Open Gaza: architecture of hope

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Both the publisher and the collection of authors in this book promise a progressive and critical perspective, and a progressive and critical perspective they deliver. As we learn from editors Michael Sorkin and Deen Sharp, the book involves ‘authors from inside the space of conflict and from outside’ to provide urban and architectural critiques and alternative perspectives regarding one of the most devastated geographies in the world, the Gaza Strip (p. 13). Therefore, as the title indicates, the book is not merely an analysis of the crisis of Gaza but a perspective of hope for a better future for the over 1.8 million people in 360 square kilometres under siege by Israel.

It is not possible to speak of Gaza without taking into account the Israeli blockade, which has been in place since 2001 and was intensified after the 2006 Palestinian elections. However, the book shows that Israel’s project to isolate Gaza goes back to the 1950s, when the whole Strip and its inhabitants were reduced to a population of ‘fedayeen’ who must be fought and contained (p. 20). Hence, merely referring critically to Gaza as a prison is by itself a simplistic conceptualisation of the reality. Accordingly, the book sheds light on two aspects: the Israeli blockade which turned Gaza into a test centre for projects of domination, and the ideology of the blockade which is communicated and sold internationally. It is within the function of the latter that Gaza came to be on the front line of the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis, proposed by Orientalist academic Bernard Lewis and political scientist and Harvard professor Samuel Huntington in the 1990s, and the subsequent ‘war on terror’ declared by President George W. Bush in 2001. By criminalising the population of Gaza, this ideology is carefully designed to justify all Israeli policies toward this population, including multiple attacks on the Strip, and to maintain its isolation.

The book is well-supported in linking Gaza’s underdevelopment to the Israeli blockade and the other policies. Parallel to the complexity of the Israeli siege against Gaza, resistance in Gaza is also complex and sophisticated. This is where the chapter authors take their readers on a journey into Gaza’s unique conditions. The chapter ‘Architecture of the Everyday’ by Salem Al Qudwa sheds light on the nature of architecture and construction in Gaza, or the way in which the blockade has changed the whole notion of place and detached it from the way people in Gaza used to build their housing. Multiple elements, such as the destructive Israeli assaults on Gaza, widespread poverty, the dependence of the Strip on the outside world for construction materials, etc. have resulted in kinds of housing – often uncompleted – which barely meet the minimum needs of the residents.

The book’s arguments are abundantly supported by photos and visual documents. This is the case with the chapter ‘Ring City: A Metropolis – Not an Enclave’ by Michael Sorkin, et al., which presents an architectural study on and for Gaza. This study is also a plan which is not a mere hypothetical and optimistic proposal in urban development, but comes from urbanists who seek the application of their plan beyond political borders. By challenging existing planning, such as that offered by the UN-related International Society of City and Regional Planners, as artificial and disconnected from the needs of Gaza’s inhabitants, the scheme seeks to centralise indigenous voices and needs in its offering. In ‘normal circumstances’, as the authors state, the plan is to centralise Gaza in an ‘urban ring’ which connects it to Egypt, the Israeli-controlled sea border, the rest of Palestine and even the Israeli settlements (p. 46). To enable this, the study depicts the possibility of generating green energy, reviving agricultural activities, modernising transportation and housing and generally constructing the elements necessary for a sustainable urban society.
The centrality of Gaza among surrounding areas is not a mere idealistic point. Rather, as the book documents, such centrality is a historical fact. Archaeological findings presented in the chapter entitled ‘Timeless Gaza’ unpack the nature of the trade, including the spice trade, between Gaza and Petra, located in current Jordan. Recent documents such as the British colonial maps, specifically one from 1880 on which the chapter relies for its analysis, acknowledge the same fact about the reliance of surrounding areas and towns on Gaza which operated as a core for trade and cultural interactions. Hence, the Israeli blockade is intended to detach Gaza from its historical functioning and purpose; opening Gaza is intended to benefit a larger population than its own inhabitants and to help the entire region flourish. It contrasts with the Israeli occupation, which is only beneficial to the Israeli colonial settlers and this at the expense of an entire nation and of a large district such as Gaza and its surrounding areas as far as Egyptian Sinai, all of which face a systematically constructed change of demography.

