



Exclusive Interview with a survivor of the Gaza Ghetto

Once again, we present our readers with a highly topical article by Felix Abt - an interview with a journalist who is currently stuck in Gaza.

Felix Abt

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While the neighbourhood was bombed and wiped out, Antoun Ananias lived on, alone in a partially dysfunctional house, along with countless rats and other disease carriers. When he fell seriously ill...

...he lacked the right medicine and, in the absence of water, he had to wash his hands with fresh urine, which is said to have a disinfectant effect. This is the heartbreaking story of a Palestinian in the Gaza

ghetto who is living through hell on earth.

We also learn about the unique history of Antoun's family, who came from Jerusalem and lived there for a thousand years according to the records of the Greek Orthodox Church. And he explains why Jews and Palestinians got along well in the past and that he dated Jewish women as a young man.

The interview, conducted by Felix Abt, was not made by phone or direct e-mail, as this was not possible, but via a friend of Antoun Ananias.

Interview

Dear Antoun, as the Gaza Strip was under fire and communication was difficult, you tried very hard to maintain contact with the outside world through your Gaza diary and some other articles on your [blog](#). Even when you were seriously ill, you continued to write, which I understand was part of your survival therapy. I will extensively quote you in my questions because your quotes offer a treasure trove of insights into life in besieged and bombed Gaza, as well as an insight into your family's fascinating long journey in Palestine and an informed assessment of the historical and political aspects of the conflict and its protagonists.

Answer what you can. If it is too physically and mentally demanding in view of your condition, be brief or skip the question.



Question: You wrote that you spend as much of your time as you can "in bed, trying not to think, not to move, as these activities use energy, and energy requires food."

"I carry on through each day, without company, power, heat, water, nor hope. I have made the decision not to consume calories, when my food supplies are so low, by reading during the day. Reading and writing consume more calories than virtually any other everyday activity. When one is surviving off a few bags of dates and nuts, one has to watch one's calorific consumption with some care."

