

WHO  
WILL SPEAK  
FOR  
THE MEN  
OF  
فزة  
GAZA?



Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?

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TAIBA ABBAS



In remembrance of Dr Maisara AlRayyes and his family

For the martyrs of Gaza

the heroes of Gaza

the legends of Gaza



Two streets from my house, in Lahore, an apartment block has been under construction for months. A building more than ten storeys high. In the afternoons I stand in my doorway and from my garden watch the faint figures of men walk across those frail heights, laying brick and scaffold, transforming that fragility into a security of homes. It reminds me of the residential neighbourhoods of Gaza. At night, sometimes, I hear a distant clang echo through the silence, the slow swinging shadow of a lonely crane, the illusion of men's voices. Something shivers in my heart, waking me from a sleep that doesn't come. And I stand, late into the night, at my window, and watch that lone towering figure against the sky; the dark, gaping caverns of unfinished rooms, a skeletal phantasm. A ghost of wholeness. How easily a construction site can resemble a site of bombing. How quickly life and death can be reversed by a trick of light, a shift of night and day, a mere positioning of the earth. How easily, Gaza could be anyone, anywhere.

How many days into this genocide? My hand trembles as I write these words. Nothing holds. No centre to bind language, to absorb the flooding reality of this new, terrible, shifting world, unfolding in the palm of our hands.

A human slaughter so immense, a human catastrophe so vast there is no way to make our way through it. How does one begin? From where? From the surreal nightmare of a people besieged, imprisoned in their own land, cut off from water, food, power, fuel

in their homes by an occupying force killing its way in for seven decades, invading further and further? From a hospital blown apart? From the wholeness, the perfection of children smashed asunder? From a limb glimpsed amid rubble? From families gathering each other in pieces, embracing each other in death? From the journalists of Gaza, the doctors of Gaza, speaking to the world standing amid a conference of the dead?

In our smallness, sitting crouched in a darkness impermeable to any notion of night or day, bent over our screens, how do we begin to hold it all? Not knowing how to articulate what we've seen, not knowing how to look away from what no one should ever have to see, how do we attempt to lift the weight of a pain bigger than our own bodies? How do we atone for the guilt of being alive? How do we beg forgiveness for being alive when they are not? In our insignificance how do we offer ourselves to Gaza?

We do it by letting them fill our lives till our life is no longer our own. We do it by holding onto someone. By being led, guided through the abyss of our pain by an anchor of meaning, of light, of connection. We do it by making it personal. Making collective mourning personal. By reaching so far out until someone reaches back, and speaks to us, only us. And they become our Gaza. As Maisara did for me.

I met Maisara AlRayyes on November 8, 2023. He didn't come to me through an image of death. I never saw his face, his body, amid the grey ash of a Gaza razed to the ground. What I saw was a face smiling down from a university poster, alive, so alive, a boy with a sunlit smile drenched with life.

On November 8, on the Instagram page of the SOAS Palestine Society, the poster said '*Today We Honour Maisara AlRayyes, SOAS Community Member, Martyred in Gaza.*' In the same post

another image: Maisara graduating in Gaza as a medical student, his face beaming. Another poster, a SOAS event from November 2019: *'Voices From Gaza: Maisara AlRayyes, Medical Doctor from Gaza-Palestine, currently on a Chevening Scholarship studying Women and Children's Health at King's College London, and former President of IFMSA-Gaza,'* an event where Maisara had been invited to share his experiences living under siege – his face on the poster, his unchanging smile, a shine glinting off the frame of his glasses, his stethoscope around the collar of a spotless white coat. Other images: Maisara speaking to his audience in a seminar hall at SOAS – a hall that pierces through me, a hall I recognise from my student days – in an elegant brushed grey sweater, his keffiyeh draped like poetry around his neck, his black hair, gleaming, parted to the side, his face turned intently towards a presentation screen, a Palestinian flag behind him. And then an online post from Chevening's office, circulating virally: *'We are devastated to learn about the death of Chevening Alumnus Dr Maisara AlRayyes and members of his family. We send our deepest condolences to his surviving family. Our thoughts, and the thoughts of the Chevening Alumni community are with you,'* over an image of Maisara standing in a cool blue button-down shirt, smiling, always smiling, holding up a poster in his hands *'I Can't Keep Calm I've Been Chosen For Chevening!'*

Amid the raging roar of grief that came pouring out online, unforgiving, crashing in waves against Chevening, against the British Foreign Office, against the cowardice, the blatant complicity of London's universities in their moral failure to state the truth – Maisara's *'death'*? Maisara was brutally murdered by Israeli occupation forces, he and three generations of his family were bombed in his home by Israeli airstrikes – I sat numb in the

immediacy of a horror too immense, a loss too incomprehensible in its closeness. The boy in that seminar hall, the epitome of a postgrad scholar, the best of London, the best of the world. How could those grieving testimonials from Chevening scholars, those devastated pleas from friends and colleagues begging for him to be rescued from beneath the rubble, be about him?

The criminality of Western media and the genocidal machinery of the US operates by rendering Gaza invisible, distant, cut off from the rest of the world, by effacing 2.3 million Palestinian men, women, children to mere numbers to enable their erasure. But Maisara's life, his bright, blazing, relentless life, defies and shatters every frame of Israel's necropolitics. At 28, surpassing death, immortalised in youth, in movement, in the brilliant fecundity of an entire future ahead of him, Maisara is the antithesis of dying.

His world comes rushing in through social media accounts that are left behind, their doors wide open. Posts, photos, videos. Maisara lives, and outlives himself. He invites me in, he takes me through his Gaza. The flesh, the colour, rising over the ash and rubble, growing his Eden back to life.

On Facebook and Twitter/X, I keep scrolling, sliding back and forth through time, 2022, 2019, 2017, 2015. I begin as further back. I get to know a teenaged Maisara, a twenty year old Maisara, a fresh, sporty, sweet, handsome, happy, jocular boy in t-shirts and jeans, in checked shirts and jeans, a quintessential high school boy; a college boy, cracking jokes, sharing one hilarious meme after another on the ordeal of exams; a magnetic energy to him, grouped in selfies with friends at medical school; idealistic, a gentle family boy, playing with his beautiful infant nephew, his sister's angelic little son, holding him while he's on his laptop, laughing, pointing at the camera, an exuberance of love, tenderness, innocence; selfies of him with his



brothers Muayad and Mohammad, with his father Azmi AlRayyes, a family photo of the four of them – a grand, dashing man with his stylish, stalwart sons. The entire family, together in this world, together gone from this world.