The book is successful in presenting the reality of Gaza beyond many mainstream representations on this subject. The complexity of resistance in Gaza can also be absorbed through its existing architecture. Accordingly, an architectural landmark such as the Qattan Centre for Children is used as an example which brings together both Palestinian heritage and modernity in its design. The story of designing and building this landmark and the challenges which faced the Palestinian builders from the beginning to the end, and its current functioning despite multiple attacks on Gaza, can be no less than a story of resistance and hope. Another aspect that reveals the humanistic side of Gaza beyond its demonised presentation in the mainstream media is the story of the tunnels.

The mainstream presentation of the tunnels in Gaza is that these exist for smuggling weapons and cash for the ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ – a phrase often deployed to mean terrorists – of Hamas who rule Gaza. Gaza itself is reduced and abstracted to mean nothing but Hamas. Yet, the author of the chapter entitled ‘Four Tunnels’, writing under the nom-de-plume Bint al-Sirhid, has herself travelled through such tunnels more than once. Those who pass through these tunnels from or to the Egyptian side are individuals who were not allowed to enter Gaza to meet their relatives and loved ones. Entering Gaza through the official Egyptian border is almost impossible for every Palestinian who is not issued an ID card by Israel. Apart from humans, what is smuggled through these four tunnels is gas canisters, construction materials, merchandise and other goods which are necessary for everyday life. The tunnels, therefore, although used as means of smuggling weaponry, cannot be reduced to mere means of terrorism, but a logical response to the Israeli blockade and they a means of survival in Gaza.

In terms of a critical and theoretical standpoint, the book significantly relies on Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism and other post-colonial perspectives. This also constitutes the closing discussion of Open Gaza which scrutinises Western discourse in relation to constructing a hyperreality for Gaza. Accordingly, regardless of what Gaza is or might be, the whole question of Gaza is a question of Palestine and the crisis in Gaza could not exist in the first place if there was no occupation of Palestine. The dominant Western discourse depicts Gaza as not worthy of attention unless there is a need to respond either to Hamas or to the humanitarian crisis which results from responding to Hamas. This parallels Israeli policies toward Gaza, effected from the Israeli position and feeding into the Israeli blockade of the Strip.

The author of this chapter, Hadeel Assali, sees these structural conditions and the two elements which are at the heart of Western discourse on Gaza as particularly problematic when there are no adequate studies to challenge such hyper-presentation (p. 327). To put it differently, the current near-absence of serious Palestinian historicisation to view Gaza as part of the Palestinian question is taking place amidst Zionist scholarship’s domination over Palestine’s history. This is where the whole concept of ‘Gaza Strip’ must lose its meaning as a carefully constructed identity for Gaza. The term ‘Strip’ has become identical to Gaza only since the Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1948. Hence, before 1948 Gaza was part of Palestine and it is still currently part of the Palestinian question, not a geographical Strip. After a series of discussions on disconnecting Gaza from its history and different violent developments that led to the reduction of Gaza to being equivalent to Hamas
and ‘humanitarianism’, Assali (p. 330) urges the immediate need for scholarship that reflects the Palestinian side of the story on Gaza. Such scholarship would indeed be complementary to existing Palestinian-led studies on Gaza (such as Helga Tawil-Souri and Dina Matar’s edited volume *Gaza as Metaphor*) which reflect organic perspectives in this regard.

Elaborating on Edward Said’s view that Gaza is a core part of Palestine, the book ends by suggesting that Gaza must not be viewed as a separate and detached issue but must be seen as being at the heart of the Palestinian question. In relation to scholarship, this can be done through historicising studies on Gaza and ethnography via establishing relationships and meaningful engagements with residents of Gaza.

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