

The ceasefire that couldn't heal: Reflections from a survivor



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KAMEL ABU AMSHA

Late September 2023, I returned to Gaza from Faridpur to see my family. It was my 24th birthday. I have been studying medicine in Bangladesh, and it was the first time in four years that I visited them. A few days later, we all knew what had happened. After seven months of genocide, I left Gaza and my family behind. My story of surviving the genocide was covered by *The Daily Star* in May 2024. I am not one to share my sorrow or pain, but I agreed to let a journalist document what happened to me so that Israel could not achieve its final victory—erasing these atrocities from human memory.

During those weeks when I shared what I went through in Gaza, there was talk of a ceasefire, but it never seemed likely as things only worsened. I was in Gaza during a temporary truce, which was reported

of war with them. Then a strange feeling overtook me. Seven months of genocide flashed across my mind like a reel. I can't forget October 7, the day I had been asleep in Gaza for just seven days before the war began. I understood nothing back then and could not, in my worst nightmare, imagine all that followed: displacement after displacement,

my parents were taking refuge with other stranded residents in a small room of a broken house in southern North Gaza. I could not reach my family when the ceasefire was announced, and at the time of this writing, I still haven't been able to talk to them, as they do not have internet. But I heard there was relentless shelling. Until the ceasefire

understand how terrible it is unless they see it with their own eyes. Yet still, I feel a sense of relief that the bombing has stopped, even if temporarily, and people have stopped dying—a thought that once seemed too distant. In Gaza, "peace" now means not hearing the thunderous sound of bombs, and a pause in the constant struggle for survival.

Thinking of my family's condition has made me feel like giving up, but I returned to Bangladesh alive, with the dream of becoming a doctor. I continued studying, but it was not without challenges. After returning, I would suffer severe trauma shocks. They would start with chest pain, and I would fall unconscious, on the verge of heart attacks. My roommates, who took me to the CCU, later told me I hallucinated snipers and blood. But I am one of the lucky ones. I made it out alive after seven months. For my family members and friends who lost their children and parents, the psychological trauma is immense.

News stories now focus on Israeli hostages being reunited with their families, while Palestinians are referred to as "prisoners." The Israeli army has randomly and arbitrarily arrested people. The worst day of my life was December 18 last year,

Beit Hanoun. Their neighbours were killed. My mother was injured by shrapnel while escaping.

They arrested my brothers Nahid, 21, and Mohammad, 22, my grandfather, who is over 70, and my father. None of my brothers had any affiliation with Hamas. What crime did they commit other than trying to survive? My father was released, thankfully, but my brothers and grandfather remain in an Israeli prison, enduring torture. Everyone in Gaza knows what the prisons are like—prisoners are given no place to sleep, nothing to eat, and are beaten as though they are not human beings.

I don't know why my father was released but my brothers weren't. The way the Israelis imprison Palestinians is arbitrary and ruthless. Each time I see the news, I hope to see my brothers freed before the next tragedy strikes. I don't trust the ceasefire will last or that the war will permanently end. The perpetrators' nature is betrayal.

The Israeli army told us to go to "safe zones," only to bomb them. They tricked people, even children, into death. I fled to so many such zones only to be forced to leave again. Many escaped alive—if they were lucky—while thousands died.

Months passed, and I have lost 35 family members to date. I lost my cousin Jamal, who was like a brother to me. The day he was killed by Israeli airstrikes, my uncle, Jamal's father, tried to bury him in Jabalia. But the Israeli had sieged the area. Jamal's body was left with a cloth, and today, five months later, he has still not been buried. As I write this, I wonder what Jamal did in this cruel world, to not even get the chance to rest peacefully and with dignity, even after he was killed.

My immediate family have been displaced almost daily and injured. Changes happened around the world but things remained the same in the north of Gaza: in horror. The government changed in Bangladesh, where I've been since leaving my family in Gaza. Similar to the internet blackout during the last days of the previous regime here, my family still goes without internet for five to seven days at a stretch.