In the Israeli airstrike that targeted the six-storey building of his home on November 5, Maisara remained trapped under the rubble with his father, mother, two sisters, two small nephews and niece. His brothers who weren't at home at the time of the bombing and for three days kept trying to retrieve their family from under the rubble in the absence of civil defence teams running short of fuel cut off by Israel, were killed by a second Israeli airstrike at the same spot on November 8. To this day Maisara and members of his family remain under the rubble of their fallen home, their bodies unretrieved.

Maisara's unspeakable tragedy is a compendium of Gaza's tragedy. The annihilation of entire bloodlines and generations wiped out in a single stroke. A deliberate genocide leaving possible survivors buried alive under rubble, unrescued. A merciless holocaust sparing no one, no man, no woman, no child.

But death is a reality that barely touches him. Maisara continues to live and outlive himself. He beckons me back to his Gaza. And I follow. I keep scrolling, desperately, further up through the years. 2016, 2017, 2018. I see a brilliant, exemplary medical student at the Al-Azhar branch of Al-Quds University and the President of the IFMSA-Gaza (International Federation of Medical Students' Association). In every frame he's a model of impeccable poise, style, neatness, cleanliness, beauty. A perfectionist. A natural leader. Precision and finesse glinting off every image of him, organising and conducting seminars, medical camps, First Aid courses, Research Training, shaping the male and female doctors of tomorrow, inspiring them

by his own gleaming example. Israel took away their futures, Israel decimated their dreams, desecrated their ambitions. In every picture Al-Azhar is a university awash in sunshine, bustling with student activity and vibrant awareness campaigns, graduation ceremonies aglow with celebration, with dance and music, embodying the very meaning of empowerment with female medical students at the helm of all events in their large numbers. In every picture Maisara is surrounded by his professors and the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, showering their admiration upon him. A cynosure of all eyes. Always an incredible sweetness shining through. This is how legends are made. Israel targeted him. Israel targeted them. Israel tore down everything they built, a history and tradition, bombarding the glorious Al-Azhar University on November 4, extinguishing their grandeur in nuclear clouds of destruction.

The eternity of these photos is all we have left. I can't stop holding them, can't stop looking at them. The warmth and charm, the refined intellect and erudition of those smiling grey-haired men, Palestinian luminaries, distinguished academics in elegant suits and scarves. I tremble when I think of where they are now, what Israel did to them. Are they still alive? The pinnacle of Gaza's oldest institutions, the centre of Gaza's culture and excellence.

My heart doesn't belong to me anymore, my breath is no longer mine. I keep scrolling, searching, grasping for sustenance. 2019. 2020. 2021. There he is. Maisara, standing tall and proud in London, his arms held out in joy. Freedom, flight in his arms. A Chevening scholar. The pride of Gaza. A citizen of the world, free at last, who had lived his whole life within Israeli occupation's nefarious blockade. In a Facebook post of October 2019 under a photo of him at the Chevening Orientation, dressed in a suit with

his keffiyeh draped across his shoulders, Maisara writes “*This life changing experience has begun, and will never reach an end.*”

And it never will. Larger than life, he keeps bridging the distance, his immediacy getting closer. There comes a point where I long to hear his voice, to know how he spoke, what his words sounded like. And I find videos shared by his friends. Videos of them, a group of medical students from Gaza, studying with Maisara in London; I hear their voices, I hear their laughter, boys and girls, chuckling, so warm, so carefree, so playful, huddled together for dinner in cosy studio-apartments, cooking together, surprising Maisara on his birthday, whooping triumphantly over a delicious home-made meal of maqluba and knafeh. Fun and laughter that Israel silenced forever. I try to piece together their conversations, their humour, longing to be part of it. The sweet, sweet melody of their Arabic. I find myself crying uncontrollably in the way only life, not death, can make me cry. I cry with all my heart from a place of yearning. I cry from a place of nostalgia. I know that London. Maisara’s London. I know those Palestinian students, those exciting beautiful Arab students who constitute the richness, the lustre, the substance of UK universities, the intellectual wealth of international academia. They are the ones who make a city like London what it is. Without them what is left of the West?

And then I do it. I muster the courage and I reach out to Maisara’s friends. I write to them. I tell them who I am. I let my grief for their friend break forth, and I type through a blur of tears, I tell them I’m grieving with them. I tell them I feel I knew Maisara. I tell them I must write about him, that I *need* to write about him. And what shatters me the most is the way they respond – the love and warmth with which they invite me in, the way they let me call

them *my friends*, the way they help me get to know Maisara. Their greatness of heart, their immensity of spirit, despite their grief, despite their loss, despite the terrifying, agonising horror of what is happening to them in Gaza.

Bahzad Al-Akhras is a medical doctor, and Maisara's best friend. As he messages me from Gaza he tells me everything I already know, everything I already felt through Maisara's pictures – "anyone who met him [Maisara] for the first time would say *I want this person to be my friend*." Bahzad tells me about the devastating moments leading up to Maisara's martyrdom, the impossible unreality of it. It was a Sunday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, around 3pm Maisara called Bahzad to check on him and his family to make sure they were alive and safe. He tells me he remembers that call so well. The last call before Gaza went into a second connection blackout three hours later "when everyone in Gaza knew that that was a sign for massacres, for slaughters committed in the dark of night without anyone knowing anything." "Despite the fact that I myself, my family, my friends and colleagues could be possible victims, I could never imagine that it could be Maisara. I don't know why but I could never think of Maisara as a martyr. We were just speaking over the phone! He was typing in our WhatsApp group just minutes before the blackout. Maisara is young, fresh, a doctor! I thought these thoughts would protect him, would constitute a shield that would protect him from death! For moments I forgot that there is an allegedly *civilised* army that views Maisara and each one of us as "human animals" that must be slaughtered in the most inhuman ways, and that barbaric army didn't acknowledge my thoughts about Maisara as a protective shield!"

Everything Bahzad says about Maisara spills like poetry. They

are not just words of a grieving friend, they are cries of reverence, looking up to someone who “was not only a close friend but a symbol of dedication, commitment, and achievement.” Being without him is unfathomable, a loss renewed with each moment, the unreality of it incomprehensible, unacceptable. The way Bahzad describes every quality Maisara possessed, his humility, his honesty, his loyal selfless sense of affection and helpfulness, the way the ability to lead and inspire came instinctively to him, I feel I’m bearing witness to something ineffable. This life force, this magnetic centrality of his. A legend of Gaza. A tale of music.

“We had a close group of about 10 friends here in Gaza,” says Bahzad, “Maisara was the one who always organised our trips, our meet-ups, our events, our social life, he built us this routine of weekly meetings on Saturday at his favourite café in Gaza. Now, I can’t stop thinking about what our Saturdays will look like if I survive all this madness without Maisara!”

