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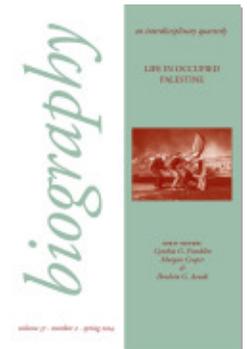
## Locked Out

Lina Hesham AlSharif

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## LOCKED OUT

LINA HESHAM ALSHARIF

A very long, a very hot summer is approaching Qatar, where I currently live. Some forced hibernation is awaiting me, since the heat is unforgiving. Yet summer is the time people look forward to the most, because, unlike me, they are going home to be with their families and friends.

When my friends ask me “Why are you staying behind? Why don’t you go home?,” my mind starts whirling, for how am I going to explain how I am being stripped of the very basic, the very ordinary, the very human right to be reunited with my family in Gaza-Palestine.

I could start by explaining that Gaza has two passages assigned for traveling. One is controlled by Israel and the other is controlled by Egypt. Jawed between the occupying power, Israel, which has been laying a very strict siege upon Gaza for more than seven years, and the unstable Egypt, which has been isolating Gaza ever since it reverted to military rule, Gaza is locked.

Israel lets very few people out of Gaza, and even fewer people in. The Rafah crossing, which is controlled by Egypt, has always been Gaza’s only outlet to the world. The crossing had its good days, when Egypt was under Morsi’s rule. But since the Egyptian military took over and started cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood at home, they have viewed Gaza, which is ruled by Hamas, as an extension of the banned group. As a result, the military government headed by General Sisi is suffocating Gaza by destroying the tunnels, and by constantly closing the Rafah crossing, Gaza’s only passage to the world. And when Egypt does open the crossing, it’s for a few hours, for two or three days. The trip is mired with humiliation, danger, and uncertainty.

So how can one, with a child, go home, when all these thrones are engulfing it?

I’ve been locked out for two years now. Ever since I left Gaza in 2011 with my husband to come to live in Qatar, I have not had the chance to pay home a single visit.

There's nothing worse than the feeling of bitterness that results from such forced exile. It's the bitterness of being a daughter, a sister, and a friend on Skype and Facebook. It's the bitterness of missing good moments with family. It's the bitterness of not being there when needed. It's the bitterness of not being there when you want to. It's the bitterness of sorely missing your loved ones so dear that you look for all sorts of options just to meet for even a week. Worst of all, it's the bitterness that all this is happening just because I am a Palestinian from Gaza.

When I was pregnant, I fancied giving birth in Gaza. But that wasn't possible. After I gave birth, I fancied throwing my daughter's first birthday party in Gaza. That wasn't possible either. I fancied taking her to the sea, to play in the sand with her grandparents.

For five years, Gaza was subjected to brutal Israeli attacks that left more than two thousand Palestinians killed. The most recent attack was operation "Protective Edge." This war left enormous physical, psychological, and economic damage. Though it ended with the signing of a ceasefire agreement, after fifty-one deadly days, the situation of the Gaza siege remains intact. There was hope among Palestinians in Gaza that their sacrifices would eventually mean that the siege would be ended once and for all. But yet again Israel, colluding with Egypt and the Palestinian Authority, refuse to give Palestinians in Gaza their freedom to move in and out of Gaza.

Gaza now isn't only a scene of apocalyptic destruction, it's also a scene of a human tragedy, as survivors have to deal with thousands of wounded, displaced, and traumatized, with no way in or out of the Strip.

My family, fortunately, survived. During this war, I had serious fears that after I hung up, that would have been the last call with them or the last time I see them on Skype.

With this cycle of wars on Gaza, followed by inaction to end the siege, I wonder when I am going to see my family again. I wonder where I am going to see them. Visiting Gaza with a toddler is a risky mission, and my family visiting me would involve a long journey of waiting for crossings to open and visas to be issued.

I am locked out, and the people of Gaza are locked in. And we are both waiting, desperately waiting, for the day where we can just be together at home. Till then, one only has the secret whispers of prayers that this all ends. There's nothing worse than the bitterness of being considered a lesser human. That's what occupation does. It's what Israel does, and what we have endured, whether we're in Palestine or in exile.