

INTERVIEW

Maintaining the Social Fabric: Mutual Aid in Gaza

An Interview with Hadeel Assali

Interview by Lucy Garbett

Abstract

Since November 2023, Hadeel Assali and a small group of family and friends (and a huge community of supporters) have been running the Gaza Mutual Aid Solidarity project to provide support to those enduring the effects of ongoing genocide. The collective has raised over \$750,000 for projects to provide clean water, food, tents, clothing, and cash to families. It has also purchased clay pots and ovens, and a vehicle for members of the project team in Gaza, repaired a sewer system, installed a new water line, and funded medical workers and civil defense crews. In this interview by Lucy Garbett at the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Assali highlights the importance of initiatives by the Palestinian community in response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

Keywords:

Gaza; mutual aid; Palestinian community; humanitarianism; fundraising; solidarity.

Countless fundraising appeals have been launched by international organizations and international non-governmental organizations for the “humanitarian crisis” in Gaza and millions have been successfully raised. These initiatives come at the same time as Israel’s criminalization of UNRWA and curtailment of its operations in the West Bank and Gaza, and UNRWA’s loss of donor funding as a consequence – symbolizing the replacement of Palestinian refugee status by an even more depoliticized status. Framing Palestinians as humanitarian recipients

in a humanitarian crisis instead of refugees of the 1948 Nakba and survivors of genocide, are just some of the ways humanitarian governance works. This idea is not new of course, as the literature has long pointed to how aid dependency is often structured by security logics and counterinsurgency aims.¹ Implementing anti-terrorism clauses as part of funder contracts, first used by the U.S. and then also adopted by the EU, upholds and maintains a security regime that criminalizes Palestinians. Civil society organizations then participate in surveillance through these counter-terrorism clauses, which authors such as Lisa Bhungalia have framed as the “aid-war dynamic.”

While pictures of destruction and death in Gaza, the “live streamed genocide,” continue to dominate minds and social media feeds, part of this story too is how Palestinians remain, reassemble, and resist. The Gaza Mutual Aid Solidarity project is one example from a long list of similar community projects that have emerged. In this interview with the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Hadeel Assali highlights the importance of initiatives by the Palestinian community in response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. We discuss how this initiative developed, some of the obstacles in getting funds into Gaza, and the benefits of this style of mutual aid at this particular time.

Hadeel Assali is a Palestinian who grew up in the United States, yet for her first twenty-two years she held the status of a stateless refugee before finally being granted U.S. citizenship. She is currently an anthropologist researcher and lecturer at Columbia University, and her work focuses on colonialism. Since November 2023, she and a small group of family and friends (and a huge community of supporters) have been running the Gaza Mutual Aid Solidarity project to provide support to those enduring the effects of genocide. They have provided clean water, food, tents, clothing, and cash to families. They have also provided clay pots and ovens, purchased a vehicle for members of their team in Gaza, repaired a sewer system, installed a new water



Figure 1. Abu Shukri poses with the new logo of the project, printed in Gaza. He is in the new pottery “studio” of the displaced Atallah family, in a tent in al-Jura displacement camp, al-Zawayda (middle area), 28 October 2024. Photo by Shukri Alayan.

line and funded medical workers and civil defense crews. The collective has raised over \$750,000 to support the various projects.

The work of this mutual aid project is a direct form of emergency response and a testament to the strength of Palestinian community ties and international solidarity. It also demonstrates a different set of priorities and rationales: for example, from using indigenous clay from the ground of Gaza – known for its purifying qualities – to make water holders, to creating an economic ecosystem based on subsistence and dignity that strengthens social relations amid all the destruction. The capacity for love and generosity as seen in the stories Hadeel Assali shared with us here illustrate that, despite all attempts against it, hope remains alive and is actively nourished by the labor of people committed to affirming life.

Considering the difficulty Palestinians have expressed around writing and finding the words during this time of genocide, and Hadeel's responsibilities of supporting family members in Gaza every day, we decided to conduct the conversation using a series of WhatsApp voice notes, which were then transcribed and edited by Hadeel and the editors of *JQ*.



Figure 2. Amina Awad with the body of her son Muhammad Ahmad Awad, killed by a sniper on 21 January 2024. Amina found Muhammad's body in a mass grave at Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis, 25 April 2024. Photo by Abdullah Awad – Muhammad's son and Amina's grandson.

