

Bearing Witness From the Imperial Core: Film as a Lens on Life With Disability Under Occupation and Genocide

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Abstract

Ramzi Maqdisi's film *Defying My Disability* (2016) tells the story of seven Palestinian youth with disabilities living in the West Bank and Gaza in 2012, and the ways in which they managed their everyday lives under occupation and apartheid. Here, we introduce the participants and explore the film in the context of the current genocide. We reflect on our conversations with the filmmaker about making the documentary and screening it just weeks after the Al Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, along with his account of trying to communicate with the participants in Gaza since that time.

The US-funded, Israeli-conducted genocide in Gaza has been a mass disabling event, with tens of thousands of amputees, severe health and nutrition crises, and intense psychological trauma for every resident. "Israel's genocidal war [is] a cause of disability. The weapons of war injure bodies, break bones, burst eardrums, and blind eyes" (Loh, 2024, para 14). However, the interconnectedness of Palestinian liberation and disability justice has been recognized since long before the current Gaza genocide began (Puar, 2017; Snounu, 2019). We can be certain that now, after enduring 76 years of occupation and, as of the date of this writing, more than 450 days of genocide, disability justice must be at the forefront of liberation efforts because "everyone in Palestine is disabled" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2024, para. 1). That is, everyone in Palestine has collectively experienced limited mobility due to checkpoints and other everyday experiences of occupation for a long time. In addition, everyone in Gaza is now facing "debilitating and fatal consequences of malnutrition, dehydration, starvation, burns, gunshots, shrapnel, and suffocation under the rubble" (Sargent & Friedner, 2024, p. 1). Like so many others around the world (e.g., Alyan, 2024; Ihmoud, 2023; Sargent & Friedner, 2024; Tawil-Souri, 2024), we have been bearing witness to these atrocities and the mass disablement of the Palestinian people.

In previous work (Stern et al., 2023), we analyzed the 2016 documentary *Defying My Disability* (Maqdisi, 2016), which tells the story of seven Palestinian youth with disabilities in the West Bank and Gaza. We noted the re-

lationships among occupation, disability, and isolation. In this paper, we expand the analysis in the context of the current genocide and explore how the filmmaker and the individuals featured demonstrate Palestinian *sumud* — most often translated as steadfastness — in spite of many challenges, including the restrictions placed on their mobility (see Meari, 2014). The film itself, screening it during the genocide, and ongoing communication with the filmmaker are, we argue, generative to understanding the relationships among communication, occupation, and disability before and during the genocide being committed in Gaza. The film illustrates an important way that artists and scholars can think about soliciting and sharing people's stories in ways that mitigate discourses of deficit, and that do not portray disability as a condition of helplessness or endless suffering. We also consider the director's reflections on disrupting deficit views of disability in his filmmaking, and we describe our experiences trying to take action by uplifting this film in the context of the genocide in Palestine.

We approach this work, as all scholars do, from a particular set of positionalities that are complex and ever-changing, and we take the call for continuous study and reflexivity seriously. Anthony is a cisgender, able-bodied, Palestinian man born and raised in Chicago but with ancestral roots in Ramallah, a place he only remembers visiting as a toddler. With all the privileges of being not only white, cisgender, and able-bodied but also tenured, Nancy is the Jewish daughter of Holocaust survivors, and she honors her family's memory with work for a free

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Palestine. Lilly is an anti-Zionist Russian-Jewish, white, and Mexican-American cisgender woman with a shifting relationship to disability who grew up in an interfaith, multiethnic home in Oakland, California. As we are all US citizens and professors at US universities, we are situated squarely within the imperial core, and we come together for this work in solidarity with the liberation of Palestine, which in its entirety is currently being rendered disabled, and whose liberation is inextricably tied to the rest of ours.

Defying My Disability: Narratives of Disablement in Palestine

Directed by Palestinian actor, writer, and filmmaker Ramzi Maqdisi, the film *Defying My Disability* (2016) portrays the complexities of disability in Palestine and its entanglements with Israeli occupation. The documentary features 7 Palestinian youth: Haneen Abu Ayash, Mohamed Sadah, and Idriss Awad were in the West Bank, while Abed Alrahman Abu Rawah, Zyad Deeb, Anas Abu Haloub, and Muna Zayed, lived in Gaza. Maqdisi entitled the film *Without Oxygen*, representing the occupation's role in limiting the most basic and fundamental aspects of human life, as well as the cause of Haneen's disablement at her birth, perhaps interconnected with the limited access to medical resources in the West Bank. It was the film's producer, Al Jazeera, who chose the title *Defying My Disability*.

