

Hamas Tortured Me for Dissent. Here's What They Really Think of Palestinians |

Opinion

Hamza Howidy Jan 02, 2024

I was born in Gaza Strip in the late 1990s, one of six children. At the time, the Palestinian Authority was the ruling party. My father, like most people in Gaza, was sick of the PA's corruption and was waiting for any alternative. [Hamas](#) promised "change and reform" and they won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006. One year later, I awoke to the sound of gunfire. Hamas gunmen were fighting Fatah, and they ended up killing of more than 600 Palestinians. It became clear very quickly that Hamas was not the "change and reform" that we hoped for.

To silence dissent, Hamas terrorized the citizens of Gaza. On the way to the Dar-Alarqam school I attended in the al-Shujaiya neighborhood near the Israeli border, a group of masked men carrying Kalashnikovs would check each car. At the end of the year, masked men opened offices in our school to promote Hamas's military camps and register students.

I graduated and began my studies at the Islamic University of Gaza, along with future Hamas leaders and current members. All art classes were replaced with radical Islamic teachings, and the elections of the student councils and clubs were only open to Hamas members, who hoarded all the privileges and distributed all the grants between themselves.

Voicing dissent was not an option. Hamas has a no tolerance policy for criticism or objections to any of its policies. Even discussion is forbidden Any journalist who objects or criticizes a policy is suspended and investigated.

Demonstrations are strictly prohibited. Freedom of speech in Gaza is a fantasy. The dirtiest tool Hamas uses to silence citizens is character assassination through online campaigns accusing dissenters of working for hostile bodies or committing immoral acts. Hamas also routinely breaks into the homes of people deemed disloyal and humiliates them in front of their family and neighbors.

I observed all this with growing horror as a student. And as Hamas's oppression of the Palestinian citizens of Gaza increased, the quality of life deteriorated. Hamas's aggression toward Israel resulted in fewer and fewer job permits and limits on the electricity in Gaza, which we only got for eight hours a day. The economy cratered. Social and economic conditions collapsed.



Masked members of the Islamic movement Hamas stand on the wreckage of a burned bus, which serves as a barricade, and address the crowd during a demonstration in Gaza City.

PATRICK BAZ / AFP

A huge social gap opened between the wealthy elite who belong to Hamas and the rest of the population who were increasingly living in driving poverty.

Public sector jobs were limited to Hamas members, and taxes were increasing on necessities day by day, even as the cost of living skyrocketed.

Many of us could no longer bear it. I was one of them.

Though we knew dissenters were subject to imprisonment, torture, and even murder, in 2019, a few of us decided to join forces and [form a protest](#) to voice our opposition to Hamas. We called it the "We Want to Live" demonstration. Our demonstration elicited an extreme reaction by Hamas. They [violently cracked down](#) on the protests and we were all arrested.

I will never forget my first day in jail—walking up the steps listening to screams of my colleagues, most of them fellow students, who had been arrested before me. I was held under arrest for 21 days and subjected to various types of torture. I was beaten with batons and sprayed with cold water in the late winter night hours. My friends didn't fare much better. A Christian friend was in the next cell and I could hear them screaming at him, "You are a Christian and you don't like the situation? Then go to another country!"

After we were released, most of those who participated in the demonstrations emigrated away from Gaza. There was no hope for any change in the current situation. We suffered ongoing harassment by Hamas members. Some died trying to leave, like Tamer Al-Sultan, a pharmacist whose crime was asking for a reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.

People's living conditions got worse. The wealth gap expanded even further. We protested again in 2023 and were crushed in the same manner as in 2019. I was arrested again by Hamas last year and held for 14 days, this time in a small cell with no bed, no window, and barely enough space to sit down. I was released on bail on the condition that I not take part in any further demonstrations.

I still expressed my opinion occasionally on social media, but the arrest warrants after each post and the continuous threats from Hamas members and accusations of treason made me lose hope that I could make any kind of change. I left Gaza in August to seek a better future for myself and my family.

All this time, Hamas was planning to expand its extremism and intimidation. They knew what would happen as a result of their massacre on October 7, when they attacked Israeli civilians, and Israel responded with a massive war

aimed at destroying Hamas, which has obliterated large parts of the Gaza Strip.

Now all the inhabitants of the city are being punished for Hamas' actions.

I think it's hard for Israelis to understand that there are many innocent people in Gaza who have suffered as much from Hamas's evil as they have. I understand those Israelis. During my life as a Gazan, the only thing I believed about Israelis was that they all hate us and want to eliminate us as a Palestinians.

Now I know better. After criticizing Hamas for its horrific actions on Oct. 7, I made friends with Israelis for the first time in my life. It turns out that many of them, like me, just want this conflict to end so they can live in peace. These friendships opened my eyes to their suffering. I now have a better understanding what they are thinking, and have decided never to make judgments before listening to the other side.

I hope my new friends feel the same way about the many Gazans living under the boot of Hamas's oppression.

We Palestinians have a saying: "Hope is born from the womb of suffering." I hope that after the war, that after Hamas been defeated, we can create a real, lasting peace for both the Palestinians and the Israelis. Many Gazans are praying for this, too.

Hamza Howidy is a Palestinian from Gaza City. He is an accountant and a peace advocate.