**Caged life**

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I spent most of my life on a strip of land not much bigger than Manhattan, surrounded by a massive razor-wire fence. Most of the time, it felt like we, the residents of Gaza, were the only people who noticed we were living in an open-air prison.

I pursued a career as a photojournalist to document life in Gaza and try to make the rest of the world understand its plight and its resilient people. In times of relative quiet, I focused on inspiring and uplifting stories. And, in times of violence and death, I tried to document the aftermath – the pain and the scars that would remain after the bombs stopped falling and the world lost interest yet again.

I am no longer in Gaza, and yet, as a Palestinian hailing from this tiny, fenced-off strip, I was not spared a deluge of accusatory messages over the past few weeks. My inbox has been inundated with messages asking about Hamas. They are not aimed at understanding Hamas or why they did what they did on October 7. Rather, they want me to answer for their actions.

It does not matter that I have lost 50 colleagues in six weeks or that my neighbours and their families had been killed in an Israeli air strike after fleeing to the south as they were directed to do by Israel.

It does not matter that every day, I fear for the lives of my family who remain in Gaza, and every time I try calling them, I would have a small panic attack when there is no answer.

The first question has always been whether I condemn Hamas. It has felt like I am being asked to audition for sympathy.

Every day, I hear the words ‘tunnels’ and ‘hostages’ uttered in media reports or conversations condemning a ‘terrorist organisation’.

But these words have a very different connotation for me.

For me and the Palestinians of Gaza, tunnels have become something of an essential infrastructure. In 2007, Israel imposed a debilitating siege on Gaza, and as an occupying power, it has been able to fully control what can come through border crossings, including the one with Egypt at Rafah.

Throughout the past 16 years, the Israeli authorities have decided arbitrarily to ban certain goods from entering the strip as yet another form of collective punishment of its population. For example, in 2009, they decided that no pasta could enter Gaza. Yes, pasta.

So, the Palestinians dug tunnels to try to smuggle in pasta and any other essential items that Israel would randomly ban.

Food, medicine and fuel started to trickle in from what came to be known as ‘the Metro’ – which probably had more stops than Washington, DC’s metro system and, I dare say, was a little bit safer.

When my first daughter was born in 2011, I was in need of colic baby formula for her age 0-3 months, which was not available in local shops. I was relieved to be able to get hold of some boxes – courtesy of ‘the Metro’.

The tunnels became such a constant feature of our lives that we would sometimes joke about ordering Kentucky Fried Chicken through them, as this was seen as a “luxury” we didn’t have in Gaza.

But there were things that the siege deprived us of that the tunnels could not provide.

A proper supply of potable water was one. We often couldn’t shower whenever we wanted because water was rationed. As a result, we would try to keep the bathtub full so we wouldn’t be forced to use seawater when it was cut.

Electricity was another luxury we were often deprived of. On average, we only had access to electricity for 4-6 hours a day.

Freedom of movement was another ‘privilege’ the tunnels would not help with. Travelling to and out of Gaza was not a possibility for most people, even long before Hamas existed.

When I was 17, we planned to visit my mother’s family in Egypt. We waited for three days at the Rafah border crossing before we were permitted to leave. As our taxi driver drove through the gates, the Israeli soldiers suddenly opened fire. The driver turned around in horror, shouting at them to stop.

We found out later that it was their lunch break, and they didn’t want to be interrupted even though we should have been allowed to pass. So, our summer plans were cancelled, just like that.

‘Hostages’ is another word that rings with a different meaning in my mind.

Many are now demanding the release of all Israeli hostages before a ceasefire can even be considered. Indeed, I wholeheartedly agree: All civilian hostages should be repatriated without condition. But this must also include Palestinian hostages.

There are more than 2,000 Palestinians currently held indefinitely in ‘administrative detention’ in Israeli jails without any charges. Many of them are children, some as young as 12.

Those who have actually been charged are tried by a military court where the conviction rate often exceeds 95 percent, indicating that the prisoners likely lack even basic access to due process or the ability to examine ‘secret evidence’ against them.

Israel is the only nation in the world that regularly prosecutes children in a military tribunal. The most common offence? Throwing stones. These ‘prisoners’ are children held captives by an occupying army that has abruptly and brutally taken them from their families.

Unfortunately, no one is putting their names and faces on posters across New York City or London. When people are imprisoned without charges and have no access to due process that is precisely what they are: hostages.

I became a photojournalist in Gaza because I believed it was important to document the reality of life there, the reality that most don’t see.

And, while I no longer live there, I would not be fulfilling my duty as a journalist, much less as a Palestinian, if I did not try and tell you what has been our reality long before Palestinians broke through the razor-wire fence on October 7.

Excerpted: ‘What ‘tunnels’ and ‘hostages’ mean in Gaza’. Courtesy: Aljazeera.com