

IFP Portraits for Dr M.ALTAWIL

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Mohamed Altawil: PALESTINE



Mohamed Altawil is a clinical psychologist, professor, and founder of the Palestine Trauma Centre for Victims' Welfare in Gaza. A mental health advocate for families suffering the effects of war, he recounts his challenging journey from childhood to a PhD...and beyond.

[Mohamed Altawil: PALESTINE](#)

November 18, 2011

Mohamed Altawil was awarded his PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Hertfordshire, UK in September 2008 with support from Ford IFP. Representing a much-needed field of study in Palestine, his doctoral degree has enabled Dr. Altawil to attend a number of International Conferences in the US, Europe and the Middle East. He is a published author and founder of the [Palestine Trauma Centre for Victims' Welfare in Gaza](#). Currently, he is a research fellow at the University of Hertfordshire and works as a clinical psychologist.

JOURNEY THROUGH THORNS

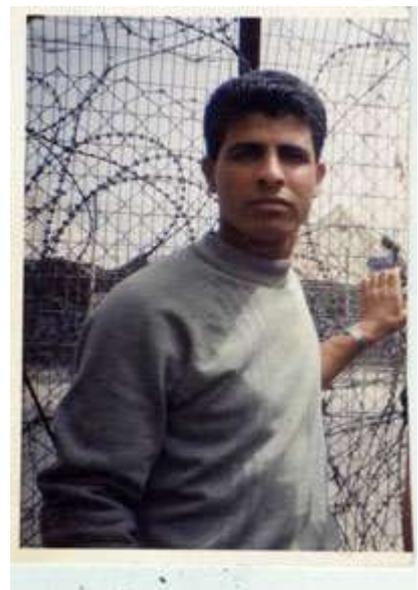


I am a Palestinian. My family lived for generations in the village of Al-Maghar. In 1948, my grandparents and their whole family were expelled from Al-Maghar, uprooted and sent to the huts and narrow streets of a refugee camp 100 km. away. When I was a little child, I used to throw stones at the bulldozers. With my brothers and my friends, I would chase after them from one street to another in the refugee camp. One day as we were throwing

stones outside the camp, the soldiers started to chase me. They fired a plastic bullet which broke skin in several pieces on my head and back. I was injured and it made me collapse. Women from the refugee camp rushed forward, shouting at the soldiers. This had some effect and I was taken to hospital. Later my parents tried to stop me from throwing stones, but I did not pay much attention to their requests.

But as I grew older, I began to get tired of our games. The stones looked pathetic against the armoured cars. Also, I found that I was doing well at school and as I learned more, I realised that knowledge was another kind of weapon. It made me feel strong and calm. I began to study hard. I discovered History. Then I worked in different psychological fields. My hope was that if I became a teacher, I would then have enough money to support my parents, who had little money.

I was given a grant by the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees](#) (UNRWA) to study. To do this I needed to go to Ramallah on the West Bank, but because of the occupation I faced huge obstacles. Travelling between Gaza and the West Bank meant crossing over Israeli territory. Permits were needed to get through checkpoints. Once I had finished my final exams in Ramallah in 1993, I applied for a permit to return home. It was refused. No reason was given. In anger and frustration, I tried traveling through the checkpoint on a friend's ID and was arrested. After one month in prison, they said I would be released if I paid \$500. I knew my family would have to sell many things to raise this amount of money. So, I refused to let this happen and stayed for two more months in jail.



The period that followed was very hard. I was working as a teacher in UNRWA's school system to earn money for myself and my parents, while at the same time doing my postgraduate studies at an Egyptian university. I had to learn more about psychology. The children I was teaching in Gaza were suffering traumas from the occupation on a daily basis. Many children defied their parents or truanted from school. Some went silent, refusing to communicate. Others turned aggressive and sought protection in gangs. Often the young ones could not settle to sleep at night or had nightmares and woke up screaming. These were alarming indicators that the psychological well-being of Palestinian children was being wrecked by repeated traumatic experiences.