On a random Wednesday, January 15, 2025, we all got the news that a ceasefire had been reached. My first reaction was an overwhelming urge to celebrate with my family, just as I had suffered the flames

hunger, fear, thirst, and exhaustion. I can't forget the days in Gaza's hospitals—the sight of dismembered children and the cries from phosphorus burns. I can't forget escaping Gaza through an Israeli checkpoint, fearing every moment that I would be shot or bombed. I can't forget the bitter cold of the night we slept in an open tent, with torn clothes and no blankets. I hugged my brother just to keep warm. I can't forget returning to our first camp, Al-Falluja, where decaying corpses were everywhere.

The feeling of joy dissipated, and I did not believe the ceasefire would hold. Growing up in Gaza, always fearing Israeli attacks and enduring the genocide, has eroded my trust in everything. I never trusted anything the Israeli government said. They killed, destroyed, and ruined my life as I knew it. Frankly, I don't remember what my beloved city, Gaza, looked like before the war or what it felt like without the smell of death. So, how can I believe they would stop killing now?

Just days before the ceasefire,

came into effect on Sunday, I worried my family would not live to see it. The Israeli army indiscriminately bombed everywhere to claim more so-called "victories." We had been lucky, by God's grace, to survive so far. I always prayed but feared that luck would run out.

My cousin Sayed, who has periodic internet access and updates me on my family's whereabouts, informed me they evacuated their shelter but made it out safely. Now that the ceasefire is in effect, people ask if I am happy. But how could anyone from Gaza, especially those who lived through the genocide, relate to the word "happiness"? The house I grew up in has been destroyed. My family takes shelter wherever they can—in rooms of houses that survived the bombings. Many residents from the North fled to the South, and when they return, my family will be homeless. The streets of North Gaza have been destroyed with such depravity that even a tent cannot be set up.

I truly believe no one can

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We Gazans dream that one day the sun will rise for us and never set again. Until then, we keep going, even if it means dying in the process. There may be a ceasefire now, but any form of trust that lives will be spared has ceased to exist.

When I left for Bangladesh, my father told me, "We know our fate, but you have a different fate. Go and become a doctor." Every day I wake up, I remember those words with a sinking feeling in my chest, and I go on with life. Because what else can I do? In Gaza, we are hardwired to keep going—and so, that's what we do.



PHOTO COURTESY: KAMEL ABU AMSHA

Kamel's family home, captured from a video of a drone passing through the sky, on January 19, 2025.



Kamel's nephew and father in front of the camp where they were staying in North Gaza, three weeks before the ceasefire.

PHOTO COURTESY: KAMEL ABU AMSHA

as a "halt in fighting," but it was a farce. We went to our house, already bombed once, to retrieve food for the camps. We left quickly as the house was bombed again during that pause.

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Geopolitics in the age of Trump: Have we been here before?



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With Donald Trump's inauguration and return to the White House, we can rightly ask the question: is 20th century geopolitics infecting the 21st century? Was post-Cold War neoliberalism misleading, rearming the world for wars rather than liberalising its economy? Four 1920s dynamics shaking the 2020s suggest so. They are the pandemic, populism, technological breakthroughs, and internationalising democracy. Each directly fed World War II. Will they bring us an all-out war now?

The 1918-19 Spanish Flu was not a product of Spain and the Covid pandemic was not "made in China" (as President Donald J Trump then claimed). But both followed global upheavals: Spanish Flu, World War I, Covid, the 2008-11 recession and the 2014-20 "six year climate anomaly." All three examples show human-flows shaking the environment. World War I saw a human stew of soldiers from many countries crossing many boundaries, but also being locked up in war-trenches, where pandemics incubate; and both the Great Recession and climate changes moved people reluctantly. Viruses dormant in one setting often explode in another. They join such constantly threatening secular triggers as biotechnological advancements. When atmospheric conditions and advancing technologies combine, consciously or subconsciously, humans face a virus minefield. Tech-savvy people adapt. They globalise, push multiculturalism, and seek inclusiveness. Others resist. They become

nationalistic, mono-cultural minded, and exclusive in preferences.

