

How long?

by Lesley Dawson

My shift starts in ten minutes and for the first time since this all madness began, I find that I can't get myself going. Maybe it has to do with the fact that I can't cope with the sight of another lovely child buried beneath the rubble of their bombed apartment block. It may also be that yesterday it was my turn to take the survivors to Nasser Hospital, which seems to be the only functional hospital in the whole Gaza Strip.

What I saw there made me glad that I am not a father. I was fine until the one surviving doctor escorted me into the children's ward and I saw row after row of kids with missing arms and legs and others who were more bandages than human flesh. The smell was overpowering but the near silence was uncanny. My stomach turned and for the first time in my life I wanted to vomit.

What really disturbed me was a phone call from my elder brother in Michigan. Now you might ask how I possessed a phone that was working and charged. Part of our paramedic equipment is a mobile phone so I can phone in when I need additional help with rescuing families from collapsed buildings.

In a moment of madness, I gave the number to my brother but asked him to use it sparingly. As the eldest son in the family, he has taken his responsibilities seriously and now regularly pleads with me to leave while I can, piling on the agony by quoting my mother's bad heart and her concern for me. I try to tell him that leaving is impossible. There is now no way out without special permission. He goes on and on about who he knows in the UN and how easy it would be to get me out. I am reminded of a saying that my professor in English at the Islamic University taught me "You can choose your friends, but you can't pick your family."

I must admit to being very tempted until being faced with the gratitude of a mother when I find her three months old baby still alive under concrete blocks and miscellaneous household goods. She kisses my hand repeatedly saying "Shukran jazilan" (a thousand thanks) then dashing off to take her son to the hospital. I stifle my response telling her not to waste her time. Even if there are healthcare personnel still at the hospital, they have no anesthetics and no medicines.

I dress myself in my stab vest with its distinctive red crescent logo on the front. My boots are now worn and cracked and most often wet and smelly. My helmet is dented and scratched having closely avoided Israeli shells and bullets.

I no longer pull myself up to my full height of 6 foot 2 inches. Those whose head pokes above the parapets are wonderful targets for snipers, so those of us who are tall creep around on bent knees, with bent backs. How my mother would hate to see me like this. Her tall handsome youngest son was always her great delight. However, safety is more important than pride these days. I have seen too many colleagues shot.

Clearing my mind and forgetting my own thoughts I look around at the other men getting ready around me. Some are even younger than me, fourteen-year-olds who would have been in school if the schools were still standing and the teachers alive. Some old men who should have been cossetted by their sons, daughters, and grandchildren, drinking coffee and smoking nargela sitting on the balcony, but whose balconies were no more.

They all had that look that I was beginning to see everywhere. At first, we had all been keen to defeat the Israelis and protect our people but as each week and month had gone by and no help had come, we began to despair. Of course we couldn't show it. That would be bad for morale we were told. We had to keep everyone else's spirits up. We could not give up, we had to demonstrate Palestinian "sumud", the tenacity to keep going despite everything. The attribute that had inspired us since the British gave away our land.

Somehow, we kept going to the end of the shift and gladly returned to the barracks where we were lodged. "Alhamdullilah" (Thank God) it was over for another day. How much longer could we keep going? We were all running on empty. As I managed eventually to drift off to some level of sleep I wished for clean sheets, a hot shower, and a plateful of my mother's wonderful maqluba.