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Lucy Garbett: Hadeel, thank you for making the time to speak to us about this important initiative, despite such difficult circumstances. Over the past year Palestinians have been saying over and over that there are no words to describe the genocidal circumstances being faced by the Palestinian people and everyone in Gaza. At the same time, I think it is important we find the ways and the words to document not just the atrocities but also community initiatives that support life, reconstruction, and dignity, and the ability to remain. Could you talk us through how your Gaza Mutual Aid Solidarity project first started?

Hadeel Assali: The project started through my mother's family – the matrilineal line. They live mostly in Maghazi refugee camp [middle area] and other areas of the southern Gaza Strip. One of my dearest great aunts, her name is Amina, lives in Khan Yunis. She is a corpse washer and someone long committed to community service. At the beginning of the current genocide, I was checking in with her every so often and asking if there was anything I could do or if I could send her some funds. At the time, she told me they were fine, but that there were families from the north displaced

around them whose conditions were very difficult. So I sent her some money, and she started distributing small amounts of cash to them and carefully documenting it. Soon after, she herself was displaced to Mawasi in Khan Yunis, but she and her family continued mutual aid work in their camp until today.

Another very close relative, Muhammad Alyan, who goes by Abu Shukri, is a kind of jack-of-all-trades and a well-connected project and construction manager. When we started in November 2023, he was still in his home in Rafah and decided that they should run a *tikkiya* (soup kitchen) to cook for all the displaced people around them. He also immediately started distributing water and found people to make clay ovens for purchase and distributed them. He used to live in the Brazil neighborhood of Rafah, but was eventually displaced to Maghazi camp.

I initially launched an online fundraising page on GoFundMe with a modest goal of \$10,000, which was very rapidly met. I increased it to \$25,000, and eventually expanded to other platforms and grew our team. That is how it all began, sending funds between my aunt in Khan Yunis, and Abu Shukri in Rafah. We ended up sending a lot more to Abu Shukri because he had more capacity as a former construction manager. He has four sons and several relatives working with him whom he has put to work. We also have two teams in the north in Gaza City. One is also a relative, Husam, and one is a very knowledgeable journalist named Abd al-Ghani al-Shami who we met by chance through family friends. All of them have been doing incredible work under the most unimaginable conditions.

On the U.S. side, the team quickly grew to include my mother Nahida Saker – who became the backbone of the effort – my sister Amanda Assali, our close family friend Nora Ashour, and recently Layla Feghali joined our small team. We also grew a very committed and consistent network of supporters who became friends. Of course, this is all unpaid labor on our part. As exhausted as I have been, I am awed by the rest of our crew – both here and in Gaza. This is not pretty or prestigious work, and it comes with so many challenges. So why do it? We reflected on it as a group and realized how quickly it has made us go back and connect with the local community to organize and get things done. These spaces of solidarity and all the new relations that have been forged helped all of us feel less isolated and gave us the push to carry on.

LG: Millions have been raised for humanitarian projects in Gaza, but Gazans have also critiqued this funding due to inflated overhead costs of large organizations that leaves much less funds reaching the people on the ground and with the speed that is needed. Mutual aid disbursed through these kinship and community networks, while of course with their critiques and issues, circumvent this and mean much more reaches people on the ground and in ways these large organizations simply cannot cover. Could you give us a sense of what sorts of initiatives Gaza Mutual Aid Solidarity has managed to do?

HA: We have had to stay very flexible and not insist on what funds are used for due to the rapidly changing conditions – and the simple fact that we are not there on the ground to dictate to them. They know their immediate needs best, and sometimes there are more longer-term needs. The more immediate needs include food and water

distribution, a soup kitchen, clothes, tents, medicine, and occasional cash assistance to underpaid or unpaid civil defense crews and to families in need.

We funded local tailors to make over three hundred pairs of trousers, since what is available in the markets have exorbitant prices. Other times we tried to do more long-term infrastructure work, such as installing and repairing water wells and solar powered pumps in the north of Gaza city and in other middle areas. We funded the repair of a raw sewage system in the Saftawi area of Gaza City. We contributed to the conversion of a diesel plant to use plastic waste as fuel, we funded the repairs and fuel for a desalination plant in Rafah, and later we funded solar power panels to power refrigerators in the summer months. We distributed ovens for cooking, and we are supporting displaced potters from the north to help expand their operations so that they can make more of the wares and containers people need for daily life.

LG: This is all very inspiring and important, especially the creative ways people have been forced to develop to sustain themselves through such devastation. In Palestine the term *faz'a* is used sometimes to describe a community response to a particular need – be it collecting clothing, mattresses, cash distribution, or other needs. Countless families and other Palestinians are trying to find ways to send funds – cash to print books or other needs. We have seen so many of these types of initiatives set up through social media and online fundraising platforms.