Bahzad is a Chevening scholar too. He met Maisara in 2019, when they travelled from Gaza together to pursue their MSc at the same university, King’s College London, where they lived together in the same student accommodation for a year and a half – that joyous abundance of memories eclipsed by the searing betrayal and complicity of the Chevening Scholarship program in their complete failure to condemn Maisara’s killers, their failure to *name* them, the failure of the British Foreign Office to call for an end to the accursed Zionist occupation that took Maisara’s life. “Chevening is the UK government’s scholarship for potential future leaders, for people with outstanding traits to serve their communities,” says Bahzad. Maisara was a world scholar par excellence, a leader of tomorrow in every sense of the word. The best of Gaza. “He is not just a loss for us Palestinians, the world has lost him as well.”

This ethnic cleansing, this genocide has many names: memoricide, epistemicide, eliticide. Eliticide is the targeted, systematic killing of a people's leadership, their education sector, their professional core, their talent, their genius. It strikes at the very heart and mind of a people to incapacitate them, to render them incapable of regenerating themselves, to leave them without the ones who would have led them, the ones who would have represented them to the world. It aims to destroy and tear apart an entire civilisation, to drain a people of their life force by emptying them of the best of who they are. And that's what the US and Israel targeted – Palestine's civilisation – by murdering Maisara, by murdering his sister Oraib, a dentist and a phenomenal artist, by murdering his brothers Muayad, Mohammad, and his sister Azza who had studied at the iconic Islamic University of Gaza, by bombarding the Islamic University of Gaza, destroying one of the largest, most advanced institutions in Palestine, by murdering the scientist Dr Sufian Tayeh, the President of the University, by assassinating Refaat Alareer, the incomparable poet and professor of literature at the University – just as they assassinated the great Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani in 1972.

Bahzad tells me Maisara could have stayed on in London if he had wanted to, having completed all medical exams to be registered as a doctor in the UK. But he chose to return to Gaza. In 2019, before leaving for London, Maisara had been working in Gaza as a medical doctor in the Obstetrics and Gynecology department at Al-Shifa Medical Complex. On his return to Gaza in 2021 he had begun working with Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World) as an Emergency Doctor Instructor. He was training medical staff from the Ministry of Health on Acute Trauma Life Support, and on emergency preparedness protocols. He had recently received his official internationally recognised licence as an ATLS

instructor having passed the exam in Jordan, and his work had been published in a number of high-profile journals, including the Journal of Prehospital and Disaster Medicine. “Maisara was known for his commitment towards his medical profession. He was passionate about improving healthcare for women, especially in low-income and war-affected regions.” And I go back to the treasure of images I’ve seen from 2016-2019, Maisara just a young medical student himself, coordinating Training of Trainers courses for medical students to become life-saving First Aid instructors, coordinating training sessions for laypeople to train them in first-aid skills enabling them to act in emergency situations – imparting the necessity and urgency to know how to serve the injured, how to save lives, in a place perennially endangered by Israel’s murderous military regime. Saving life is what defined him.

We have seen what it means to be a doctor in Gaza. We have seen how Israel’s genocidal forces have targeted and destroyed an entire health system. Medicine in Gaza is a profession unlike any other in any part of the world. It is a sacred commitment, a sacrament of the soul, a line of duty beyond all mortal courage, a willing knowing fearless confrontation against the darkest horror staring it in the face. “Serving his people ran in his blood,” says Bahzad. During the Great March of Return in 2018-2019, Maisara was among the first volunteers of young medics to tend to the injured, despite the fact that medical tents were being targeted and shot at by Israeli soldiers at the border. And I realise the significance behind the specialisation that Maisara chose for his MSc – Women and Children’s Health – the two most sensitive and vulnerable aspects of Palestinian life under occupation. Maisara loved children. If a picture can speak a thousand words, each word can take you in, to time-travel to experience each truth for yourself.

I see him, a young student volunteer, in 2014-2015, visiting pediatric wards, visiting children with special needs, children with deficiencies, sitting beside children with such poignant tenderness, his head bent, listening with deep attentive care, playing, lifting them up on his shoulders, bringing out the child in him to make them feel at home, opening up smiles like flowers upon their shining faces. His profession was an extension of his heart. And his heart beat with reverence for maternity. I read the words he wrote in August 2019, his awe at the miracle and bodily sublimity of childbearing, the supreme strength and sacrifice that women bear in the act of giving birth to life and preserving life even at the cost of their own mortality. Beyond a passionate dedication to improving maternal healthcare in a place where access to medical facilities and treatment was already bruised and battered by Israeli occupation, Maisara's vision was all-encompassing, he believed in the supremacy of education, the imperative importance of securing and nurturing female education and engendering a strong, capable society through self-realised women. He felt intense dismay over the practice of early marriages that inhibited young women from focusing on their studies, from working towards their futures and realising their true potential and responsibilities as complete individuals. Maisara's loss is not just a loss for Palestinians. The world is a bereft, empty place without him.

When Bahzad tells me how Maisara chose to return to Gaza I know what he means. I have read Maisara's posts, how much he missed his home while away in London, how he missed his father, how no city in the world could draw him away from the love and pride he felt for his land. *"How can I heal from my longing for Gaza?"* Maisara wrote on 19 November 2019. I look at images of him at the beach, smiling, the sea of Gaza unfurling gloriously



behind him, like a part of him. His synonymity with his homeland. That was his resistance. His extraordinary, invincible resistance that defined his martyrdom too.

In his last few messages to his friends, Maisara spoke of a repeated haunting; he was gripped by the premonition of the suddenness of an airstrike, the abruptness of death striking him and his family in the midst of food and life and laughter, he imagined himself experiencing the horror of being trapped alive under the rubble of his house. Despite it all he stayed on, he didn't evacuate, he refused to be displaced from his home, refused to leave his family's side. Now his name is inseparable from his city. Gaza the city of doctors. Maisara the prince of doctors.

But who will speak for the men of Gaza?

The lip service, the empty blood-soaked lip service paid by the West's representatives to assuage their genocidal exposure begins and ends at the women and children of Gaza. There is no vocabulary for men in their language. For the racist colonial West, the men of Gaza the men who are vilified, tortured, dehumanised for being Palestinian, are deserving of being killed, they are faceless targets meant to be eliminated, their slaughter legitimised by virtue of being male, Arab, where boys are denied their childhood. Stripped of every inch of their humanity, it is their tragedy that is the loudest, for it is only silence that speaks for them. The men who watch their homes, their schools, their hospitals, their mosques, their churches being bombed, the men who scrape through rubble with their bare hands, carrying child after child in broken tireless arms while their land burns, the men who cry, the men who bury their families and return to the call of duty immediately after, the men who harness their pain and look up to the sky and seek their strength their sole sustenance in God's name.