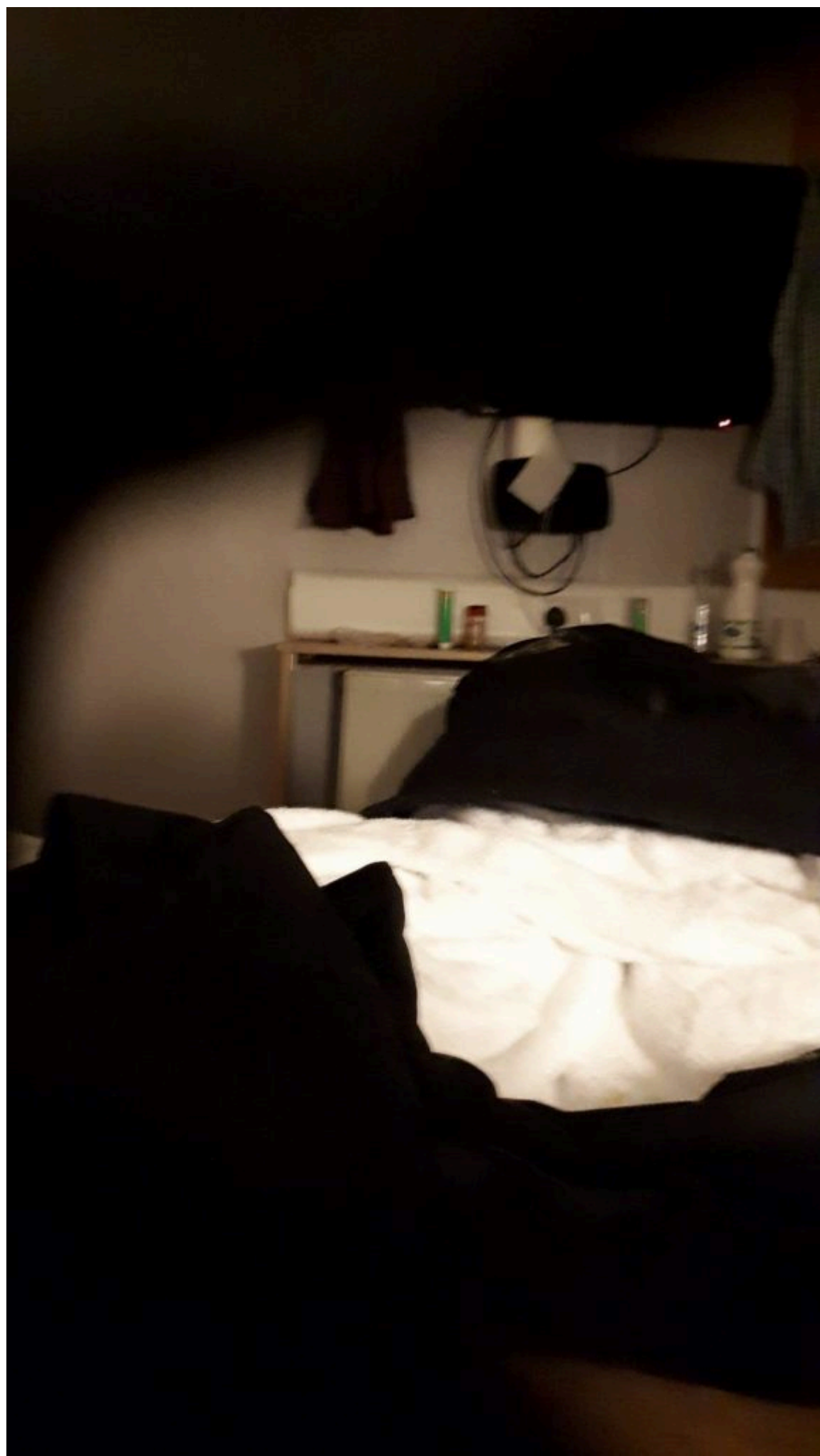
Energy and heating in cold weather is another issue that you addressed: "I still have a small amount of Butagaz in the gray bottle. I ration its use to the coldest hour before dawn. My cans of meatballs, I eat cold. I am on half a can of meatballs and ten nuts for each meal. It is sustaining when one's life is horizontal, thoughtless, a mimicking of death."

And because of the food shortage, you even got used to eating stale food. After a few days, a relative brought you some food.

How precarious is the food situation now and what are you currently consuming? How great is the risk of mass starvation?

Antoun Ananias: As I write, approaching one million Gazans are still considered at risk of starvation, despite the trickle of aid. Given the systematic destruction of the medical infrastructure, my impression, sadly, is that it will only take only serious disease outbreak, for this malnourished and improperly sheltered population to be decimated. We are on the edge of an unprecedented catastrophe. By comparison, I have it relatively easy, with solid shelter, some food, and heating.

Question: You mentioned in an earlier post that your "bed has been moved to the middle of the apartment" and added that this was "a futile act, as is any act in this situation; but maybe there it is less exposed to shrapnel." Days later you wrote: "Outside is a landscape I no longer recognise. Blocks of apartments have become deep craters of rubble, where the bunker-busting J-Dam munitions supplied by the Americans have struck. Somewhere under this rubble lie dead and dying bodies. Perhaps they are attracting the flies and midges away from my windows."



Antoun's bed is in a hallway in the centre of the flat, furthest from the windows; on the shelf are long-life milk, a few multivitamins and ground chilli to ward off illness. (Picture and copyright: Antoun Ananias)

Is the bombing still going on in your neighborhood or have the Israelis stopped, since almost everything has been flattened and destroyed?

Antoun Ananias: it is much quieter. I only hear what I hear and see what I see. The landscape is so comprehensively devastated, it evokes precedents such as post-bombing Dresden, Stalingrad, and even Hiroshima, as so little has been left standing or habitable. It is difficult to imagine this mass vandalism was not a deliberate act, as when the Romans destroyed Carthage and sowed the ground with salt, so it could never be repopulated.