Once I had received my master's degree, I began to work as a part-time lecturer at the Islamic University in Gaza. Life was so busy with studying and teaching that I had no time to see my friends; they saw so little of me that they thought I had gone away. I was still pursuing my long-held dream to learn as much as I could so that I could help to heal the wounds caused by the occupation. It was as if the anger that had made me throw stones had been converted into the need to study.



But I realised that I should balance my life. I got married in August 2002. In September 2003, I walked at midnight - the last two kilometres through gunfire - to the hospital where my daughter was born.

Scholarships from the International Ford Foundation Programme through [AMIDEAST](#) in Palestine are very few and I was fortunate to be offered one in 2004. It was in clinical psychology, at the University of Hertfordshire in England. Now I had a difficult decision. Going abroad to study meant leaving my wife, my little daughter and my parents. This would be hard, particularly for my sick mother. I went ahead with the scholarship, assuming I would be able to go back regularly to see them.

But developments in Gaza now took a turn for the worse. A second Intifada had spread through the Palestinian population and caused the occupation soldiers to create even more obstacles and difficulties. The Gaza Strip was now under blockade. No one could cross into Israel. We no longer

had an airport. The blockade stopped boats at sea. A wire fence, a high wall and watchtowers caged us in from the occupation. The Rafah crossing at the Egyptian border became the only route for the population of Gaza to the rest of the world. It was easy enough to get to Rafah, but once there, we were kept stranded for three weeks, sleeping on the floor of a deserted, half-built house with no roof, doors or windows.



I was meant to be in London to begin my fellowship in September 2004. Delay could mean that I would lose the scholarship all together. To go back to Gaza City meant that we might miss the chance opening of the border crossing; so we slept in this place for twenty-one days, waiting for the moment when we might be let through. We felt humiliated and angry. Some became violent and we used up a lot of energy trying to keep one another calm.

At last, we were able to cross and then travel from Cairo Airport to London. When I arrived at the University of Hertfordshire, I changed my research topic to focus specifically on rapid-response programmes that could be set up immediately to help the children of Gaza.

To my shock, when I went to the registration centre at the University of Hertfordshire. I found that they had registered me as an Israeli citizen with my homeland as Israel. I objected and showed them my passport, which clearly identified me as Palestinian. They apologized, but all they could do was to replace Israeli with Unknown Nationality or Nation. The computer system does not include Palestine. I had the same problem when I opened a bank account.

For a short time I was able to go back and see my family for the holidays. But in June 2006 the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, was captured by Palestinian militants and the blockade was intensified; I could not get into Gaza at all. My little son was born in January 2007, but I was unable to see him. On top of this, my wife was in need of urgent eye surgery at a specialist hospital. I had hoped to bring her to Moorfields in London, but this now seemed impossible.

Meanwhile, my family was telling me that life in Gaza was worse than the Nakba, the catastrophe of 1948: you could not find fruit or milk for your children; there were continuous power shortages, often only four hours of electricity a day, sometimes none; hospitals were starved of equipment and pharmacies had no medicine; sick people were dying every day as they waited for permission to

pass Israeli checkpoints. Often it was impossible to find a coffin, or cement to make a grave. Children played on the dangerous rubble of bulldozed houses, stealing moments of life as their parents despaired. They swam in polluted water where untreated sewage flowed into the sea.

In January 2008, I was in my office at the University of Hertfordshire working through the night at my computer when the news broke that the border wall between Egypt and Gaza had been broken down at Rafah. Here was my opportunity – if all went well, I would see my wife and little daughter for the first time after eighteen months, and would have my very first look



at my one year old son. I listened to the news on Aljazeera throughout the night and, in the morning, I contacted my wife and asked her to move quickly and leave Gaza for Egypt, like all the other people.

I was lucky. My visa was still valid and I quickly found a seat on a flight to Egypt. My wife and children had clambered their way through the rubble of the border and were now starting to walk along with thousands of other people to where they could get a car to take them to Al-Arish. I arrived at Cairo airport that same evening. Not daring to tell the authorities the real reason for my journey, I said that I was traveling as a student.