Against the obscene excess, the heinous monstrosity of weaponry wielded by Israel's profane brute forces, the men of Gaza stand defenceless, supreme, incandescent, stripped clean to the fire of their souls. Their existence is their resistance.

We cannot speak for the men of Gaza because there is no language to encompass who they are, no tongue that can mourn their pain, no voice sacred enough to sing and scream their praise. The men of Gaza, men more than men, who have redefined the beauty of the body, in death too, in woundedness too.

I will never let go. None of us will ever let go, as our hearts rage and rage in a language without sound. There is no closure, no acceptance, no point of finality. Grief swerves us back to life, because that is where it must breathe and burn. And so I return to Maisara's life, I listen to the rhythm of his thoughts, those typed words enshrined outside place and time, online posts, this transcendent phenomenon of our day and age, the unerasable presence of a life that lived, and lives. A person that was, and will continue to be.

12 November 2019, London: *"Could you believe that even while I am out of Gaza I literally think that the sounds of travel planes are those of F-16 fighter aircrafts! I felt the same feeling again. We are really traumatised. Gaza will always be part of our life and will always live inside us."* My heart constricts. I cry without being able to stop. The Palestinians, a people who reach the stars, and yet their skies are not their own. I cry when I think of a person like him, a citizen of the world deserving of the entirety of the world, living his whole life under the terror of airstrikes, entrapped within the concentration camp of Israel's abominable siege, without the right to travel, without the right to be free. A people assaulted by

atrocious abuses of human rights and dignity by depraved Israeli military checkpoints, by the unconscionable violation of their space by a settler apartheid system. The Palestinians, a people of purity, a people of light. An extraordinary, unadulterated people, with a primordial intensity of living. Their world order is their own, alone, against the non-existence of any notion of international law that could protect them, they look to themselves, they look up to a sky no one can see but them.

*“I am the son of Gaza, and my family is in Gaza, and I lived through three wars there, and unfortunately fate decided that I would be outside of it these days, that I would be far from my family and people, and I actually die 100 times a day from my fear and anxiety, and yet I cannot speak or comment because of my shame in front of the people of my country,”* writes Maisara when he was away in the UK in May 2021, reminding us across time that the genocide in the Gaza Strip, in the occupied West Bank, in East Jerusalem, is not a horror the world is waking up to now, it is a 75 year old living reality of Nakba. *“This is the reality of the apartheid state,”* he tells us, witnessing Israel’s 11-day military offensive on the blockaded Gaza Strip in 2021, when the brutal Israeli police stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque attacking worshippers, when Palestinians were illegally and ruthlessly dispossessed of their homes in Sheikh Jarrah by Israeli settlers, *“This is what happened during 1948, and now it is happening again and will happen again if we do not take a step to protect ourselves. Israel is the state of ethnic cleansing, racism, and brutality. #GazaUnderAttack #SaveSheikhJarrah.”*

*“I am living in Leeds, England,”* he had moved from London to Leeds during the Covid-19 lockdown, *“Apparently it is a safe city in a safe and free country. But honestly, I don’t feel safe. I have exactly the same feeling of fear, stress, and anxiety as if I were in*

*Gaza. The sounds of bombing, Israeli airstrikes, and army aircrafts are in my head. Till this moment more than 40 innocent people in Gaza have been killed by the Israeli forces including 13 children, hundreds of people fled their homes, and hundreds were injured. #GazaUnderAttack. I am physically away from all of this, but mentally I feel the pain every second. People in Gaza deserve to live peacefully and safely. #GazaUnderAttack.”*

What breaks me the most is a post he shared of people marching in solidarity with Palestine in the UK, “*Hundreds of people are now standing in solidarity with the Palestinians, in Leeds. I could have never imagined this until I witnessed it. The Palestinian cause is still alive in the hearts and minds of real humans. Stay strong, your voice is heard. #Gaza\_Under\_Attack.*”

I try to imagine how he would’ve felt today seeing millions and millions marching across the world, every country rising, holding the Palestinian flag up high – the cry for a ‘*Free Palestine*’ engulfing the world like a prayer chant. My heart splinters into irrecoverable pieces. The boy who watched that flow of solidarity, that turned into a force of nature sweeping the world, has today himself become a symbol of the Palestinian cause. Today, the same people he watched, when they march in London, it is his picture that they carry.

November 2019: “*What does it mean to live in Gaza? The fact that at every moment you could face death, for no reason, while you are trying to live exactly like any other person in the world. The occupation did not only rob our land, but is trying to deprive us of living normally and peacefully as well. We will never stop living and will never stop dreaming for a better future for us and our families.*”

In these past months we witnessed Israel’s barbaric forces target and demolish Gaza’s libraries, places of culture, art, tradition,

identity. Epistemicide, the murder of history, heritage, knowledge. And they did it before. They've always done it before. Despite the painful difficulties and challenges of basic day to day living in a place known as an open-air prison due to the unlawful, inhuman blockade imposed by Israel on this small stretch of space since 2007, Gaza stands proud and unique in the world for its education, holding one of the highest global literacy rates, shining fiercely like a diamond under the darkest circumstances. Al Amal bookstore, a bookstore that was an invaluable source of learning in a place already squeezed to bare resources by the blockade on the Gaza Strip, was hit by an Israeli airstrike in May 2021, an airstrike that destroyed the businesses and livelihoods of so many. Maisara was one among other medical students who had started a fundraiser to help rebuild the bookstore. A bastion of his community, passionately committed to building and rebuilding Gaza after every Israeli act of destruction. *"When I was a medical student, Al Amal bookstore was like my second home. My colleagues and I used to purchase our medical textbooks and print our lecture notes there. Please help by donating or sharing to restore the bookstore and allow students to continue their education by making educational resources available."*

He continues to bridge the years, his voice the voice of Gaza today, *"Childhood is the target of the Israeli army,"* he writes under images of martyred children, hundreds and hundreds of children killed mercilessly by Israeli forces in 2014, under an image of a woman holding her martyred son, *"It is the last time she can hug her son, he was killed by an Israeli missile. Our children, women, elderly are under Israeli attack. Where is the UN? Where is humanity? The world has to wake up, has to see the truth, has to stop this massacre! #Gaza\_under\_attack."* And under images of houses bombed to

ruddle, “*This picture shows a house bombed by the Israeli army and it’s one of hundreds of homes that have the same form now! Its owner may have been working all his life to build it, and in one moment it becomes nothing, without any reason, with no warning, it was bombed over its owners’ heads, maybe because its owner is a civilian living in Gaza.*” A devastating foretelling of his own destiny.

