Strip. Early in 2018, the library moved to a bigger apartment in the same city, where it still operates. The library now includes a reading room, a children's room, and a lecture room. We even managed to provide a small staff room. The library offers not only a venue for reading and borrowing books, but also a reading club, an English club, and English language lessons. Our library activities run year-round, and many school students visit the library as part of their school activities. Students also use the library to look up references for their school research projects.

One of the additional problems librarians, teachers, and counselors face in Gaza is the lack of new publications which could help children and young people to develop their linguistic, intellectual, and emotional abilities. Only one library specializes in children's books and activities: the Abdel-Mohsen Alqattan Center's library. After the frequent bombings in Gaza, a number of depressed and traumatized children come to meet our Edward Said library staff to seek psychological support. In our small way, the Edward Said library cares as much as possible for the children and their own library space in it. As part of our evolving counseling and recovering program, we play games with them in the library, while others draw and play with colors.

### **Trying to Leave Kafka's Castle in Gaza to Make it to Harvard**

One of the happiest days in my academic life occurred in 2019 when I was awarded a Harvard Scholar-at-Risk Fellowship, hosted by the Department of Comparative Literature as a visiting poet. Harvard also made me a visiting librarian-in-residence at their Houghton Library. Because the Israelis didn't allow me to attend my visa interview at the U.S. Embassy in *Jerusalem* for two months, I had to apply for a visa interview at the U.S. Embassy in *Amman, Jordan*. To make it worse, the Israelis did not allow me to go to Jordan through Israel. I therefore had to spend more money and time to travel to Jordan via Egypt.

On September 25, 2019, we opened a second branch of the Edward Said Library in Gaza City. I celebrated from afar in Amman, with my wife and two children, who had been given permission by the Israelis to travel from Gaza to Jordan. For about seven weeks, we waited for our visas in a small, rented *room* in Amman that costs

more than some *hotels* in the U.S. As a result of the long visa delays, I missed the first month and half at the beginning of my fellowship. However, I am grateful I finally made it to your country, and to everyone at Harvard who went all out to welcome me and my family.

### **Services Not Only for Readers but Also for Young Writers, Musicians, and Artists**

Earlier last year, Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Pulitzer Prize winning writer and professor, generously donated the honorarium he was offered for his 2019 Edward Said Memorial Lecture at Columbia University to the Edward Said Library in Gaza. We are deeply grateful to him and everyone who contributed to our growth and success. Running two libraries relies on the goodwill of our friends abroad, and their sending us more books that would be of value to Palestinians, including children’s books and books for high school and college students. However, as you can imagine, we also need *ongoing* financial support to pay for our running costs like electricity, rent, and staff.

However, the many, often painful daily problems in Gaza, have not made us abandon the belief in a future for *all* of us on both sides of the terrible divide. We have learned not to give up—in spite of the high rate of depression and suicides, especially among the young. Thanks to your support, we move forward in the belief that books, combined with education and moral and psychological support, can make a huge difference.

Nowadays, the two Edward Said libraries, in addition to our mission of providing books, have expanded our program. We not only work with librarians, but with young writers, musicians, and artists, providing a place for everyone to study and grow, practice their talents, and share them with those who would like to come and



Figures 4 and 5. Discussion groups in the Edward Said Public Library. Photos by Aya Dakka.



visit us. Who knows, one or two of you might even come and work with us for a semester or so.

### **Libraries, Education, and Cultural Institutions in Palestine**

Now that I have told you about the story of the Edward Said Library, to provide some context, I would like to share a few things with you about Gaza's educational and cultural institutions in general from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics report in 2018: Among countries with the world's highest literacy rates, Palestine ranks fairly high. Only 3.3 % of its population are unable to read. Against all odds, we built many cultural centers, including cinemas, and a few public libraries and museums. However, most of them have been negatively impacted by the Israeli occupation, their siege, and the political rift within the Palestinian community.

### **Studying and Dancing in the Ruins of One of Our Finest Cultural Centers**

Let me give you an example of one of our proudest achievements, the Al-Mishal Foundation, a leading cultural center in the Gaza Strip and the second largest theater in Gaza. The five-floor building housed a library, an Egyptian community center, offices for cultural associations, and a theater for arts and *dabke*—a traditional Palestinian style of dancing. The center also served as a home for hundreds of workshops, lectures, plays, exhibits, musical performances, and national ceremonies.

