

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

THE PAIN OF TRAVELLING WHILE PALESTINIAN

This year, I learned the difference between a traveller and a refugee.

By Mosab Abu Toha

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Illustration by Matt Rota



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The first time I travelled outside of Gaza, I was twenty-seven years old.

Growing up, I had always thought of “travel” as riding a taxi, bus, or bike within the borders of the Gaza Strip. My family lived not far from Railway Street, but there were no trains there. I had heard stories about the Gaza International Airport, but Israel had bombed it when I was eight. I remember asking my childhood friend Izzat, a soccer fan, about the places he wanted to visit one day. “Barcelona,” he told me. “I want to play alongside Messi, Xavi, and Iniesta.” In 2014, a few days after Izzat graduated from college, he was killed in an Israeli air strike. Our freedom of movement was just another victim of the occupation.

The first place I tried to visit was Boston. I needed a U.S. visa, but was not allowed to travel forty miles to the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, or to drive four hours through Israel to the U.S. Embassy in Amman, Jordan. Instead, my brother-in-law drove me to the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, in southern Gaza, so I could fly to Jordan for my visa interview. I remember standing in the travel hall in Rafah, surrounded by the young, the old, and the sick, and thinking that my suitcase, like me, had never been on a real journey before. When my plane took off from Cairo International Airport, I had the feeling that my legs were shrinking below me.

At the U.S. Embassy in Jordan, an officer handed me a list of personal information that I would need to provide: home addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses, the names of my siblings and children. My fifteen-year travel history was blank. I did not know how long the decision would take—only that I could not go back to Gaza while I was waiting. After forty days of limbo,

living in a rented apartment in Amman, I finally got the visa. In the years that followed, I was lucky to go on many trips.

Since October 7th, it has been difficult to exit Gaza at all. My immediate family was able to leave in November because my youngest son, Mostafa, has a U.S. passport. On our way to Egypt, however, Israeli soldiers separated me from my family, beat me, and interrogated me. In December, my mother applied to travel to Qatar with my twenty-year-old sister, Afnan, who needed medical care for a rare genetic disorder. They were not approved until late March. Afnan, who has the vocabulary of a four-year-old, could barely understand the broken Arabic of Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint. My mother nearly fainted during a four-kilometre walk in the sun. In Gaza, this is what travel means now.

In June, I took another trip. My family was relocating from Egypt to Syracuse, New York, and we planned to visit my mother and sister in Doha on the way there. We were excited. In the two-hour van ride to the airport, I took photos, and Yazzan, my eight-year-old son, looked out the window and asked questions. In Doha, my mother and sister greeted us at the entrance to their building. I laughed when I looked in their fridge, which was stocked with fresh foods that were impossible to find in wartime Gaza. “Look what you have!” I told my mother. “Mango, cherry, cucumber, cheese, and more.”

She looked guilty, not happy. “I wish I stayed with your father and your siblings and their kids,” she told me. She had waited months to come to Doha, only to wonder if she never should have left. She said that Afnan was so afraid of going home that she was refusing to leave the apartment for days on end.

We stayed for a week. Then, on the morning of June 18th, we woke up early and collected our suitcases. My mother stood in silence, avoiding our eyes. I promised her that we would meet soon in Gaza, but both of us knew that we

might be away from home for a long time.

On our way to the airport, the sun shone gracefully above the Persian Gulf. I felt proud that we had made it this far. We were sitting and waiting for our flight when a young man, who was tapping something into his phone, looked up at me and spoke in Arabic. “Are you Mosab? Mosab Abu Toha?”

I pretended not to know the name, but my kids gave me away. “Yes, this is Mosab!” my daughter Yaffa said. “He is kidding.”

The man smiled. I smiled at the kids, then at him. “How do you know me?”

“I know your story. Is it not you who was detained by the Israeli Army?”

“Yes. In fact, I was kidnapped, not detained.”

The young man was Palestinian, like us. He studied at M.I.T. but had recently helped his family evacuate Gaza and resettle in Qatar. I was amazed that two Gazans could meet by accident, like two fish finding each other in an ocean. That is the nature of the diaspora: Palestinians who might once have met in Gaza now bump into one another in airports.

When my family landed in Boston, for a layover, Mostafa jumped on one of our carry-on suitcases and asked me to pull him along. This was becoming his favorite kind of travel. In line for immigration, he started to sneak under the stanchions, laughing, his little face triumphant. Then it was our turn to step up to a booth. I handed over our passports and visas to a woman in a uniform.

When I saw the woman’s reaction, I started to wonder whether something was wrong. She spoke into a radio. Then a muscular young man with a metal badge, who had a Taser, a pistol, and handcuffs on his vest, escorted us to a waiting area. After my experience with Israeli soldiers, I was nervous, but I didn’t want my family to notice. “We need to go to our new house,” Yazzan said

impatiently. Finally, a young customs officer came over to talk to me.

