

Palestinian Photojournalist Mohammed Zaanoun's Snapshot of Life in Gaza

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Introduction

The conflict in Israel and Palestine is beyond comprehension, and for this issue I publish the story of Mohammed Zaanoun, a photojournalist recording the destruction occurring daily in Gaza and showcase a selection of his images from 2023 and 2024. Some of these images have been captured from video on The New Humanitarian website. Others are from his personal website. His images provide a window for the world onto the devastation being wreaked on Gaza. They give people across the globe a view of the life of Palestinians in Gaza and the way they are surviving with the continued bombardment of their homes and towns by the Israeli military. They are heartbreaking images and I am deeply devastated about what is happening in the many countries currently suffering from invasion and war.

Witnessing Israeli Defence Force incursions into Gaza in 2006, the then 20-year-old Palestinian photojournalist Mohammed Zaanoun was shot and seriously injured by shrapnel. It provided the impetus for his future career. He graduated from the Gaza University, majoring in Graphic Design and then became a new recruit at Ma'an news, an independent wire news service in Palestine. After an extended stay in hospital in 2006 Mohammed, became a freelance photojournalist and has dedicated his life to being a witness through the lens of a camera. He is currently documenting the devastation caused to peoples' lives by Israeli bombing.

The Anera website publishes a blog 'The Olive Press' 'Voices from Gaza' that gives regular reports from those living in Gaza about their daily lives (anera nd). An article featuring an interview with Zaanoun, reflecting on 'Gaza's scars and Beauty,' documents the contrast between life in Gaza in 2017, and the situation in 2023-2024. When Elhelo asked him which was his favourite photograph he replied:



A girl jumps rope and behind her is a building destroyed by war. Photograph Mohammed Zaanoun (uploaded on anera 2017).

My favourite photo is one I took of a girl jumping rope, and behind her is a building destroyed by war. It expresses strength and power. After death, there is life. It shows the real Gaza—where people find life amid destruction (Zaanoun cited in Elhelo 2017).

Before the violence erupted in early July 2023 Zaanoun turned his camera towards documenting a Palestinian artist who paints Arabic calligraphy over the rubble of destroyed houses. Artist Ayman al-Hosari paints these in an attempt to turn the murals into works of art to express love and peace. This type of Arabic calligraphy is an expressive artform that is used after conflict.

The images below are taken from videos published in 'Snapshots: A Palestinian photographer captures life under bombardment in Gaza', on the *The New Humanitarian* website.



A family house bombed in 2003; all is left is rubble. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



Children are playing on a mural painted by Palestinian artist Ayman al-Hosari who paints on the rubble of destroyed houses in Gaza. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.

The photographs taken in 2017 and early 2023 show a creative and crafted take on living in the Gaza, but as Zaanoun comments this situation did not last:

Everything changed overnight on 7 October, after a raid into Israel by Hamas gunmen left 1,200 people dead, most of them civilians who were killed deliberately, according to the Israeli authorities. Hamas, the political and militant group that governs the Gaza Strip, also took around 240 hostages back into the coastal enclave (Zaanoun *The New Humanitarian* 2023).

Mohammed Zaanoun's work documenting the Israeli siege on Gaza provides a moving and memorable photographic record that brings the experiences of Palestinians to the world. His photographs are provided to many international news outlets such as *La Monde*, *The Electronic Intifada*, *Ma'an*, *Zaatar*, *Anerna* and *The New Humanitarian*. For the *New Humanitarian* Zaanoun documents life in Gaza with "Snapshots' shining a spotlight on Gaza with weekly photos that matter to people on the ground" (Zaanoun 2023). Now in his late thirties he is increasingly at risk of death or further injury whenever he is covering these events. It is a dangerous occupation; many journalists and photographers have lost their lives in this and other conflicts. Tharoor (2024) from the *Washington Post* reported on the deaths of journalists in Gaza:

According to a tally maintained by the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 79 journalists and media workers have been killed since the start of the war on Oct. 7. Local Palestinian authorities put that number above 100. In either case, it's the single biggest death toll for journalists in a conflict zone for years — surpassing the toll exacted on the press operating in Ukraine over the past two years in just a matter of months. By one estimate, 1 out of every 10 journalists in the Gaza Strip has already been killed (Tharoor, 2024).

Commenting on the current situation in Gaza Zaanoun says, 'life is so desperate here in Gaza'. 'Everywhere on the road, I witness the bombings, constantly hearing explosions. I see the missiles strike. Wherever you look, you see destroyed buildings. In the streets, you can smell the remains of mortars, gunpowder, fire and death' (cited by Mraffko 2023).

In *The New Humanitarian* Zaanoun writes 'People in the Gaza face the 'risk of starvation' and disease as food and health systems collapse' (Zaanoun 2023). The pause in the conflict in November 2023 brought some respite, particularly to allow emergency aid through but 'four days [was] a very short window to meet the vast humanitarian needs, given the damage to the region after more than seven weeks of bombardment and siege'.

Zaanoun's house was destroyed, his son injured and along with the majority of the population of Gaza he was forced to leave his city as the Israeli military issued instructions to the population to move south to escape the bombing. But the bombing followed Gazans south. He concludes that the situation has become "catastrophic" and he must now focus on the safety of his wife and their four children. 'No safe place is left for them' (Zaanoun 2023 in *The New Humanitarian*).

Some of Zaanoun's photos show Gazans during the four-day pause including the Abu al-Ruk family taking advantage of the lull to gather around a fire near the ruins of their home in eastern Khan Younis.

The following images are from 'Snapshots: A Palestinian photographer captures life under bombardment in Gaza' with permission from the *The New Humanitarian* website.



People waiting for aid during the four-day ceasefire. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



Families gather during the humanitarian pause. The Abu al-Ruk family gathered round a fire next to their destroyed home in eastern Khan Younis, as the temporary pause in the Israeli bombardment began. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



UN aid trucks are finally able to enter Gaza after weeks of bombardment. The UN's agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, said it was prepared to receive at least 150 trucks of aid each day (still well short of what was allowed in before 7 October). Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



This photo shows the destruction caused by Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip, the humanitarian pause [was] vital to allow emergency aid into the Palestinian enclave. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun



This photo shows the many buildings targeted by the Israelis. Video screen shot: photo: Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



17th October, first responders and residents in Gaza scrambled to dig people out from under flattened buildings, often only using their hands. Video screen shot: photo Zaanoun 2023.



Many people were killed in a blast in the densely populated al-Maghazi refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip, including the family of Zaanoun's friend and fellow photojournalist. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



Evacuating the elderly. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



Photo taken at the al-Aqsa Hospital. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun 2023.



Many people were killed in a blast in the densely populated al-Maghazi refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip. Video screen shot: photo Mohammed Zaanoun Zaanoun 2023.

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