



Reflecting on Nakba, Embracing Pentecost

Thursday, May 16th

Amgad was intended to be one of the voices guiding this campaign. Since the attacks on Rafah, commencing on May 10th, we have lost contact with him. His friend Doug Hostetter, Pax Christi International's Representative at the United Nations, provided a reflection on the profound silence that has embraced us in his absence.

The Nakba has taken on deeper meaning for me over the last seven months.

I have known Amgad Al-Mhalwi for a decade having met him through my previous position as the Director of the Mennonite Central Committee United Nations Office. That job required regular visits to the relief and development projects that MCC supported around the world.

I first met Amgad as a recently graduated Palestinian college student working for Al-Najd Development Forum near Gaza City. Mennonites supported Al-Majd to assist Gazans with family gardens and raise chickens & rabbits. Amgad and I have kept in touch with an occasional text over the years to celebrate his marriage, the birth of my two granddaughters or the birth of his two sons.

When the war started, Amgad started to text me almost daily, sharing the pain and trauma of trying to find food, shelter and security for his wife and two children under five.

I learned from Amgad that the Nakba started with his grandfather who was driven from his home in Hamama, 25 miles north of Gaza, by Israeli militia in 1948 and resettled in the Nuseirt Refugee Camp in Gaza. Over the years, Amgad's grandfather and father had built a nice compound of concrete houses for Amgad's extended family near Gaza City.

In October of last year, the Israeli Defense Force forced his family to flee again, first to the houses or in-laws and neighbors, and later to a series of schools ending up in a classroom on the third floor of the Umar bin Aas School near of Gaza City. On November 19th, fighting came to the school area, making it too dangerous to leave. A tank shell made a direct hit on the classroom where Amgad's extended family was sheltering, killing 30 people in the school including Amgad's father, a brother, a sister. Amgad grabbed his family and fled through the shelling and bombing to take his wounded wife and two children to a medical clinic. I then did not hear from Amgad for 5 weeks as he and his family traveled by foot over 20 miles through intense shelling and bombing until he finally reached Rafah on the Egyptian border. The silence was painful. I had no idea whether Amgad was dead or alive, or possibly captured and taken to a prison in Israel.

Rafah was safe for Amgad for a few months where they lived in a tent but were able to get food from the UN and international NGOs. But that safety was shattered on February 12th when the IDF rescued two Israeli hostages in Rafah, but to distract attention from the rescue operation bombed extensively in other parts of Rafah, killing 67 Palestinians, and wounding some of Amgad's immediate neighbors.

On May 6, Israel ordered evacuation of Eastern Rafah and later expanded the order to cover most of Rafah. The IDF then invaded Rafah and seized the Rafah Border Crossing to Egypt, shutting both the door out of Gaza to Egypt, and closing the entrance where most humanitarian aid entered Gaza. While the US, UN, EU and Arab

nations have protested the closing down of humanitarian aid (a clear violation of the Geneva Conventions), Israel seems determined to attack on Rafah and enforce the siege.

On May 8th, Amgad sent me this text:

"It is too dangerous here

I see bombing

Today, I sat with my son Majd (4) because of his fear. He said that he is afraid of the bombing. He said that he sees my dead family members under the sand, and he dreams that his legs have been cut off and he is walking without legs (that is because he saw my cousin without a hand and my brother without an eye when we were shelled in the school in November and our neighbor in the tent opposite of us a few days ago whose leg was cut off after it was shattered in the bombing). This conversation made me cry as a man."

On May 10th Amgad wrote:

"The IDF is in Rafah now..."

Soon I leave Rafah, Next, I don't know..."

And since the afternoon of May 10th, there has only been silence.

I think of Amgad constantly. When I eat, I realize that finding food is likely very difficult for him. When I shower, I think of Qamer, knowing she likely has no access to shower or bathroom. When I drink water, I remember that Amgad's family has little access to water. When I go to sleep, I wonder where Amgad and his family are sleeping at night. When I play with my granddaughters, Meena and Jaelyn, I think of the trauma of Majd and Ibrahim.

Honestly, I have not known how to respond to Amgad's texts (or his silence), the best that I have been able to do was to say that I would share their stories and their pain with my friends and relatives, and we would work together end the war and the occupation, and that we would hold them in our hearts and prayers.

Doug Hostetter
PCI UN Advocacy Team