I think of Maisara living through it all – the debilitating fear, the unending anxiety, the trauma that a besieged existence brings, deprived of normalcy, deprived of the ease of joy – and I think of his smile, and I wonder how he did it, how he emerged through it all like a beacon of hope. He had just begun to embark on a married life with his wife, a Chevening scholar herself, this year.

I see a photo of him, as the student President of the IFMSA-Gaza, in a deep maroon sweater and sleek black jacket, standing in a seminar room, listening and intent, as a professor of Blood Pathophysiology and Molecular Genetics and the Dean of Medicine at Al-Azhar University address a group of students. On the wall behind Maisara, hangs a message in colourful letters: *Keep Calm and Study Medicine.*

Until the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, 05/11/23, I imagine him, a medical doctor, witnessing the brutal savagery of Israeli forces targeting and destroying Gaza’s hospitals, massacre after massacre. I try to imagine what he must have felt. I cannot bear to think of the sunlit brightness of his spirit overcast, weighed down, how someone as vital as him was already beginning to transcend himself, to give himself over to something he felt coming. His last few words to his friends: “*I say to myself we are going to die in the end, wherever we go, or how long we live. Thank God we are the oppressed and the*

*innocent in this cause. All our choices are difficult, so our times are difficult as well. At the end what supports me is my faith. Those who die find rest from all this terror, pain, and horror.”*

A phone screen that bears eternal witness to what our disbelief cannot – *Maisara AlRayyes, last seen 05/11/23.*

As I write these words, language falls like husk. Meaning slips, numbers run like water. Thousands upon thousands of Palestinians killed. Orphaned children, limbless children, children shivering with fear, pain, cold, on the blood-splattered floors of hospitals, suffering amputations without anesthesia. Ceaseless bombardment raining down agony after agony. Desecration after desecration, beyond any sanctity of life and death. Families shot point-blank, in front of each other, by Israeli snipers. 2.3 million Palestinians displaced from their homes, displaced from their lives – not by any natural disaster, but by the deliberate calibrated evil of Western powers.

Devastation, horror, trauma – Gaza is where all language goes to die.

As I write these words, as I face the death of language – all meaning wrested from its familiar, complicit place – I don't know what it is that we come back with. I don't know how to name the responsibility that we carry within ourselves, as we bear witness to this unspeakable holocaust; as we watch, feel, mourn, and plunge every waking moment of our consciousness in grief, in waiting, in standing in all our strength, in all the force of our representation, for a free Palestine.

What I do know is that we return to ourselves, knowing all barriers have been lifted. That the words in our mouths can only speak the language of prayer, that we've surrendered our bodies to

mists of blood, relinquished our flesh to the sweat of tears. And anything is possible. We could be anything. Because we know we have to be so much more. We are air and sky. We churn through an earth enriched with our remains. We are the glittering vapours of dreams exhaled from our eyes. We carry the shifting centre of the new world we search for, within ourselves. We re-enter ourselves, re-inhabit our bodies, our mortality re-infused with the suprahuman beauty, the insurmountable courage, the faith, the love, the resilience of the heroes of Gaza, the martyrs of Gaza, the legends of Gaza. Through them, we see the promise of eternity. Gaza is where our bodies go to be made again.

I write to Bahzad, my heart burning my throat, I don't know what words to shape, I don't know the form and method of articulating one's soul. But if we're broken and fragmented, let everything be broken and fragmented.

I tell Bahzad nothing matters beyond Gaza, all reality ends and begins with Gaza. I tell him the people of Gaza are our world. I try to mouth the love raging out of all of us for them. I tell him Pakistan is his home too. I tell him I can't wait to meet him one day, in his city. I thank him with all my soul, for everything that he shared with me, for his luminous courage in talking about his beloved friend. He tells me he looks forward to reading what I'm writing, "I hope I will be alive when you finish it so that I can read it." And if ever one can feel oneself disintegrate, fall apart, shred by shred, I feel it then. I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it. But my pain is insignificant. I am no one. If Palestinians don't deserve the entirety of the world, who does? If they don't get to live and sing and cherish every beating moment of this earth, how can anyone else? They, a people who are a living work of art, an archive of truth. A masterpiece of humanity.



The darkness is too immense. A vortex so deep, all vision ceases. I stand at my window again, I put my ear to the rushing silence of night, I watch the high lonely ghost of that construction site two streets ahead of me. The black hollowness that stares back. And I don't know what it is that I feel when I think of Maisara still under the rubble of his home, under the ruins of his city. I don't know what sound to give to this haunting, passing through me like air. The unforgivingness of it. How can there ever be any forgiveness? A whole family, gone, with him. The intangibility of it, the ever present presence of it. The voice that went quiet. The laughter that disappeared. Where did he go.

And then I hear his laugh again. I have to. The ineffable return, through the years. September 2020, London: "*The feeling when you load the dishwasher, turn off the gas, and see that the kitchen is clean is a very beautiful feeling, I swear*" – and I laugh with him. Student life woes, student life humour. I couldn't agree more. Cleaning my stove at the end of the day after class was a surreal feat. "*I hate working under supervision,*" he confesses with a haughty Morgan Freeman GIF saying *I'M THE BOSS*. And I laugh more. I hated writing my thesis under supervision too. And commuting by London's Underground. "*The worst experience I had in London was underground. Crowding, stopping, long time, bad smell, delays, and switching between trains. Life of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*" – and I laugh harder at his acuity of observation. And as that association connects, something splits irrevocably. Something ends, forever. London. Gone forever. London, Maisara's city. Maisara leaning against a bridge, the waters of the Thames glistening in the night, standing under the Christmas lights of Regent Street, beside the Tube of Oxford Circus, London Eye behind him. Every landmark, bearing the unfading trace of his

smile. I could never go back. SOAS. The School of Oriental and African Studies – a campus I adored. I can never walk in those halls again. The halls Maisara walked in. Where he came and spoke about his Gaza. SOAS, a community enriched by scholars like him. SOAS, a name now gilded in his memory, and charred in the betrayal of his memory.

