

Interview with Mosab Abu Toha

Founder of the Edward Said Public Library

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How has the occupation affected libraries in Gaza?

The occupation has two sides. One is the continued wars on Gaza, the assault; the other is the siege. As you know, many libraries have been destroyed by the Israeli airstrikes. The other side of the occupation is the siege. We do not get books in Gaza unless they come through Israel. And one side of the difficulties we face is the slow arrival of books from the western world to Gaza. Normally it should take about ten days, but in Gaza it takes from six to seven or eight weeks. Another thing is that some of the websites that I use to order books, like Amazon and many other websites, do not deliver to Gaza. So one example: I ordered three books from Amazon, and they never made it to Gaza. However, I used another website called Book Depository, and they arrived. So even books ordered online do not make it.

What obstacles do you face today in acquiring books for libraries in Gaza?

Most of the books we get from the outside are sent from individuals. Until now we did not get the books from publishing houses in big

This interview with Mosab Abu Toha was conducted for Progressive Librarian by Jessa Lingel and Tom Twiss at the American Library Association's 2020 Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia. The interviewers would like to express their appreciation for the assistance provided by Henrik Eger.

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quantities. So people send books and parcels and packages. And sometimes the books when they come to Gaza, they arrive damaged because of the storage conditions. Some of the books get wet because of winter. Some books arrive in bad shape because of the pressure on them because maybe the Israelis put hundreds of parcels on top of each other. They do not care what is inside them.

I think I mentioned the story of my Canadian friend who sent fifteen novels from Canada to Gaza. They were supposed to go to Gaza. But this company FedEx, it seemed that they only deliver to the West Bank. So a few days after the books arrived in the West Bank or maybe Israel the company called me and said, we have got something for you. You need to pay \$700 to get the books from us, and maybe for taxes. And you need to come to the West Bank and pick them up because we do not deliver to Gaza.

I asked them “Can you please send them back to my friend in Canada so that he can send them through another mailing company?” They said, “We cannot do that. Your friend needs to pay the money for us to send them back to him.” Eventually, in December last year, I called my friend. I told him I’m in the US now, and I’m a Visiting Poet and Librarian. And then I asked him about the books. He said, “I got half of them back.” So what about the other half of the books? He didn’t get them. It seems that they stole them. Maybe they sold them to get the \$700 that they wanted. I don’t know.

Is there a ban on types of materials that can be imported?

In Gaza we only get paper and clothes. We don’t get electronic devices, laptops or replacements for the laptops or accessories, chargers, batteries. We do not get any electronics. We only get paper and clothes or toys sometimes.

What about the subject matter of books—for example, if a book is about Palestinian struggle or political books, things like that.

In fact, I haven’t noticed that the Israelis have banned any title from entering Gaza. Even if it was written by Chomsky or Norman Finkelstein, who wrote the book, *The Holocaust Industry*. I got that book from abroad—I don’t know how. Maybe they were blind. I don’t know. But many times, I notice that the book boxes that I get have been opened. I mean I do not get a box of books sealed as it was sent. No, the Israelis maybe, or maybe the Hamas government, opened it. I don’t know. Maybe they open it, they just look at the titles, and then they put them back, and then they seal them again. I noticed that many times. And sometimes I get, as I told you, some packages or parcels that are torn or spoiled by winter rain. And I sometimes get a message from the Israeli postal service that, “We are sorry for

the damage.” So they were kind enough to say that in Arabic and in Hebrew and in English.

Can you describe the extent of damage to libraries in Gaza by Israeli bombing?

In fact, I don't have numbers. But I can mention my university, which had the English language department, etc. These departments had their own libraries, so they were all destroyed. And I mentioned the title of the book that I found in the rubble *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. So these books were a part of a library in the English department.

Was it ever announced why they would destroy the university?

Well, in fact, the Islamic University of Gaza is usually affiliated with Hamas. This is not a justification because this is an educational building. It doesn't have weapons. The only weapons that were there were English books. This is what they tried to bomb. English language books and a university, which is the best or one of the two best universities in Gaza Strip. And I think it's ranked in the third place in Palestine, the Islamic University of Gaza. So that was an attack on education, not Hamas. Because Hamas have their own training fields or quarters, but not the university.

I didn't know why they bombed it at that time. But if you noticed how Israelis started to act in the last few days of the 51-day war, they started to escalate the attacks. So in the last five or four days, they started to bomb towers. Towers, where dozens of families live. So when they bomb a tower, then 100 or 200 people are homeless. So they started to escalate. It's a challenge for Hamas, as if to say to Hamas, "If you are going to challenge us, then we will make your people homeless.

In 2002 following the Israeli incursion into the West Bank, we sent a questionnaire to some of the libraries and asked them "Why do you think that they did this to your library?" One person responded that he believed the purpose was to destroy any cultural resources that made life livable, hoping people would just leave.