I spoke to an elderly Greek-Palestinian woman in her nineties in Jerusalem just last week. Her family were made refugees in 1948 when they were forced out of their home in the Greek Colony in the western part of Jerusalem. They were living in cramped conditions in Church properties in the Old City and her mother decided to set up a soup kitchen. She got the supplies from the Red Cross and ran it twice a day for the refugee families as a refugee herself. It made me think of all the soup kitchens and food distributions being run all over Gaza and how throughout the long history of catastrophes Palestinians have faced there has always been a community response from both inside and outside of Palestine of Palestinians insisting to live, support one another, re-build and resist. Just in our last issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly* 99 on Food and Foodways we had a piece by Hani al-Madhoun on the Gaza Soup Kitchen run by his brother Mahmud al-Madhoun and in the period of publication his brother was targeted and assassinated by the Israeli army. The targeting of doctors, professors, community workers, and the entire fabric of society is a brutal demonstration of the unprecedented nature of this genocide.

Could you tell us more about the food distribution and soup kitchen activities that you have all been doing?

HA: As for food distribution, that can happen in a few ways. The first is a *tikkiya* – the distribution of cooked food. In Rafah, Abu Shukri organized a *tikkiya* for several months and hired people to cook. At one point he had it going in multiple locations in Rafah and sometimes he would take the big pots to displacement camps around them to distribute there. He had one just beneath his house for a long time. Giant pots are typically used for weddings and other big gatherings, so they were available and put to use. He has since been displaced to Maghazi camp, and now he hired a young baker to help bake

and distribute bread, and he is starting a new *tikkiya*. In the north, we also sponsored food distribution several times, but there we have smaller capacity. Similarly, my aunt in the Mawasi area in Khan Yunis does smaller food distributions with her kids in the displacement camp they are in called al-Hurriya camp – often canned goods, *zayt* and *za'tar*, and occasional cooked foods like *sumaqiyya* (a spiced stew of greens and sumac).

This table might give an idea of the matching funds required for certain projects:

Project	Matching funds
Solar powered pumps and water well repair in the Saftawi neighborhood north of Gaza City to serve one thousand people	\$15,000
Sponsor food distribution in the north	\$100,000
Cash distribution to over two hundred families	\$200,000
Daily bread and ten thousand liters of water distribution	\$120,000
Diesel plant conversion	\$3,000
Repair and fuel for desalination plant in Rafah	\$3,500
Three hundred clay ovens made and distributed	\$18,000
Soup kitchen daily in Rafah for nearly three months	\$30,000
Solar energy panels for refrigeration of water and chicken	\$6,000
More than one hundred tents	\$70,000
Fuel costs for approximately 150 family evacuations from Rafah	\$30,000
Five wheelchairs for amputees	\$1,500
Medical treatment and prosthesis for about thirty bombing victims	\$4,500
Medicine for several patients	\$1,000
Support for orphaned children	\$1,000
Clothes: three hundred pairs of jeans and sweatpants made by local tailors	\$3,000
Food distribution: ten kilograms of vegetables and two kilograms of chicken for approximately one hundred displaced families	\$20,000
Eid celebrations	\$2,000
Eid money distribution for children	\$5,000
School support (meals and supplies) in Mawasi Khan Yunis	\$10,000
Small cash stipends for unpaid and poorly paid civil defense crews, clinic workers, and mortuary workers in north and central Gaza	\$10,000
Installation of water well and pump in northern Gaza	\$8,000
Repair of raw sewage system in northern Gaza	\$5,000
Equipment for displaced potters (and pottery distributions)	\$25,000

LG: You have also launched a specific campaign around pottery and clay. Could you say more about this?

HA: At the beginning of the genocide, fuel supplies were cut by Israel. In order to cook, many turned to clay ovens. In Gaza, clay is plentiful and naturally occurring in the soils, and there is a very long history of pottery – at least since the time of the Canaanites. It is an ancient custom and potters are famous for it in the Gaza Strip. In fact my own father’s extended family were potters in Gaza City in *Harit al-Fawakhir* but their place of work was bombed. However, we discovered that the Atallah family – one of the largest potter families who have been making traditional ceramics for many generations – was displaced to the middle area and started making pottery there, especially traditional vessels that people needed after being displaced and leaving so much behind.

We launched a campaign to distribute traditional vessels that are everyday necessities for displaced families and to keep a cultural craft alive in defiance of Israel’s relentless effort to destroy everything Palestine represents. Distributions include the *zibdaya* (a mortar and cooking vessel that is vital to the local cuisine), *qalan mai* (a jug to keep water cool), and *qidra* (a cooking vessel for spiced rice).