Question: You wrote that you were told that the hospitals had been destroyed and that medicines, as well as other goods, were in short supply or missing altogether. You mentioned that you were unable to write for several days. "My fever is too fierce, the delirium too unprecedented, too various." The only thing you had left to defy your illness was medication for insomnia, which at least allowed you a "few hours sleep if there is no shelling or rocketing".



Antoun has feverish eyes and his sick body is covered in pustules. The self-medicating patient uses the scarce and insufficient medicine that is left. (Pictures and

Has the situation with medicines improved somewhat, as you mentioned recently: "Strangely, despite all 27 hospitals being struck down, chemists still operate home limited deliveries from stock — if one can pay" — and how many can pay and what happens to the patients who can't?

Antoun Ananias: There has, predictably, been profiteering, as in any war zone. Those with stocks of medicine and food are gouging the desperate. My impression is only a very limited group can afford these inflated prices.

Question: It is estimated that more than 80% of all houses have been destroyed and most of the infrastructure has also been destroyed. Gaza has become uninhabitable. The Israeli cleansing operation is brutal and effective. Even those who still live in a (dysfunctional) house have to contend with serious hygiene problems that make the difference between life and death. You say: "Most of my mental energy each day is taken up with how to dispose of my waste. Particularly feces, urine, and food bags. These, from experience, attract flies, midges, and roaches – all vectors of disease. My greatest fear is falling ill. I would almost certainly die alone, as even if I found a cell phone signal, there are no functioning hospitals remaining in North Gaza." *And you continue:* "Urine is a potent anti-septic when fresh. If the scent of rotting food is breaking through the plastic trash bags, tied and covered again, urine mitigates that smell. Fresh urine serves as a handwash in the absence of water. In this sense, I am grateful for the bodies; in the same way, others will perhaps secretly become grateful for my body."

Given this horrific situation, what is the likely fate of the Gaza population who are "vegetating" rather than living in such extreme conditions?

Antoun Ananias: It is difficult to know whether life in a makeshift shelter in the winter rains, with no food certainty, which is the majority predicament, is sustainable for long or will end in mass disease. I have deliberately avoided contact with disease vectors, but open sewers and dead animal carcasses, combined with a population on the brink, seem to augur a humanitarian catastrophe of biblical proportions.

Question: You have made some highly interesting and perhaps surprising observations that reveal the unique melting pot that is Gaza, writing: "Yesterday, at the far end of the wasteland, I saw a group of IDF in their floppy webbing helmets. They were leading two dark-skinned, elderly men at gunpoint towards a flatbed truck. About a dozen men were already bound and packed tight in the

truck, but not hooded. None looked young enough to be fighters. Most of the fighters have built bodies and are well-fed, but these men looked frail, scared, and half-starved."



Gaza being turned into a wasteland (Image and copyright by Antoun Ananias)

"Gazans come in all skin colors. There are blond Gazans – a legacy of the Crusader population who stayed on – Arabs, Bedouin, Refugees from Yaffa and Jerusalem – but also African Gazans: Lower Nile Egyptians, Sudanese and Gazans from East and Central Africa, who came into the strip looking for construction work and as street sellers. There is virtually every racial type to be found in Gaza; it was a historical crossroads between the Levant and Egypt for four millennia."

"These African Gazans have long been integrated into the community, and as Muslims, it would be a significant sin for any person to discriminate against them. I have travelled all over the world, but Gaza is the only place I know which is genuinely color blind."

So Gaza is an amazing island of racial and multicultural tolerance. Does it also apply to non-Muslims like you?

Antoun Ananias: People tend to pull together when facing an existential threat, but paradoxically they can display cruel and feral survival instincts. Palestinian Christians are not discriminated against in my experience, except by Muslim extremists, such as some Salafists.

Question: Let's talk about your very interesting family history. Your family are Greek Orthodox Christians. Your grandfather was a priest, as was his grandfather. You have written: "The family legend – difficult to verify – like every belief we hold as human beings – is that we are descended from St Ananias of Damascus, who saved St Paul by lowering him away from the mob in a basket."