Our conversations with Maqdisi made evident his dedication to foregrounding his interlocutors' experiences as they described them, rather than explicitly requesting them to speak about the obstacles they face. Maqdisi told us that he only prepared 10 questions prior to conducting the interviews as a way to allow the conversations to flow as they most naturally occurred. Unsurprisingly, what became clear from the testimonies of the participants is that they not only faced challenges of mobility because of their disabilities, but that the Israeli occupation especially rendered them isolated, confined, and debilitated, what Snounu (2019) refers to as the triple matrix of maiming. Snounu (2019) quotes Dr. Fadel, a professor of Philosophy and Cultural Studies: "The occupation does not have a role in disability, rather, the occupation is disability..." (p. 461).

The testimonies also demonstrate the everyday practices of sumud that all Palestinians enact to resist the restrictions imposed on them. Sumud, a central characteristic of Palestinian identity since the 1960s, encompasses a broad assemblage of individual and collective practices of refusal and resistance to the colonization of Palestine (Meari, 2014). In the realm of visual culture, sumud has been portrayed through representations of the everyday brutality of the occupation as well as of Palestinian dreams and joy (Ahmad, 2016). Alshammari (2022) puts sumud in conversation with disability studies to challenge individualistic notions of resilience and to learn from Palestinians about understanding disability as a collective condition. In *Defying My Disability*, each participant's testimony reflects the complications of their



Figure 1. Haneen Abu Ayash at the Mediterranean Sea

"I'd come here every day if I lived here. I'd sit for hours, bring a paper, write on it, then throw it away." (Maqdisi, 2016, 00:44:50)

lives and includes expressions of both subjugation and sumud.

For Haneen, a 25-year-old living in Hebron, the result of this triple matrix of maiming meant that she was restricted from visiting places like Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Gaza, and from visiting the sea, which requires a special permit for Palestinians: "I wish I could go to places I've never seen before. But I don't have a permit or anything from the occupation's side." In the same breath that she articulates her awareness of the unlikelihood of her ability to visit the sea because of her identity as a Palestinian, Haneen is steadfast in her wish that she will one day be able to travel; she embodies sumud by dreaming of a different future in which her movement is unrestricted. In fact, Maqdisi and his crew decided to take Haneen to the checkpoint to visit the beach, expecting to be denied entry and having the opportunity to film Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement. But when they arrived, they were surprised that the Israeli soldiers allowed them to pass without questioning, and Haneen, whose home is less than 50 kilometers from the coast, saw the sea for the very first time (see Figure 1).

In one of our conversations, Maqdisi reflected on whether it was a mistake to take Haneen to the sea, because it gave her a taste of a dream that she might never live again: "Dreams are so impeded in Palestine that even the filmmaker worries about realizing a dream that is so dissonant from the reality of those living under occupation" (Stern et al., 2023, p. 15). Even so, what *Defying My Disability* centers is not this dissonance, but rather the ways in which Haneen and the other participants manage their reality despite the conditions of occupation through everyday practices of sumud, such as the ones that keep Haneen's dream of seeing the sea alive, and that in this case made that dream come true.

When asked in the film what she dreams of, Muna, a cheerful 14-year-old girl living in Gaza, told the interviewer that she has stopped dreaming, chuckling as she said it, and playing lovingly with her older brother. For Muna, living with a disability meant being forced into homeschooling because the commute to school was too difficult. It meant having few friends who accepted her



Figure 2. Muna Zayed

"I love the Arabic language. I'd love to be a teacher and teach first grade." (Maqdisi, 2016, 00:21:53)

disability, leaving her with no one to play with. But although Muna said she no longer dreams, she did imagine what she would do if the conditions of her life were different: "If I had an electric wheelchair, I'd go to school to continue studying" (see Figure 2). If Muna had the infrastructural access to mobility throughout Gaza, she said she would have studied to be a first-grade (and emphatically, only first-grade) Arabic language teacher, a language she says she loves. Even when the genocide in its current form ends in Gaza, it will likely be a long time before the roads will be usable by people in wheelchairs.

Maqdisi talked to us about how "shocking" it was to hear Muna say she didn't dream anymore while laughing it off, but also how the representation of that cognitive dissonance would not have been possible without a documentary approach that foregrounded disability as daily lived experiences that people manage in the ways and with the language available to them. Dabashi (2006) observes that Palestinian dreams "always border with nightmares – hopes transgressing into fears, and at the borderlines of that im/possibility of dreaming and naming..." (p. 9). The tragedy of the content of Muna's statement — the impossibility of dreams — juxtaposed with the humor in her performance of the utterance is an example of an everyday practice of sumud through laughter.