Potters in Gaza City used to be equipped with extruders for processing the clay, powered wheels for throwing vessels, and gas kilns for firing them. After their displacement, they set up a makeshift studio in a tent and built a wood-fire kiln out of mud. They were able to find local deposits of mineral-rich clay, which fires into russet earthenware. Potters globally joined together in a collective called “Potters for Palestine,” and helped us raise over \$20,000 to support the potters and the distribution of wares. With those funds, we were able to also buy for them an extruder and solar panels for power. We have done several distributions of *zibdiyas*, and now we are hoping to try and have them make clay water filters since clay has the ability to clean some toxins from water (and soil). I am also hoping that when it comes time to rebuild, we will encourage the use of local clay rather than concrete,



Figure 3. Makeshift kiln created by the Atallah family in their displacement camp in al-Zawayda area, 3 October 2024. Photo by Abu Shukri.

which is environmentally very destructive.

LG: There are so many inspiring posts on your Instagram account that highlight the real innovation and resilience of Gazans to find ways to continue. One that stood out was Abu Shukri's water tank being hit by a tank missile which also injured his son Rami and patching it up the next day using fiberglass. Do you have any other anecdotes you want to share since starting this initiative?

HA: One is a story of love in the time of genocide.

Before they were displaced from Rafah, Abu Shukri and his wife Nisreen were housing one hundred and twenty displaced people. During those difficult days, [their son] Shukri fell in love with one of the young women staying in their home. Now they are proud to announce that they are engaged to be married.

Abu Shukri has adopted two boys whose parents were martyred and is helping care for three other children who are orphaned. One of the boys will soon be coming to the United States for a prosthetic leg. Also the potter, Ja'far Atallah was recently married and asked Abu Shukri to stand with him.

We are seeing new relations forged all over the place through this mutual aid work. I think this is important to highlight as Israel's hope is to sever all of these relations. Of course, this is working through their genocidal acts, but it turns out we are more rhizomatic – connecting with roots and shoots and without hierarchy – than they ever imagined.

LG: So many people in Gaza have become a target for what they do, most recently we saw this with Mahmoud al-Madhoun, the chef at the heart of the Gaza Soup Kitchen who was assassinated by Israeli forces. We have seen doctors, nurses, lecturers, anyone who is forming the basic fabric of society assassinated since the start of the genocide – how does everyone you work with manage this risk?

HA: We try to tell people on the ground to be careful, that maybe they have done enough and they are putting themselves at risk. They respond that they cannot just sit at home doing nothing. They are witnessing so many people who are in much worse situations than

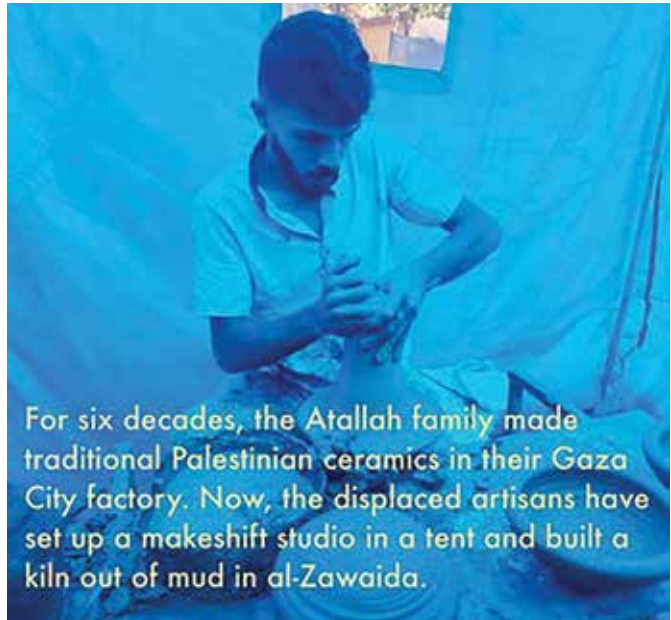


Figure 4. Image and text created by Potters for Palestine for their fundraising push, featuring Ja'far Atallah; online at givebutter.com/pots4pal (accessed 15 January 2025).

they are experiencing, and so this work gives them a very strong sense of purpose. It also enables them to meet so many people they might normally not have known and to forge new relations. Initially, because we were so afraid they would be targeted, we would cover their faces before posting to Instagram. However, now they have taken over the Instagram account and are posting openly about their work. I think they know the areas to avoid, but also they know that no place and no one is entirely safe. I naively thought that Mahmoud al-Madhoun and the Gaza Soup Kitchen crew would be safe because of all the media coverage of their work, but sadly even that did not protect him.