"My uncle, a professional landlord in West Jerusalem, married a younger Jewess and retired rich to Florida. I never saw him as a traitor, like others in the family; if I have been interested in women, they are usually Jewish."

"A few months after emigrating, my uncle died from the heavy metals in the water in the well on his estate. If being Palestinian means anything to me – then this identity is simply a reminder that one cannot beat contingency. One is powerless before it – as [Chatwin](#) was, and I am, and my neighbours who have all disappeared are."

"My father was born in 1907 in the Old Town of Jerusalem. He was a subject of the Ottoman Empire and was to become the first Middle Easterner called to the English Bar, a Professor of International Law, who taught at Stanford, and later Dean of Arts and Sciences at the American University of Beirut. In 1934, as a student at

Oxford University, he was recruited into the British MI6, the same year as the three most notorious British traitors, Guy Burgess, Donald MacLean, and Kim Philby; double agents who sent hundreds of Allied operatives to their deaths."

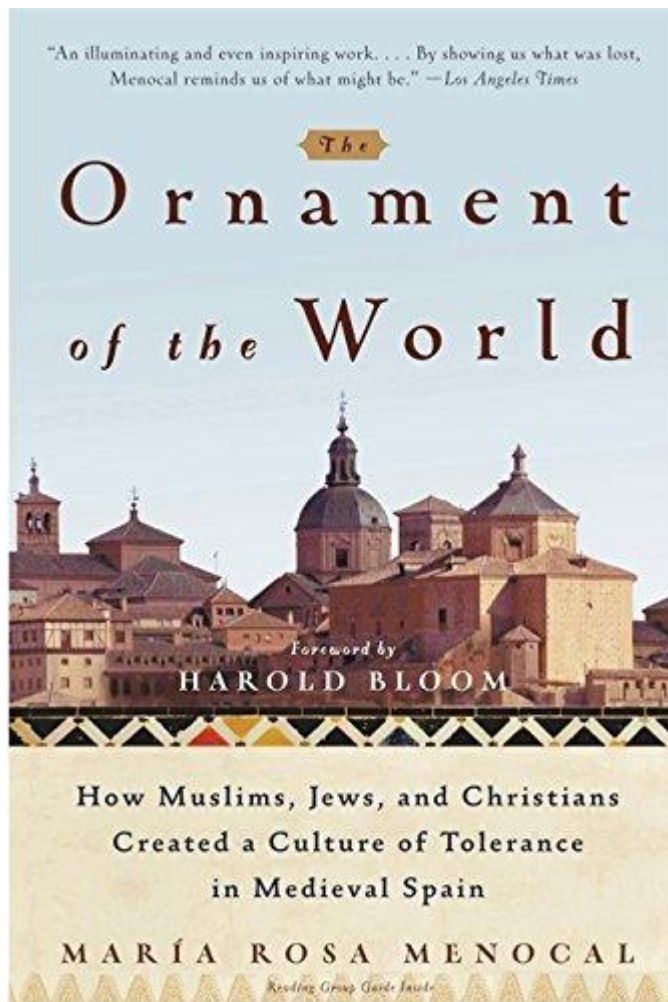


Your father was the most secretive man you ever knew. Although you talked to him for years, you say: "I still have no idea whose side he was on, where his loyalties ultimately lay, nor who he really was".

He was well-connected and knew many prominent personalities of the time. He also was "fluent in Hebrew, long before it became expedient to be so. The family library stocked many ancient tomes in Hebrew, along with that Western canon that line most Professor's shelves. My father encouraged me to read Spinoza, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, who remain among my most revered authors."

Your father and you grew up in a time and under circumstances that are so different from today as if you had lived on another planet. You got on well with Jews, made friends with them, dated Jewish girls, and saw them as human beings. And the same was true for them. For example, you clarified, "I have had relationships with Jewish girls, and I can assure you, apart from some superficial learnt cultural differences, there are no substantive differences—nothing to hypostatise one people over the other."