Yeah, this happened in Gaza in 2018, when they decimated the Al-Mishal Cultural Center, 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. It was a house to hundreds of people who went there

to attend plays and acted on the stage. I watched a cultural activity where a circus team from my town put on a circus. That place was a house for hundreds of kids. 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.

Are you familiar with the destruction of the Al-Ataa' Library in Beit Hanoun?

I don't know exactly about this library and how bad it was affected by the war. But in the 2014 war, Beit Hanoun was turned into ashes by the Israeli army. So whenever the Palestinian resistance action, for example kills Israeli soldiers, the Israelis start to act stupidly. This time they started to bomb the area randomly, just as an act of anger. They started to bomb the streets, people walking. So that happened in Al-Shejaiya, if you heard about the Al-Shejaiya massacre where people were trying to leave the houses to seek refuge, and they bombed them in the street.¹ And that happened also in Beit Hanoun, when the Hamas military wing killed, I think, 10 soldiers. The Israelis started to bomb whole neighborhoods, and I think maybe this library was located in one of them. But they don't care whether it's a library and a school because they bombed a school in Beit Lahia city, North Gaza, during the 2008-09 assault on Gaza with phosphorus bombs. People were, for example like my family, who were taking refuge in an UNWRA school. UNWRA is an international organization. They bombed that school with phosphorus bombs, and that phosphorus material cannot be washed off with water. No. I think you need to cover it with sand or with cloth to extinguish the flames. I remember in 2009, when we went back to our home in Beit Lahia city, I saw that material on the ground in front of our house. And I was a kid, I was 16. I tried just to rub it, and it started to emanate smoke, and started to burn again. They used many types of internationally prohibited weapons.

In the 2008-9 war, we left our house because it was a very dangerous area. And on my way out with my little sister who was four or five years old, just 100 meters away from our house, I saw an ambulance bombed by the Israeli army. And they used something like... a nail bomb. A bomb when it explodes it gives . . . maybe thousands of nails fly in the air and if it hits your head, it will cut your neck.

During that time I saw an ambulance, and I discovered later that one of my teachers was killed during that attack. He taught me science in my fourth grade. While he was working to rescue some people who were just killed a few hours earlier than that. The Israelis bombed the ambulance he was in. And I saw some flesh on the ground after that

¹ On the Al-Shejaiya massacre, see Kouddous, 2014.

attack. So I mean when they kill anyone, they do not care whether he is a kid, an infant, a baby, a teacher like me, a librarian, a paramedic, a doctor. Yeah, they don't consider that.

Do you collaborate with other libraries in Gaza?

Well, in fact we try to use other libraries and librarians' knowledge. Until now this didn't happen yet, but we went to some public libraries and we tried to use their help with how to proceed to classify books. Also, we sought their help and asked if they could share with us the types of activities they run in their libraries. And we also can share with them what we use in our libraries. So this type of collaboration. Yeah. And also we, two years ago, we borrowed 100 children's books in Arabic from Al-Qattan Library. That was very helpful of course. So this is another kind of collaboration.

Can you collaborate with other librarians in the West Bank or Israel? Can you participate in training opportunities?

Well, for the training opportunities in the West Bank and Israel, that's next to impossible of course. But collaborating with librarians in the West Bank? Some of the librarians and activists in Israel, though, offered to help the initiative. They tried to send us books in Gaza. And this is a good sign. One time when I was raising funds for the library, a friend of mine from Jerusalem hosted me on Skype in a video conference, and they raised \$700 for the library. One of the contacts was an Israeli British translator and writer.

What is internet access like in Gaza?

It runs at a snail's pace. When I talk to my family in Gaza, Face Timing, it's really very slow. It's unreliable for a video conference or a reading club between the West Bank and Gaza. If we think of having a joint reading club between members of the Edward Said Library in Gaza and maybe another library in the West Bank, it's unreliable.

We have 2G bandwidth I think. We are not allowed to have 3 or 4G. The materials come through Israel. The communication materials, the internet materials, the telephone materials, like the cords, the devices, et cetera come from Israel. And they decide which to get in and which not to get them. And those materials which would provide us with 3G speed or 4G are not allowed to get into Gaza. So this is part of the occupation.

Have you ever heard an explanation of why that's true: Why they don't allow that equipment in Gaza?

I didn't look into that, but it seems they don't want us to have a good internet network to communicate with the world. So they are making

life for us miserable and slow. For example, when I tried to go to Jerusalem, they delayed me two months, and then when I tried to go to Jordan through Israel, they delayed me another month. Then I had to go to Egypt and then from Egypt to Amman. So they are slowing everything down for us. They don't want us to move forward.

Could you describe limitations on hours of electricity and how that affects your work?