The interviews with Abed, a 17-year-old born in Gaza with one arm and one leg who learned how to ride a bicycle as his primary mode of transportation, also demonstrate Maqdisi's insistence on focusing on daily experiences and feelings rather than the clear obstacles disabled Palestinians face under siege. Maqdisi told us:

It's not about the drama and the tragedy. Because if you speak to Abed, you're speaking to half person. He can be telling you the most lovely and funny things, and you still be able to see the tragedy he lives, this guy. So why I have to tell him, yeah, tell me about your disability? How you suffer? I am seeing how he is suffering. But I am seeing at the same time how he invented this amazing way to move on a bicycle. So why do I need to ask him, explain me your suffering? And after filming him and seeing. No! He says to be a handicap physically is not a problem, because if your mind functions well, everything is fine. How



Figure 3. Abed Alrahman Abu Rawah

"In the war on Gaza I felt afraid. Everyone feels afraid. I prepared myself for dying at any second, from a stray shell or random shots. I was afraid. But to think about running away, I didn't. Like they say, you only die once." (Maqdisi, 2016, 00:32:57)

can he tell you this type of response if you ask him about the obstacles? (Ramzi Maqdisi personal communication, July 2, 2024)

Although Abed's story (see Figure 3) is surely fraught with tragedy, what *Defying My Disability* foregrounds is the ways in which he enacted sumud by creating mobility for himself in a place where mobility is severely limited politically and infrastructurally, and with a physical disability that one might expect would preclude the ability to ride a bike. In the documentary, Abed shares how his own process of empowerment ultimately shaped his dream to help other Palestinians with disabilities find such freedom of movement.

Zyad, a 28-year-old artist, is the only person in the documentary who was disabled directly by Israeli violence. In the film, Zyad recalled the day in 2008 when he lost 11 family members and both his legs as a result of an Israeli air strike, during what the Israelis called Operation Cast Lead. He talked about the moments right before, when he and his family heard a nearby bomb and were calming some of the people who were panicking and screaming in fear. Zyad described it as less than a second later that he witnessed something falling right in front of him — a rocket — followed by an explosion, which he said he didn't even feel: "I didn't hear a sound. All I heard was a strong ringing in my ears." Zyad was one of only three surviving family members; his injuries required both his legs to be amputated. He buried his legs along with his brother and father, so that they would rest in power in the same grave.

In the documentary, Zyad's story is particularly relevant to understanding the implications of the longstanding practice of Israeli military violence rendering civilian Palestinians disabled (Puar, 2017) and the continuities between the past and the present. It is also an example of how Palestinian sumud remains intact even under the most brutal circumstances of Israeli violence. As an artist, Zyad centers his work around the joy he experiences in his homeland, not on the conditions of occupation that influence it. Zyad described his dream to have his own art gallery, which would show his "love for Gaza and Pales-



Figure 4. Ziad Deeb

"I have a dream in art. First to have my own gallery to reflect my love for Gaza and Palestine." (Maqdisi, 2016, 00:15:24)

tine" (see Figure 4). He explained that he wanted to photograph the beautiful green areas near the border, but that he could not go there because living with a disability meant that "If the Israelis started shooting, I wouldn't be able to move from my place." Despite this reality, Ziad embodies *sumud* by uplifting the beauty of Gaza: "nothing stopped me from capturing the beauty of things." For Maqdisi too, art is an act of *sumud*: "the very act of 'creating culture' is an act of political resistance" (Tawil-Souri, 2011, p. 471).

Screening *Defying My Disability During Genocide*

During the summer of 2023, we planned a virtual screening of the film, followed by Q&A with the filmmaker, to take place on October 26 of that year at one of our universities. The idea for the screening came out of the collaborative work the authors had been doing with Maqdisi, and a desire to bring Palestinian narratives on disability into the center of Western—in this case, specifically USian—academic discourse(s).

While the virtual screening had been planned many months before October 2023, the university's administration faced considerable pressure to cancel the screening following Al Aqsa Flood on October 7. In spite of entreaties from an unknown number of students, faculty, and community members to cancel these plans, administrators allowed the event to go forward.

In the grim and anguishing context of the onset of the genocidal assault on Gaza, the virtual screening of the film was a highly emotional event for the filmmaker, the organizers, and for many people in the audience of more than 200 virtual attendees. With the sorrow and torment so many people were experiencing, it was especially poignant to screen the film and to share the stories of Palestinian lives and loves in the West Bank and Gaza more than ten years earlier.