As the brave Palestinian students of SOAS keep raising their voice, keep protesting against all odds, standing dauntless and united for a Palestine free from colonial occupation, I will never forgive my university's administrative powers for failing in their duty towards their alumni, I will never forgive them for their complicit silence, their failure to condemn and dissociate from their government for abetting Maisara's murder. I will never forgive, and I will never let them forget it. As an alumna I will never stop holding their complicity before their eyes, through whatever small strength my words might have. I will hold my shame high for being associated with a place that failed to honour everything it claimed to stand for. As an alumna *this* is what I owe them. Decolonisation is not a research module. It is my truth. In my smallness, in my insignificance, this is how I will offer myself to Gaza. I regain my faith in the power of every voice, with Maisara's reminder "*Stay strong, Your voice is heard.*"

As decolonial writers, we talk about our stories in the past. As if the worst is behind us. As if there is a centre we can aspire to, and move towards. What centre is there anymore? Where do we go, what is our present? What is left of who we are, when our future and our history is tied so inexorably with the Palestinian cause, the Palestinian principle? with the shattering magnitude of the tragedy of the men of Gaza, the women of Gaza, the boys and girls, the children of Gaza?

*“The repetition of events nullifies their effect, or is forgetting a way for us to defend our broken hearts and worried minds that have no choice but to pray and forget? But what really scares me is if we forget, as if nothing happened, how can the world not forget?”* said Maisara in February 2020, reaching out to us across time, speaking into the future, *“Is this what the Zionist entity realises? So he continues his aggression without caring? Maybe everything the occupation accomplished was because we forget.”*

But we will never forget. We can never forget.

As decolonial people, as inheritors of a 76 year old bloodied British Partition of the Indian Subcontinent, we, too, know what it is to live in a home of remembrance, a home withheld from us by borders, wars, and military occupation, sliced through by the cold wind of colonial erasure, by the lies, the falsehood, the destruction wrought by the continuing British and US colonial necropolitics of separatism, extremism, terrorism. We know what it is to look back and conjure a wholeness, a culture, a wealth of identity that was, that could've been. To live outside place and time, waiting at the point of arrival, grappling with the unlive body of what it could possibly mean to just *be*. A poetics of a besieged self, a poetics of deprivation. The poetics of Palestine.

Erasure, obliterating memory is what 75 years of savage Zionist colonisation banks on. And forgetting is what we are incapable of. It is in remembrance that we live the wholeness of who we are. It is in revisiting and replenishing our past over and over again that we create our futures, that we return to our eternity. Colonial-military empires don't have a past, don't have a history. They have nothing. All they have are stolen footprints they seek to bury through bloodied time. But the earth doesn't let them. The earth remembers, the earth resists. The earth responds only to the

dancing rhythm of indigenous limbs.

If we look to the past in order to fully live, let the world of dreams and legends be our only today. The world Maisara has passed into. Immortalised in our memory and blood. His Gaza can never cease to be. The Gaza that was, that is, that will be. Because place is porous, place shapeshifts, place is us. Palestine is all of us. And our Paradise will be regained.

If the world of faith and folklore is our only language, how can I not see *Adam Khan* in Maisara? Adam Khan, our legend of Malakand. The cynosure of all eyes, the beloved of his friends. I dedicate my retelling to him, forever. The boy with laughing eyes and a smile that could light up the whole world, whose physical beauty, whose personal bravery has become the lore and legend of his land. A boy whose life was love and song. Maisara loved his indigenous music, contemporary Palestinian music, the clear rippling stream of the *oud*, so similar to our *rabab*. Maisara of Gaza. Whose glorious existence will forever be the power of his resistance.

I think of the Saturdays at his favourite café that Bahzad told me about. I look at their pictures together. Friends lounging together at the beach, all jeans and charming smiles, long legs crossed across a stone bench, paper cups by their side, a luminous mosque behind them, against the pure white clouds of a cerulean sky, the sea of Gaza washing up close to join them for a selfie. The boys of an eternal summer.

*December 2023, Lahore*

Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





*Maisara and Bahzad*



*Maisara*



Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



**Voices From Gaza:** *Maisara at SOAS, University of London*





*at SOAS, University of London*

*Maisara's family. Together in this world, together gone from this world*



*Maisara with his father Azmi AlRayyes and his brothers Mohammad (L) and Muayad (R)*



*Maisara (R) and Muayad (L)*

## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*Brothers*



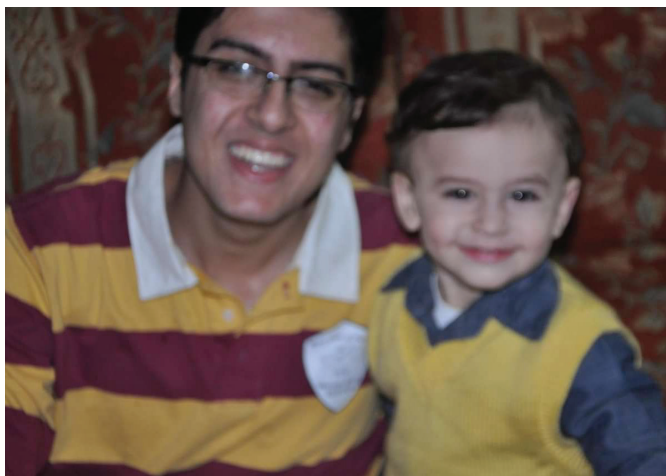
*Maisara with his beloved nephew Kareem*







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*with his mother, his sister Azza, Muayad, and his nephews Adam and Kareem*



*Maisara's sister Oraib (L), his brother Muayad, his parents, and his sister Azza*

## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*Maisara's niece Sham, and his nephews Adam and Kareem*





*Father and son*



## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





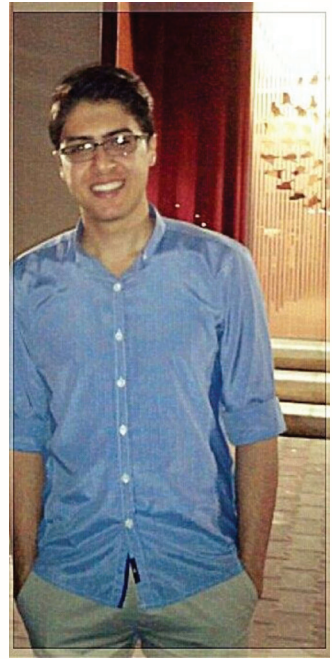
*a young medical student in Gaza*











*The boys of Gaza*





Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?









*at Al-Azhar University, as the President of the IFMSA-Gaza*



## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?









## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







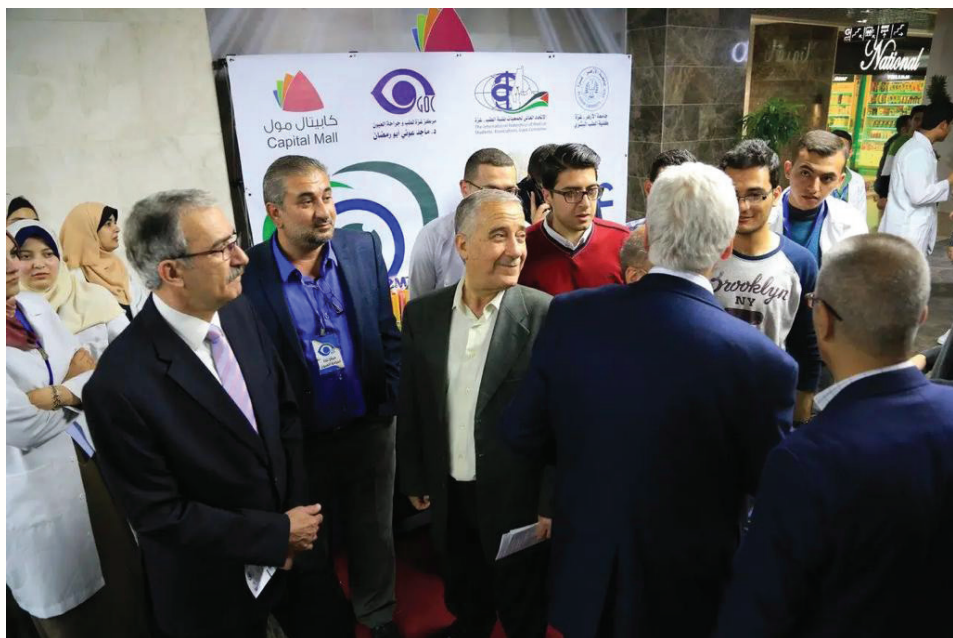
## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?









## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*with Bahzad.  
Postgrads in London*





## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*in Gaza*







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







*Maisara at Médecins du Monde in Gaza*

## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*Fun at the Great King's Run*





## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?









*Maisara (R) and Bahzad (L) at SOAS, University of London*





*at SOAS, University of London*













## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*Maisara conducting First Aid courses in Gaza*





Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?

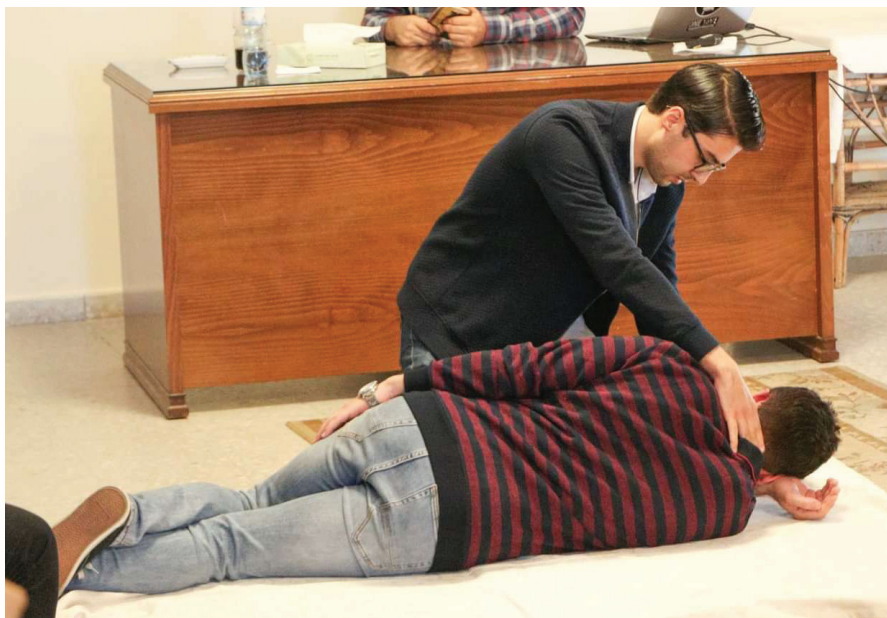






## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







*Proudly presenting a keffiyeh to a Norwegian medical instructor and researcher*



## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





*A young medical student extraordinaire*

## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?