LG: Could you talk us through that process of raising funds among the Palestinian community in the United States and especially some of the obstacles with raising and sending funds?

HA: There were many obstacles and challenges in getting the money in. There has been a lot of fear regarding sending international money transfers because of the history of criminalization of this in the past. One such example is the Holy Land five.² The United States State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations includes every single Palestinian faction with the exception of the non-military wing of Fatah. There was fear that as Arabs or as Muslims we would be seen as we could be accused of sending material aid or material support to those groups. I think that's why a lot of people prefer to go the non-profit route because they seem to think that it offers some level of protection rather than sending families the funds directly.

At the beginning Western Union would work sometimes and we would have to search to find the best rates. Eventually it became evident that lots of people were sending money to their families in Palestine. Countless families here in the U.S. were sending thousands and thousands to their relatives to pay the evacuation fees [to Egypt] or just to survive the exorbitant prices in Gaza right now. I noticed that it was mainly older Palestinian women like my mother and her cousins who were transferring the money through to their kinship networks. While the risk was there, this generation of women said, "Let the FBI come to my house. I'm sending money to my family." So while not everyone is willing to do it, my mother, my sister, a couple of friends are doing money transfers directly to accounts with Bank of Palestine and everyone has decided this is a risk we are willing to take.

The issue has always been liquidity, not just the transfers. In the north of Gaza for example liquidity takes at least a 20 percent cut (lately we have been hearing even higher percentages). In the middle area it is less than the north but still a significant amount, which is something we can't quite get around. Except, for example, Abu Shukri can do bulk orders directly from traders and pay them electronically to avoid dealing with the liquidity issue. We are also facing obstacles of extreme inflation. Many in Gaza are blaming the traders, the *tujar*, and accusing them of raising prices to take advantage of the situation. There are many awful stories that we are hearing. But we are not there on the ground and we can't control these things, so we just try to keep going as we are and do what we can.

LG: As you have said, the Palestinian community in exile and outside of Palestine play

such an important role in raising and sending these funds. This is nothing new, certainly in the first intifada there was a similar initiative from the Palestinian community in the United States to “sponsor” families inside Palestine with their running costs. But I also don’t want to lose sight of the internationalist part and you have raised many funds outside the Palestinian community. Can you tell me a little more about the fundraisers that have been taking place beyond kinship networks?

HA: The very first fundraiser that someone did for us was a dumpling artist in Mexico City. The breadth and creativity of the fundraisers has been surprising and very uplifting – it really helped keep us going both financially and emotionally. There was a supper club in London, a music party in Korea, book auctions, tattoo raffles, ultramarathon runners, all to raise funds.

Shakira’s niece is an artist and made prints to raise funds for us. She is just one of the many artists and artisans who have made prints, paintings, quilts, pottery, jewelry, naturally dyed clothing, candles, beaded charms, and furniture. There has been real creativity with food: a Salvadoran friend had a “Pupusas for Palestine” fundraiser; she, her mother and her aunt cooked their tails off in San Antonio. There were many fundraising dinners that I wish I could have attended; there is an Indian chef in Marseille who sold a special Chai blend, bartenders in Brooklyn who donated their tips, a confectioner in Oakland who made special chocolates. There were also film screenings and other cultural gatherings that donated proceeds to us (and other mutual aid efforts). Another moving example was a group of Asian artists who held a water ceremony to honor the murdered children in Gaza.³

The creativity and care is beyond what we imagined and way too much to list here. I personally have learned so much from them. They have affirmed for us that we must be doing something right if the work is being buoyed by all these people who find the most creative ways they can to sustain life in the face of genocidal annihilation.

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Endnotes

1 See Lisa Bhungalia, *Elastic Empire: Refashioning War through Aid in Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).

2 Several months after 9/11, the U.S. government froze the assets of the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, the largest Islamic charity in the U.S., and charged leaders with providing material support that benefited Hamas, a proscribed organization, based

on humanitarian aid funds that HLF sent to zakat charitable committees in the West Bank and Gaza. Five men were sentenced to 15 to 65 years in prison. For information on the legal case and concerns, see online at charityandsecurity.org/litigation/holy-land-foundation/ (accessed 23 January 2025).

3 See @tamate.uta, “mizuko kuyo means water child memorial service,” 4 April 2024, online at www.instagram.com/p/C5XVniMLtqz/?img_index=1 (accessed 15 January 2025).