Unfortunately, as part of the campaign to demoralize Palestinians and destroy their cultural life, the Al-Mishal Foundation was decimated by Israeli warplanes on August 9, 2018. We are hardly allowed to import cement to rebuild damaged or destroyed buildings, let alone construct new buildings. However, we do more than stare at ruins. We try to stay positive and move forward. In its recent article, "Rising From the Ruins: A Theatre Persists in Gaza" on March 11, 2019, *American Theatre* magazine illustrates the spirit of Gazans with this one-sentence synopsis: "Even after their building was destroyed by Israeli airstrikes, the actors and artists of ASHTAR Theatre keep the show going"—in the ruins (Danney, 2019).

### **Data from the Official Report on Operating Public Libraries in the Palestinian Territory**

In 2010, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics conducted a survey of the cultural institutions in Palestine (Palestine Central Bureau, 2010). Unfortunately, Palestinians don't have the money, nor the expertise to provide you with more recent statistics. However, I

can share with you the results from almost ten years ago. Please bear with me as your “Palestinian Library System Tour Guide” who tries to get you the main statistics in one minute. Here we go:

- There are 65 operating public libraries in the Palestinian Territories, including 52 in the West Bank and 13 in the Gaza Strip.
- Of these, 72.3% are housed in buildings of their own.
- 140 people worked in public libraries: 45% males, and 54% females.
- 93% of public libraries staff have a secondary school degree or higher education.
- Only 16% of public libraries use library classification systems.
- 69% own computers.
- Only 37% provide computers for their *visitors* to use.
- And just 29% provide internet services to their visitors.

Anyone who remembers those statistics, see me afterwards and I might have a nice gift for you. 😊 On a more serious note: the situation for libraries is dire, and that’s why the Edward Said Library provides an important service such as making available as many books in Arabic and English as it can get and also offering English language lessons, English club, reading club, and drawing activities for the kids.

### **Books Smuggled into a Library System in a Society That Struggles with Survival**

Last April, the Gaza Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Gaza City organized the first book exhibition in the past six years. Fifteen local and regional publishing houses and societies participated in the exhibit with about 20,000 books. Most of the books in the exhibit came from local bookstores which had imported them from abroad. In the past, the books were smuggled through tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. These days, with most, if not all, tunnels destroyed, books reach Gaza but only in small quantities—either via mail or carried by tourists and Palestinians who are returning or visiting from abroad.

### **“Almost no one buys new books anymore”: Sad Book and Library Stories from Gaza**

In an article published online, Raed Wihidi, Chief Librarian at the Diana Tamari Library in Gaza, shared some shattering statistics: before the siege on Gaza in 2007, the library had more than 20,000 subscribers. Now it attracts only a quarter of that number. Most of the visitors to public libraries are school and university students. This dramatic drop of readers shows how devastating the constant pressure is on Palestinians.

Significantly, the Dar Alshorouk Bookstore director in Gaza, Amin Ghaben, mentioned in an article that in the past two years, their branches in Ramallah, West Bank, and Amman, Jordan, requested not to be sent more books, because “almost no one buys new books anymore.” As a librarian and teacher of English, I felt like crying hearing this devastating assessment of the situation in my country.

Similarly, Abdallah Tayeh, a writer and the assistant Secretary-General for the General Union of Palestinian Writers, told me of the severe restrictions by Israel on any transportation of new books and journals published in the West Bank. They cannot be sent to Gaza nor are any new books from Gaza allowed to be sent to the West Bank. That is like telling Americans they cannot send books from New York to California, nor from North Dakota to Texas. In short, knowledge gets restricted by the occupiers, so much so that, because of the endless siege, a new book has become a luxury in Gaza.

### **A Palestinian Sisyphus Pushing a Literary Boulder Up a High Mountain**

A few publishing houses try to support the local literary movement, but, as you can imagine, given joblessness, depression, and hopelessness, these efforts make me think of a Palestinian Sisyphus pushing a literary boulder up a high mountain. Atef Abu Saif, a Gazan novelist and writer, who now serves as the Minister of Culture in the Palestinian Authority based in the West Bank, aware of the deadening consequences of the siege since 2007 and the rift between Hamas and Fatah, presents this assessment: “A healthy cultural atmosphere requires a healthy political one. We don’t have this, unfortunately. The politician doesn’t support the intellectual. On the contrary, he tries to fight him. Gaza deserves to be the world’s cultural voice [...] it is the city of *suffering and pain*, which make poets and literary figures.” Sadly, he goes on to say, “no one [is there] to *support* these talents”—talents that were born out of our tragedy.