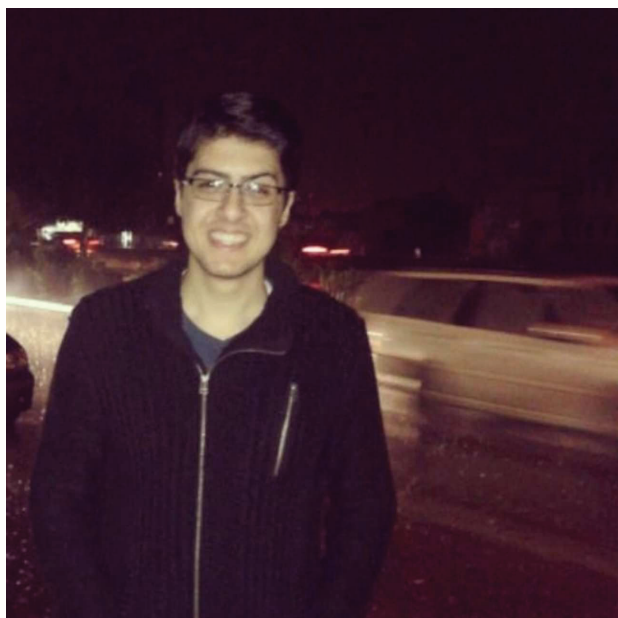






Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







*an exemplary student President of the IFMSA-Gaza*



Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







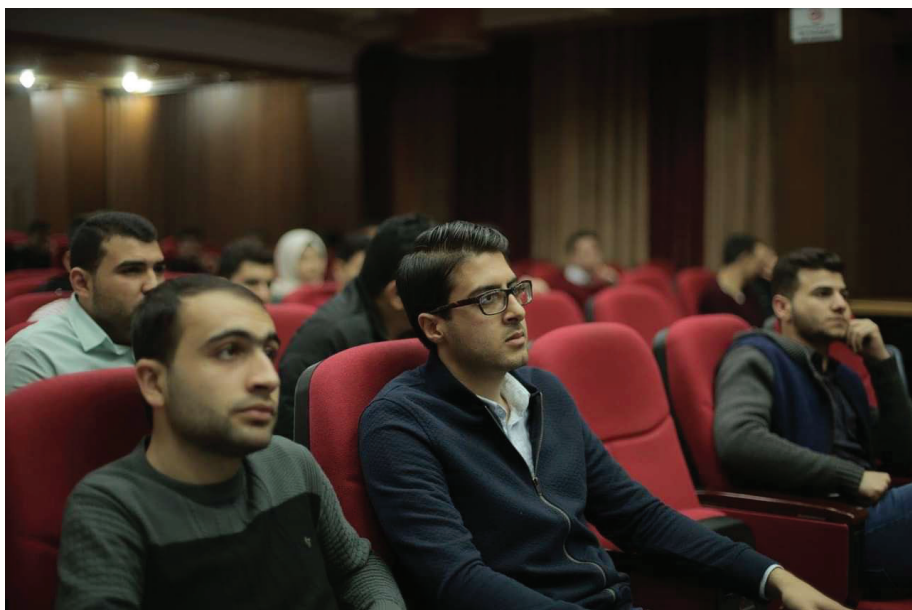
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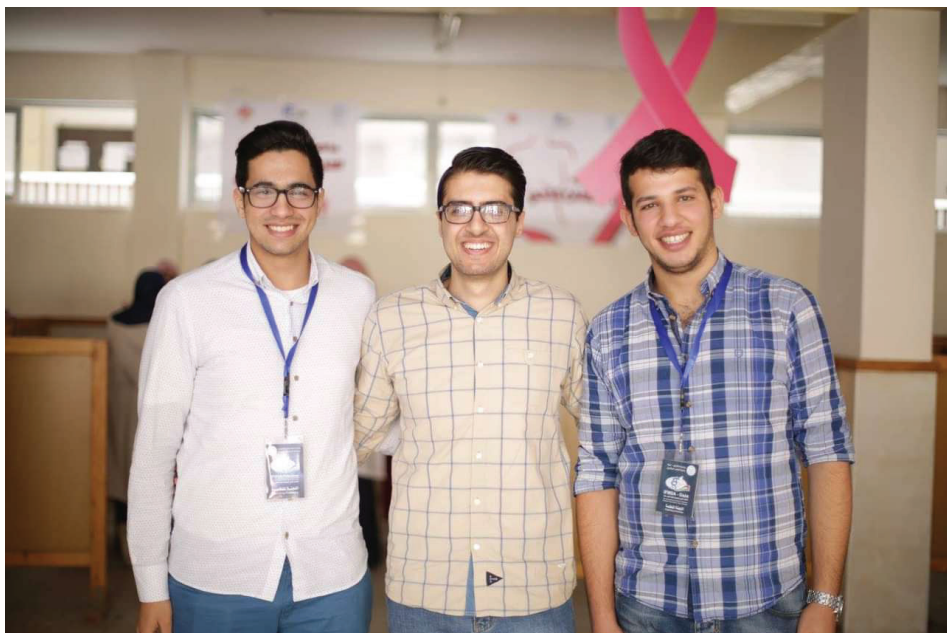
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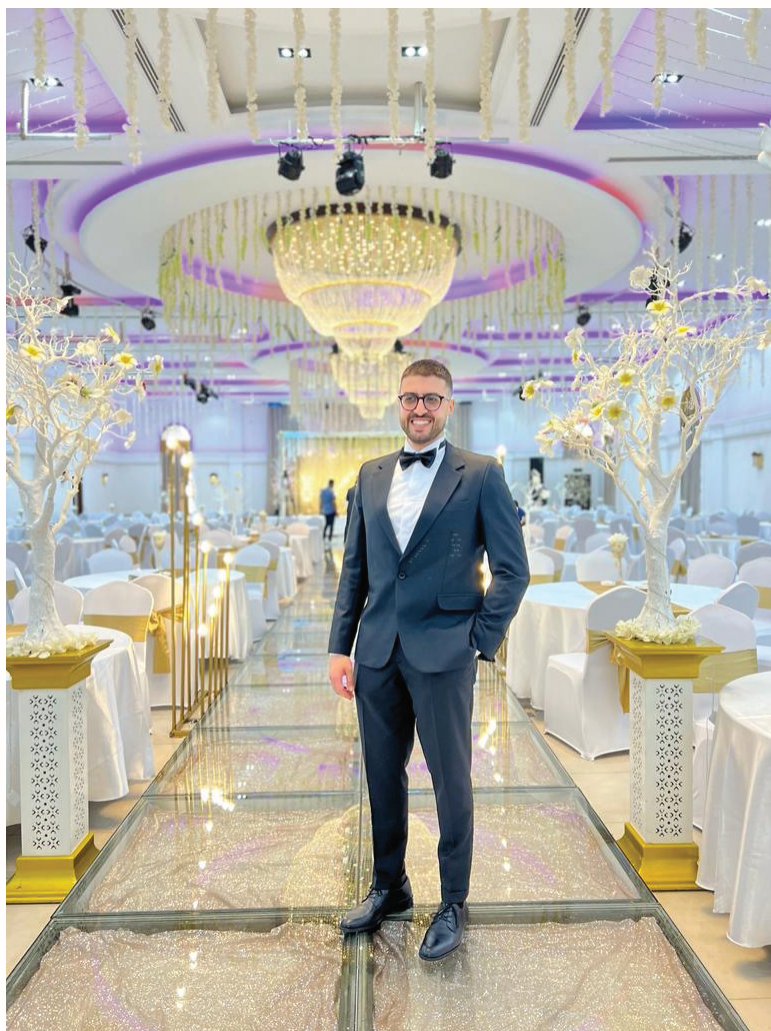


*at Médecins du Monde*









*Maisara on his wedding day*



*with his wife Laura Alhayek*









*Maisara with his father and his brothers Muayad and Mohammad*



*with his parents*



*with Muayad*



*with his father*





*with his mother, Muayad, and his nephew Kareem and niece Sham*



*with his nephews Kareem and Adam*



*Maisara (L) with his father, and Muayad (R)*

Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*"This life changing experience has begun, and will never reach an end" – Maisara*





## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





*with the Cheveners*



*at SOAS, University of London*



Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?







Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





*Maisara's London*









## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?





*The men of Gaza*







*Maisara's Giza*

Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*The boys of an eternal summer*





## Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



*“How can I heal from my longing for Gaza?” – Maisara*





Collecting this splendid archive of photos that bear witness to the continuity of Maisara's life, his glorious life, and preserve the truth, the beauty, the pulse of Gaza, would not have been possible without Bahzad's efforts and generosity. My infinite gratitude to Bahzad for his unparalleled devotion to his best friend, for showing me what love and friendship really mean, struggling resiliently against the most difficult circumstances to recover the photos he lost in these past months, sending them to me every day, luminously committed to making each memory come alive again.

Remembrance is our greatest assertion of existence.

Words fail me as I thank him for connecting me with Maisara's only surviving family member, his sister Fatma El Rayyes, who lives outside Gaza. Words will fail me when I try to describe Fatma's magnanimity and extraordinary sweetness, her strength and endurance in the face of the most inconceivable loss. The way she shared her beloved photos of her beloved family for this book.

My love, my respect, my reverence know no bounds.

Free Palestine.



Who Will Speak For the Men of Gaza?