The college's dean gave opening remarks and noted that the institution is committed to preparing educators to teach and lead diverse communities, "with an understanding that diversity comes in many forms not just

based on learning styles, race, ethnicity, and languages, but also lived experiences - in our city, in the US and abroad." One hopes - but wonders whether - the institution's leaders would have the same fortitude now, as the repressive climate in universities has only intensified since that time (Fúnez-Flores, 2024), and some of us have been advised since then that our advocacy is "too political."

During the Q&A portion of the event, audience members expressed appreciation for the film and the screening, especially when so much of academia was censoring the voices of the Palestinian people and those who support them. The first question the audience asked was about the people who had been living in Gaza: Muna, Abed, Ziad, and Anas. Maqdisi reported that he had been in touch with Abed and Ziad but had not been able to reach Muna and Anas. He added that he hoped that was simply due to communication issues.

Maqdisi himself maintained his composure throughout the one-hour Q&A, but after the cameras were off, he ran outside for a long walk even though it was the middle of the night in his time zone. The toll of watching the then-month-long genocide from his home in Spain, and his worry about the people featured in the film as he recollected the making of it, drained him. Maqdisi was also aware of the censorious political climate in the US. Although we had not asked him to do so, he felt the need to speak with great care so that there were no repercussions to us, as the organizers of the event, based on his words.

Mass tragedy, death, and destruction, although surely present, are not primary in the narrative of *Defying My Disability*, but rather are the quiet background within which the seven main participants learn to exist - what Dabashi (2006) describes as part of Palestinian cinema as "a subdued anger, a perturbed pride, a sublated violence" (p. 11). When Maqdisi reflected on the experience of screening the documentary during genocide, he noted that some people considered the film to be too 'light' and that it was inappropriate to screen at a time of such escalated violence. This statement recalls Tawil-Souri's (2011) observation that,

given Palestinians' political condition, their cultural praxis - whether of the everyday, the institutional, the mundane, or the monumental - is an act of resistance, because it de facto attempts to reverse [Golda] Meir's proclamation that Palestinians do not exist; more complicated than that, it attempts to negate subjugation and silencing. Palestinian culture is the attempt to re-voice the silences of the witnesses, victims, and historical 'losers' and to 're-write' the historical truth of events in Israel/Palestine, before and after 1948. (p. 471)

In fact, Maqdisi explained that the only reason there are images in the film of bombs dropping during Ziad's story was because the film's producer, Al Jazeera, insisted on it. Maqdisi himself discarded the videos he obtained of the aftermath of the bombing, because, he explained, his goal with this film was not to measure or depict loss,

death, and pain, but rather to highlight the daily life experiences, dreams, and resourcefulness of disabled Palestinians living under occupation in all their contradictions and complexities. For (disabled) Palestinians, the effects of Israeli colonial violence are not new conditions; they are the reality they have been living under for decades, described in films as what Dabashi (2006) calls “traumatic realism” (p. 11).

The stories presented in *Defying My Disability*, filmed in 2012, reveal the continuities between the past and the present live-streamed genocide in Gaza. It has become common practice for those of us bearing witness to the current genocide in Gaza to situate our experience in the time continuum of “days since the genocide began.” However, as egregious and unprecedented as this ongoing iteration of Israeli violence toward Palestinians is, it is also an historical obfuscation to locate the onset of Israeli colonial violence on October 7, 2023, more than 75 years after the beginning of the Nakba in Palestine. As Eghbariah (2023) argues, the genocide in its current form in Gaza is another iteration of the ongoing Nakba in Palestine that began in 1948. Our language is limited in capturing this complexity, so we use the metric of “since the genocide began” cautiously to avoid participating in historical revisionism, but also with the purpose of centering the fact that we are indeed witnessing an unprecedented live-streamed genocide in Gaza, and an increasingly violent and expansive ethnic cleansing of the West Bank.

Albeit the most destructive thus far, this genocide is another chapter in what Khalidi (2020) refers to as the hundred years’ war on Palestine. Speaking in 2024, Maqdisi quietly observed, “everything that’s happening now, it used to happen before” (personal communication, July 2, 2024). Nevertheless, there is no denying that the maiming tactics that have always been a characteristic of Israeli occupation of Palestine (Puar, 2017) are being executed at a faster rate and on a much larger scale than ever before, rendering the entire population of Gaza disabled. The genocide has given an entirely new meaning to what it means to understand Palestinian liberation through the lens of disability. Maqdisi urged us in our conversation to think about the challenges that will begin after the genocide ends, which is the struggle for resources and capacity to rebuild Gaza with the needs of its disabled residents at the forefront. Will the Western powers allow Gaza to receive the aid it needs to rebuild itself? Will Gazans have access to what they need to survive in the destroyed cities they’ve been left with?