Though it has many meanings and manifestations, populism is all about aggressive nationalism. It characterised empires a century ago, when the 1919-24 Paris Peace conferences freed many peoples. Some leaders turned extremist, and empowered White supremacy. On January 6, 2021, the world's most modern capital experienced what is generally dubbed a "third world coup." Rather than the military usurping the US Congress, Trump's fanclub ran riot. Trump lost an election, only to return stronger. He rolled out a red-carpet for his fan club, pardoning January 6 rioters, along with signing a handful of other executive orders and tossing pens from signing into the cheering crowd. Like leaders before World War II, Trump knows how to convert popular frustration into steam-rolling policymaking: pin a grievous national problem upon a domestic or foreign group. One consequence of this is to realign geopolitics. Trump detests foreigners and immigrants but geopolitics is dicier today. With Xi Jinping currently bailing Vladimir Putin, whom Trump admires, out, and Trump admiring Benjamin Netanyahu, whom nobody likes, when the International Criminal Court places both villains on the "wanted" list, no one speaks a word. Jinping, Modi, and Putin flaunt BRICS Plus and the "Global South" against US policies over Ukraine and Gaza, yet Trump, of all people, is most likely to end both wars.

Trump now placates Canada, Greenland, Mexico, and Panama, meaning the infamous US 19th century "westward ho" will now go in northern and southern directions. At the time, cowboys evicted native Indians (Indians). In the same vein, Trump's defensive Monroe Doctrine approach belies an explosive future with non-military skirmishes.

One victim of all the above dynamics is democracy. It stands more hopelessly today.

Reconciling democracy and aristocracy was impossible a century ago. The 1943 Bengal famine exposed how British Prime Minister Winston Churchill deliberately diverted food to soldiers defending the British Raj against Japan than to the peasants and farmers in the very first Indian province taken by the East India Company (who also produced the original British wealth). Similarly, today countries crusading for democracy such as Canada, France, Great Britain, and the United States, also sell weapons to Israel to blast hospitals, kill mothers, and bludgeon children.

Among the champions of the "other group" alluded to (favouring newly independent countries) was Woodrow Wilson. His Fourteen Points and the League of Nations internationalised "democracy," appealing most to Main Street citizens in colonial Europe, India, and Ottoman Turkey. The League of Nations widened negotiations beyond Europe and the Atlantic, preaching global democracy. New countries relished it,

but great powers shunned it. They still do.

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Democracy bells hitherto rang in the "West." Individualism, its key feature, does not jive in the collective-minded culturally different non-Western societies. For other non-Western countries, the unequal past appears more golden than before because it carried peace. Substituting that with "democracy efforts" took away that peace.

Political parties were dubbed "left" or "right" of centre by the mid-20th century for pro-labour or pro-business preferences, respectively. Until the 1970s, elections were determined by those preferences. Today the left has moved to the centre, forcing the right to move farther right, as demonstrated by the popularity of Trump's MAGA ideology, promising restoration of greatness, to keep a safer distance against what they perceive as usurpers. Even in plights, "advanced democracies" still impose sine qua non policy preferences to new Africa, Asia, and South American countries to democratise, as with World Bank preconditions for aid.

No wonder, even by charging more interest, China's Belt Road Initiative remains popular by not imposing preconditions. Noble as it was, the concept of democracy, the modern world's 20th century nirvana, has been driven to its twilight zone in the 21st.

One of its invisible killers is technological growth. Before the 1920s, the industrial revolutions revolved around human labour and tangible instruments. Factories and tractors kicked farmers out of village homes into metropolitan apartment homes and assembly-line work, with the Great Wall Street crash highlighting the problem in developed countries. Today we call those instruments "hardware," to distinguish our supposedly more "cultivated" intellectually groomed "software" skills. But today's "less developed countries" face double-dose hardware and software kicks. In a world still not as educated as the new technologies require them to be, "democratising" has been overtaken by "monetising," as demonstrated by the presence of Elon Musk in US politics. Then there's the inescapable artificial intelligence (AI) dominance coming our way, which leaves us in a more uncertain world.

Restlessness is now our middle name. Survival of the fittest instincts dominate. They can be controlled by formidable rules. Yet instincts grow, as in the jungle, while rules of civil society vanish. Since every class has been mobilised by democracy without portraying bottom-up interests, no rules stand a chance against the Fourth Industrial Revolution's weapons: social media; artificial intelligence; and the likes. Without the promised fruits, the cancer can only grow. Since every solution must be "homegrown," international institutions flaunting vетoes and weights globally cannot help. Paradoxically, then, today's grass becomes greener if left under national control. Building a sustainable global order, in turn, requires a long enough hiatus.