We have electricity cuts in Gaza. My family and all of the people in Gaza get electricity for only four hours. Then we have four hours on, and then twelve hours blackout. So when I try to call them, I just look at my watch. Now it's off. I cannot call them. I will have to wait until maybe seven o'clock to call them because they will have electricity by that time.

During winter things become worse because there is more electricity used in winter, especially for heating, et cetera. We get sometimes for two hours, not four. So four hours becomes a luxury, a privilege. "Oh, we have electricity for four hours." At best we have electricity for eight hours, twelve hours cut. Eight. So eight is something.

It would be hard to refrigerate anything.

Yeah. During summer especially. So during summer we need electricity for the refrigerators, and also for the fans because it's very hot sometimes. In winter we need electricity for the fireplace, the electric fireplace. It becomes very, very cold. So that affects the library. For example, we need constant electricity access. We do not have that. Therefore, we rely on a device called UPS, an uninterruptible power supply, where we have a battery, for example, a big one like this, which is 100 Amperes. And then we have a converter (UPS device) which converts the power from that battery to electricity. So this is how it works sometimes when electricity is out.

Can you talk about ways in which the government in Gaza helps or hinders your work?

Well, I wouldn't say that they hinder my work. They are not helpful. They do not help in any substantial way. So the library has been open since 2017, but no one from the government or the civil society, whether it's official or non-official, not one of them reached out to see how they could help us in the library, even though we said we serve the society. But no one came and said, "Mosab, how did you come up with this library? How can we help you?" One member of the library staff visited their bookstore and we could take some of the Arabic books.

Did you talk with them about your library?

I invited the director of libraries and exhibits in The Gaza Ministry of Culture to the opening ceremony. And he didn't come. No, I didn't see him. And I told him in person about the library. I went to his office before I opened the library. I told him I'm Mosab, I'm doing this and that. But he didn't offer his support or his ministry or the government. He did, however, offer to give us a dozen of books that they got as donations from some organizations. But I mean nothing serious was offered, like help in budget, informational assistance, connecting us with other relevant and potential supporters.

How can librarians in the West and the international library community assist the work of libraries in Gaza?

This is a good question. Well, in fact, connecting with the libraries in the western world is, in itself, a good sign of help and support. Connecting with these international libraries. And also benefiting from their expertise, the kind of activities they run, the kinds of programs they use to store books or to help people find books in the library. But of course we have small numbers. We do not have big libraries. So one thing we need to know is where a specific book is in the stacks because we have a small library. That's something maybe we will do in the future when we have a big place and lots of resources. And also donating books. Maybe some books that you have in one library. You keep of course updating your books, so the books that you update, of course you will have old copies. Maybe they can send them to Gaza. And also donating funds to the library because it is a continued process of funding. We do not have a specific budget for the library. So every year we look for support.

It seems that maybe you get duplication of materials, or you end up getting a lot of books that you can't use. Is there a way to find out from you the books that you can actually use, or the books that you would like to get?

When I started the project, I did have a wishlist on a spreadsheet form. So there are, I think about 400 titles that we need. Other than that, we need children's books, philosophical books, psychological books. Maybe sometimes textbooks, especially if they are on English language learning, textbooks to teach English, maybe [for an?] English language center, et cetera. Also drawing books for the kids, drawing, painting. History, history books. Yes. These are the kinds of things.

But if we have duplicated copies, then now we have two libraries. On September 25, 2019, we opened a second branch of the Edward Said Library in Gaza City. And in the future we are hopeful that we will have more libraries because this is what we are aspiring to do. So

in Gaza we have five governorates. So now we have one in the north of Gaza, and the new one is in Gaza City. We still need one in Rafah, another in the middle of Gaza, and another and in the South of Gaza. So we still need to have not only two libraries in Gaza, but five. And who knows? Maybe that chain will continue to be in the West Bank also. So this would be a big project. Even though I started it from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, and now it's two libraries. Who knows what will evolve out of this?

That's exciting!

Yeah. I mean working with MECA [the Middle East Children's Alliance] is very helpful because they are making things easy for us. So if anyone is willing to donate, they send it to MECA. And MECA has partners in Gaza who have bank accounts, and we work through them. So this made things easy for us. So the sky's the limit for us now.

Is there anything that you are taking back with you to Gaza that will help you and your libraries?

The many connections that I have made, whether it's at Harvard or here at ALA, would empower my chances of getting more support of course. The connections in themselves are something positive to carry back to Gaza. So I'm very blessed to have come here today to meet all of these people, and they have written their names on the spreadsheet, on the mailing list sheet. Going back to Gaza, of course, I would continue reaching out to them and keeping them updated about everything. If I weren't here today, of course, I wouldn't have made these connections with people. So this is a good thing.

Thank you so much for your time.

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_fRGaZLj06G79ZQdP72pw2.

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