Direct Action and Communication

After the screening, we were called into collective action, haunted by the knowledge that what the documentary portrayed as life with a disability in Palestine in 2012 had only become more violently oppressive and lethal since the onset of the most recent iteration of the ongoing Nakba. After re-watching the documentary in the context of genocide and hearing Maqdisi reflect on his interactions with Ziad and Abed, it became clear that

from our privileged position in the West, bearing witness and creating opportunities for Palestinians to share their stories wasn’t enough. Unaware at the time of better fundraising platforms, we launched a GoFundMe campaign to raise money for Ziad and Abed’s families, who had been displaced several times and were living in tents in Rafah. Cable (2021) refers to efforts such as these under the umbrella of cinematic activism, which includes “philanthro-spectatorship” where virtual screenings can be used to organize community fundraising rather than generate private profit. Despite the modesty of the donation and its insufficiency in the context of genocide, we wanted to take some action and at the same time provide an opportunity for those who had witnessed the screening to materially contribute directly to the people we were learning from.

The process of collecting and distributing the funds raised several reflections about the limitations and complications of direct action for people surviving genocide in Gaza. First, the GoFundMe platform required an extensive list of information about the recipients of the funds, some of which was almost impossible to access. It also felt inappropriate to request information from Abed and Ziad about their families and their situation, without knowing who of them were still alive and while they were fighting to survive genocide on a daily basis. We also knew that getting funds to Abed and Ziad would be difficult based on the scarce resources available, their limited ability to move through the city, and the bombing and looting of banks. Even so, through Maqdisi’s connections he was able to find someone who could facilitate the transfer of money to a bank in Gaza, and to get the funds to Abed and Ziad who would not have been able to wait five days in a line at the ATM, as others in Gaza had to do if they were fortunate to have cash to withdraw.

These challenges are a small illustration of the ways in which the destruction and debilitation wrought on Gaza is magnified for people who have disabilities (see Loh, 2024; Mahdi, 2024). And as Sargent and Friedner (2024) note, “the forced scarcity of medicine and assistive devices (including, mobility devices, glasses, and hearing aids) causes chronic and manageable conditions to spiral out of control and produces excess mortality, in addition to increased disablement” (pp. 1 – 2).

Maqdisi reflected on the helplessness he experiences trying to maintain communication with the participants of *Defying My Disability*. He told us that he stopped trying to send Muna and Anas messages and even needed to archive the conversation with them on WhatsApp, because the singular check mark that signals that the message has not been delivered terrorizes him. Although his instinct is to continue reaching out, “the problem is that I don’t know if they’ll ever see the messages” (Ramzi Maqdisi, personal communication, July 2, 2024).

Although he has been able to be in contact with Abed and Ziad, sometimes directly and other times through family members, Maqdisi told us that after the latest message he received from Ziad, he was left speechless with nothing meaningful to say. He translated the mes-

sage to us, which said that Zyad had moved from Rafah to Deir el Balah, the seventh displacement in ten months, and that he had been separated from his wife and children, who could not find a place to shelter near him. He wrote that:

Food is becoming very difficult, because there is no aid and the little money I have I use it for water rather than food. When I get connection I try to watch the news and see what's happening. The prosthetics are fucked and I have infections. And every day we wake up and we sleep with noises of bombing. And Alhamdulillah.

Abed has lost weight too, as a result of scarce access to food and water, so he will need to re-learn how to balance on his bicycle in order to move, not to mention the difficulties of riding a bike along streets that are covered in rubble from collapsed buildings, and corpses yet to be collected.

Reflecting on the lack of contact with Muna and Anas, who live, insha'Allah, in Gaza, Maqdisi said:

In another time, in another situation, I could ask people to figure out their contacts, but imagine me trying to contact someone in Gaza to tell them I'm worried about these two, can you please ask around. If I was him, I would tell this person, you know what? Go fuck off. Because he cannot assure me how he will be in 1

hour. (Ramzi Maqdisi, personal communication, July 2, 2024)

In any case, sending messages and checking in is in some ways a futile endeavor given our limited ability to offer direct action or aid. Just as this paper was being finalized, we learned the news we had feared all along: Muna did not survive. Sweet Muna, who dreamed of becoming a first-grade teacher, passed away from starvation.

We grieve this loss deeply, and the countless other lives taken by the ongoing Nakba. As citizens of the country funding and supporting the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, we continue to struggle against this injustice and to bear witness. The people of Palestine, who are experiencing collective disablement, do not need thoughts and prayers. What they need urgently are material actions that will end the genocide, dismantle the occupation, and allow them to build their decolonized future in their land, and on their own terms.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

All authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research.



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