### **Current Challenges to Libraries and Librarians in Palestine: Summary and Conclusion**

To summarize, the occupation and siege of Gaza pose a daily challenge for everyone, including libraries and librarians, who find themselves restricted in what they try to achieve. Frequent electricity cuts, extremely slow internet access, closure of border crossings for books, readers, and librarians, plus the political rift among Palestinians, and the daily humiliation of the population by the occupying soldier present some of the many hurdles Palestinians have to jump every day. For example, unlike librarians in Israel and the Western world, Gaza

librarians cannot travel to the West Bank or outside Gaza to attend training programs or participate in conferences. Heads of libraries and bookstores cannot travel to participate in international book fairs because of the many Israeli-imposed restrictions on every aspect of life. Like our hospitals, many of our schools and libraries rely on power generators for light, print, and computers. Because of the severe limitations on our infrastructure, communication among Gazans takes place at a snail's pace, if at all—let alone communication with the outside world. Even things that may be self-understood by Americans, like downloading data or participating in video conferences, can become an uphill battle, if not an impossible mission.

The Gaza Ministry of Culture is having a tough time to keep up with its role of supporting the cultural community and to provide funding for cultural projects. As the government in Gaza relies on donations from foreign governments and organizations and collecting taxes from often unemployed citizens who are struggling to survive, you can see the difficulty in making major cultural breakthroughs, let alone stemming the deterioration of the little we still have.

Unfortunately, the key players, namely, Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), never tolerated any of its critics. For example, in 1996 Edward Said, an independent member of the Palestine National Council and an outspoken critic of Yasser Arafat, resigned in protest of the humiliating peace process in the early 1990s. As a result of Said's criticism, Arafat, the late chairman of the PLO, banned Said's works in Gaza and the West Bank. Similarly, Israel, super-sensitive to any criticism from anyone, especially Palestinians, was also responsible for banning and confiscating 6,420 books between 1967-1995 in Gaza and the West Bank—the way the Catholic Church and many countries banned countless book titles throughout history.

### **Librarians in Functioning Democracies Can Do Things That We Cannot Do in Palestine**

People in Western democracies can and do create environments in which books rarely get banned today—something that Palestinians can only hope for. Censorship reigns supreme in Palestine. As a result, we continue leading severely restricted lives. Before I end this talk, I would like to quote a short passage by Norwegian *library* researcher Erling Bergan. In his paper, "Libraries in the West Bank and Gaza: Obstacles and Possibilities," at the 66th International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Council and General Conference in Jerusalem, he said:

From 1967, when Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza started, and up to this day, Israeli censorship has been hard. Through the

years, many Israeli military orders banning specific book titles have been issued. The list reached at one-point Kafkaesque proportions, with titles like George Orwell's *1984*. [It] was on one of the 60 lists of prohibited books that included more than 1,600 titles. (Bergan, 2000, p. 10).

In the midst of all the hardships, I am grateful to everyone who has supported me and the Edward Said Library, including Noam Chomsky, poet and columnist Katha Pollitt, and writers that I have met here in the U.S., like academics Stephen Greenblatt and Lloyd Schwartz, poet Richard Hoffmann, and novelist Askold Melnyczuk. A big thank you to them and all of you librarians here, and all the readers from around the world, who are supporting us through their books. I'm not sure whether every one of those generous people realizes what a life-changer their emails, their books, and their donations are for us. You and these writers, librarians, and donors of important books give the Edward Said library a gleaming light in the darkened Gaza.

اعزائي أمناء المكتبات، شكرا جزيلاً لسماع حديثي عن المكتبات الفلسطينية في غزة بشكل عام ومكتبة ادوارد سعيد بشكل خاص. دعمكم الجاد يساعدنا كثيراً نيابة عن اهل غزة، اشكركم من أعماق قلبي. بامكانكم التواصل معي اذا كان لديكم أي استفسار او اذا كنتم ترغبون في المساعدة

Dear fellow librarians. Many thanks for listening to my talk about Palestinian libraries in general and the Edward Said Library in particular. Your active support means the world to us. On behalf of the people of Gaza, I would like to thank you with all my heart. Please contact me if you would like to get involved in reaching out.

شكرا لكم. شكرا لكم. شكرا لكم.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

*Editor's note: To contribute to The Edward Said Public Library, please visit the Middle East Children's Alliance webpage, "Support the Edward Said Public Libraries in Palestine": [https://secure.everyaction.com/q\\_fRGaZLj06G7gZQdP72pw2](https://secure.everyaction.com/q_fRGaZLj06G7gZQdP72pw2).*

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