I was surprised by the officer's kindness. He seemed concerned about whether my family in Gaza was safe and had enough food. When he was done asking questions, he gave our passports back and even offered to help us with our suitcases. I was starting to relax, and I texted a few friends. "All good," I wrote to them. "Collecting our bags."

Before we could board our connecting flight, we had to pass through security again. My boarding pass seemed to trigger another alert. The officer reached for a radio and said, "Supervisor!"

The supervisor appeared behind the officer and looked at the screen. They chatted in a low voice before eyeing me. It turned out that a string of four letters had been printed on my ticket: "SSSS," for Secondary Security Screening Selection. "Your wife and kids can proceed," the supervisor said. "I will have to ask you to follow me."

This time, I was told to pass through a metal detector and then a millimetre-wave scanner. Neither seemed to find anything. A T.S.A. employee asked if he could pat me down. I said yes. The employee ran his fingers around my collar and down my chest. Bystanders seemed to avert their eyes. I scanned the crowd and spotted my wife, Maram, in the distance, seeming to look for me. I wanted to shout to her, to reassure her, but I feared that would only make things worse. Then, with the back of his hand, the officer touched my private parts and my bottom. I knew that this sometimes happened to travellers. But for a moment, I felt as upset as I had been in Israeli custody.

While the officer swabbed my palms for explosives, Yaffa finally spotted me and tried to beckon me over. "I will join you when Uncle is done," I said in Arabic, acting like the T.S.A. agent was a relative so she would not be scared. Finally, the supervisor left to photocopy my passport. When he came back, he said we

were done.

“Before I go, I have to tell you something,” I replied. He listened.

“I was kidnapped by the Israeli Army in November, before being stripped of my clothes,” I told him. “Today, you come and separate me from my wife and kids, just like the Army did a few months ago.”

He nodded, looking embarrassed. I asked him whether he would do the same to travellers from Israel. I thought about how Israeli settlers, who live on Palestinian land in violation of international law, can travel to the U.S. without a visa. “This is random selection,” he told me. “It’s not meant for you.”

I fought back tears. My children could see me. “For me, it’s not random,” I said. “I travelled to the U.S. three times before. Nothing like this happened to me.” He gave me a business card for complaints to the T.S.A.

I carried my shoes, watch, and travel documents over to where my family was sitting. We ate some lunch. On the final leg of our flight, the kids quickly fell asleep. In Syracuse, five old friends picked us up and loaded our ten suitcases into their three cars. Their warmth, the smell of the trees outside, the hot meal that was waiting at our new home, pushed my exhaustion and frustration away.

I could not have guessed that my next trip would be much worse. Around noon on July 1st, a friend took me back to the Syracuse airport. I was flying to a book festival in Sarajevo by way of Washington, D.C., and Frankfurt. I was unable to access my boarding pass from my phone, so I tried a self-service kiosk, which told me that my travel document required verification. “Please alert the nearest United representative,” the kiosk said.

The United representative at the check-in counter stared at her screen for so long that a colleague came over to help. Then, struggling to pronounce the

name of my destination, she asked, “Where is Sarajevo?”

“It’s the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

Another moment of silence. I asked if there was a problem.

“We think you can’t transit in Germany,” one of them said. I was surprised. I had flown through Germany several times in the past.

The first woman pointed to my passport number. “They only allow numbers that start with four, eight, and nine,” she said. “Yours begins with a six.”

They found me a new route via Washington, D.C., and Athens. I wasn’t happy—the trip would be longer than before—but I didn’t think I had a choice. I accepted my new boarding passes and walked to security.

The T.S.A. agent who scanned my ticket looked me over, then called his supervisor. My ticket said “SSSS” again. A young man read me the secondary-screening rules—two pages of tiny print—very quickly.

My bags went through the scanner. I went through the metal detector and millimetre-wave machine. An officer asked me whether I had been patted down before. “Unfortunately,” I said. I knew what to do. He ran his hands over every part of my body, and I thought again of Israeli soldiers. Finally, I was allowed to rejoin the other travellers.

I found my gate and pulled out my phone. When I looked up the rules for travel through Germany, I realized that the United representatives had made a mistake. They had been looking at a list of prohibited I.D.-card numbers, not passport numbers. The number on my I.D. card started with an eight; I was allowed to travel through Germany. But now it was too late. I needed to board or I would miss my flight.

When we landed in D.C., I called United. An agent told me that I was still booked on a Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt. “Are you sure?” I said. The boarding pass in my hand said Athens. For a moment, I felt relieved. It was 5:20 P.M. and my flight to Frankfurt was at six.

At the gate, the Lufthansa staff had trouble printing my “new” boarding pass. They, too, called a manager, and I rushed through my story. I was now so frustrated that I was thinking about cancelling the entire trip. Then the manager told me, “You need to go and re-check in, I’m afraid.” She pointed to my new boarding pass. It said “SSSS.”

Shocked, I told her that I had been screened just three hours before. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You cannot board the plane without this.” It was now 5:33 P.M.