I asked my wife to walk to Al-Arish square and went to meet them there. Through the crowds I ran, full of happiness to see them again. I took my little son from my wifes arms and hugged him as I had wanted to do for so long. This was a moment of great happiness - but also of sadness and burning anger. I had been unable to travel for eighteen months and now my wife looked tired and ill. I was shocked to see the condition of her eye, which was worse than I had imagined. My little daughter was very shy of being near me. My son did not know me and did not want me to hold him. He looked at me as if I was a stranger.

We were forced to spend five frustrating and risky weeks getting through fifteen Egyptian checkpoints to Cairo, and then waited for official approval to travel out of Egypt. On February 2008, we were ready to fly to London. At first, my daughter refused to get on the plane. All she knew about planes was that they dropped bombs and killed people. It was very hard to convince her that this plane carried no bombs. Here in England, she is often frightened by fireworks and flashing lights on cars, not to mention post coming through our letterbox. She is one of Gaza's traumatised children.



In September 2008, I was awarded a PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Hertfordshire. Soon afterwards, I published several articles in international journals and books. My degree also enabled me to establish the [Palestine Trauma Centre for Victims Welfare](#) – PTC (Gaza). PTC provides psychological, social and specialized medical services for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip who have suffered and continue to suffer from the occupation and blockade imposed by the occupation.

In January 2010, with support from Mr David Harrold and others, I established the Palestine Trauma Centre here in the UK. [PTC \(UK\)](#) was set up in England in 2010 to enhance the professional work done by the mental health team at PTC (Gaza). It aims to build a network of specialist trainers in trauma therapies and provide emergency aid techniques for Gazas mental health workers.

In late 2010, my colleagues and I spent a week visiting the Palestine Trauma Centre in Gaza for the first time as a delegation from PTC (UK). We were welcomed in Gaza City by the Board of Directors of PTC Gaza, and I was deeply impressed by the courtesy, kindness, and, most of all, the professionalism with which they treated us during the five full days we were there. They left no stone unturned in helping us meet the officials and clinicians we wanted to see from other NGOs in Gaza, as well as visiting schools and the psychiatric hospital. We engaged in visits to projects in the North of Gaza, and met some of the people who are or have been in receipt of psychosocial and/or therapeutic support from PTC staff. We participated in workshops run by PTC Gaza for some of their local colleagues, and I gave short trainings on Family Therapy and Movement Psychotherapy to about twenty-five mental health workers.

It felt great to see the fruits of our labour. Everywhere we went, we were greeted with warmth and respect. This visit in Gaza was one of the most moving and interesting weeks of my life, and has fostered a desire to do much more to support their work.

Currently, I work as a Research Fellow at the School of Psychology, University of Hertfordshire. I am the co-ordinator of the Intervention Research project, where we are adapting and developing a Family Therapy Approach to the treatment of traumatized children and their families after the war in Gaza.



I published my personal story “Journey through Thorns” in 2009 in [The International Journal of Evacuee and War Child Studies](#). It was translated into English, Spanish and Italian and published by International Institutions. It has also been performed as a [dramatic presentation](#) throughout the UK and Ireland, including several schools, universities and public venues.

When I left Gaza to come to England on the Ford Fellowship, I left everything behind. Even so, the people remained in my heart. I will never forget the flag of Palestine and the grief of its children. I see the green spaces here in the UK where children play without fear. I am happy for these children and for the joys they experience. I only wish the children in my country could have half of what they do.

I am one of Palestine's children, and none of us had a childhood. We were all born adults. How long will this suffering be allowed to continue?

Photos, top to bottom:

Mohamed performs a dramatic rendering of his personal narrative, "Journey through Thorns", at the University of Hertfordshire's School of Law; Mohamed in jail,1994; visiting a UNRWA school, 2010; presenting at a conference in the US, 2011; providing training for mental health workers in Gaza; providing social support for a Palestinian family still living in a tent, 2008.

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