"We should not forget that for centuries, Arabs and Eastern Jews lived in a relative harmony. The apogee of this fruitful co-existence was the *convivencia al-Andalus*". The racism and hatred that have emerged in recent decades have culminated in a never-ending spiral of violence. There is no Jewish DNA per se, as you explain, just as there is no Palestinian DNA, and yet the blowhards in the Israeli cabinet insult the Palestinians as "a race of animals", "a snake people", "children of [Amalek](#)", while some Arabist supremacists use derogatory terms for a Yahoood (Jew), as a member of some lower race, and commit the same facile error, as you write.



Cover of a book on "How Muslims, Jews, and Christians created a culture of tolerance in Medieval Spain", which explains what Antoun Ananias meant when he spoke of the "conviviencia al-Andalus"

Why have the once relaxed relationships you experienced in your youth become so strained and hostile between different groups?

Antoun Ananias: The Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews living and thriving in the Ottoman Empire had no ambition to colonize anyone's land. This event, perpetrated by European Jews, triggered a cascade of unforeseen consequences, where these Eastern Jews were often expelled from their ancient communities and so arrived in Israel understandably embittered. This purge of Jewry was politically inept and wholly gratuitous – by the Arab states – usually to appease local street protests against Zionism, rather than from any genuine or motivated resentment of their ancient Jewish neighbours.

Question: Finally, you give a sober assessment of the main players in the conflict and debunk myths and lies by writing: "Iran is a uniquely pragmatic power, which rarely acts impulsively, and the Mullahs are well aware that any serious attacks on

Israel or world oil supplies would doom their domestically fragile regime. The reprisals from US assets in the Gulf alone would wreak such havoc economically and militarily that the Iranian regime would quickly implode — Gaddafi-style."

"Significantly, Hamas and the armed Palestinian factions, although supported by Iran, are highly independent in their leadership decision-making. They are not puppets. None of their leaders are hosted by Iran. The idea they take orders from Iran is a cynical myth."

"In short, the US has been sold a dangerous lie by Israel regarding the danger Iran poses. This lie could still push a credulous US administration into enabling what is shaping up to becoming the worst genocide of our times – and into a regional conflict that in no way serves US interests, only Israeli colonial and expansionist interests."

What people also don't know is that there are synagogues and parliamentary seats for Jews in Iran and that the mullahs meet and exchange ideas with them. Nevertheless, people in the West are told that Hamas and other Palestinian resistance groups are radical anti-Semitic Islamists and want to drown the Jews in the sea with the help of Iran. Can you give us a more nuanced picture of their nature and the motives that drive them?



Jews in a synagogue in Iran (Picture [USA Today](#))

Antoun Ananias: This is a particularly interesting question – what is silenced and repressed by both sides is the extraordinarily long-standing and complex cultural, social, and commercial relations between the Eastern Jews and their Arab friends and neighbours. The Arab states by losing their Jewish communities were significantly diminished – and lost part of their own fragile heritage and their wholeness as political and social ecosystems. The tragic displacement of the Palestinians triggered an equally traumatic displacement of Eastern Jews. This uprooting left multiple voids and wounds in those leaving and those left behind, the legacy of which may never be healed until there is some acceptance by the Eastern Jews of their former Arab context. Sadly, only a negligible group of Israeli thinkers still actively celebrate the Eastern Jewish tradition, which is as rich as the Ashkenazi tradition, though there has been much inter-racial tension between the two, which it took several decades of social engineering and manipulative state policies in Israel to more or less distract from and bury.

Thank you, Antoun, for granting us this interview. We don't have the words to express how we feel about your terrible situation and how frustrated we are that we can't do anything about it.

Related article "Are Jews exceptional?" by Antoun Ananias [here](#).

This interview was first published a few days ago on the blog [Easterangle](#).

ARTICLE TAGS:

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