The directions to the T.S.A. checkpoint were complicated, so a kind female staff member ran there with me as my backpack bounced on my back like a door knocker. A T.S.A. supervisor confirmed that I would have to be screened again, and the officer who searched my bag appeared to touch every item in my luggage—tea bags, pens, a notebook, a comb. She put her hand into each of my socks, as though searching for something to justify the “SSSS” on my ticket. About five T.S.A. employees stood around as I was patted down, watching me realize that my trip was already ruined.

After seventeen minutes, the supervisor stamped my boarding pass four times in red. When I told him that I had been treated unfairly, he told me about an online portal where I could complain. By the time I returned to the gate, it was 6:30 P.M. The plane was gone.

United gave me a convoluted new itinerary with a total of five legs: Syracuse to Washington, Washington to Munich, Munich to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to Zagreb, and Zagreb to Sarajevo. My next flight would not take off

until after midnight, and I struggled to stay awake. I thought about giving up and flying back to Syracuse—a day of travel, wasted. But I reminded myself of the readers I would meet in Bosnia, of the excitement of signing my book of poems in Bosnian.

Two hours before the flight, I requested my boarding pass at the Lufthansa gate. Again, the staff could not print it and called a manager. When he arrived about an hour later, he asked me whether I had a Schengen visa for travel in the European Union.

“Why do I need a Schengen visa? I’m not staying in a country that needs one.”

“You need a Schengen visa because you cannot transit in more than one Schengen country.”

I could not believe this was happening. The airline had given me an itinerary that I was barred from following. “You have to find a solution for this,” I said. I was twelve hours into my trip and I had not even left the United States. The manager seemed kind, but after making some calls he concluded that I would not be allowed to board. “Maybe you should try finding a flight where you don’t have to transit in the Schengen area,” he said.

When I called United and demanded a new flight, the woman on the other end of the line told me, “We can get you a trip to Sarajevo, but I cannot get you a stay in a hotel.” She connected me with her supervisor. “It’s your job to know whether I can take a flight or not,” I told him.

I stayed on the phone for eighty-six minutes, until 1:55 A.M. I was tethered to an outlet so that my phone would not run out of charge. The only flight that could get me to the festival in time, the manager finally said, was leaving for Vienna in more than fifteen hours. The airline would not book me a hotel.

I was lucky that my new gate was near an airport chapel. I went inside and found a pile of prayer rugs in a closet. The room was empty, so I arranged them into a makeshift pillow and blanket, lay down, and slept on and off for more than twelve hours. Before walking to the gate, I made up for all the prayers that I had missed.

On July 3rd at 2 p.m., I landed in Sarajevo. Forty-four hours had passed since I had arrived at the airport in Syracuse.

Sarajevo reminded me of Gaza. I saw bullet holes in the walls of some buildings and craters in several streets. I thought back to 2014, when Israeli forces had bombed my neighbor's house and my family had patched holes in our home. I thought of the day last year when Israeli strikes reduced our home to rubble.

In my four days in Sarajevo, I met many writers and artists. One of them invited me to an upcoming festival there, which several Gazan photographers and artists were expected to attend. At first I said that I would be glad to come. Then I thought about the airports and the screenings and the days away from my family, and I changed my mind. When I wrote to the editor of my forthcoming book about how difficult the trip had been, he told me, "For your book tour, maybe we should arrange events in cities near you so you don't have to enter airports." I had hoped that travel would make my world seem larger, but I felt like it had clipped my wings.

To my amazement, the return journey went smoothly. There was no "SSSS" on my tickets. When I checked in at the Sarajevo airport, an agent took a few minutes to confirm with a colleague that I could board, then waved me through. I made it to Syracuse as scheduled, feeling like I had got away with something. A friend picked me up at the airport. Later, I looked up an online ranking of passports from around the world. Israeli passports, which allow for

visa-free travel to a hundred and seventy destinations, were ranked eighteenth in the world. Passports from the Palestinian Territories, which allow for visa-free travel to just forty destinations, were near the bottom of the list.

In the weeks after my trip, I tried to understand what had happened to me. My friend Hasan, a U.S. citizen who spent most of his life in Gaza, told me that he is regularly stopped at airports and asked intrusive questions—for example, what he is doing in his own country of citizenship, or whether he is carrying a weapon. I also called three experts on the surveillance of travellers.

Shezza Abboushi Dallal, an attorney at an organization that works to hold law enforcement accountable, housed at the City University of New York, told me that the U.S. government maintains a watch list, which includes travellers, that it calls the Terrorist Screening Dataset. The most famous part of the database is the no-fly list. “But there is also the selectee list,” she said. People on this list are often pulled out of line for secondary screenings, as I was.

I learned from Faiza Patel, the senior director of the Liberty and National Security Program at the Brennan Center for Justice, that even experts don’t know how many watch lists there are, or how people are added to them. A person can also experience secondary screenings without being on any list. Some passengers are flagged because of where they’re going, or because they have a one-way ticket.

I kept wondering whether I was on a list because I come from Gaza, or because the Israeli government had wrongly labelled me a threat. Dallal said that many Palestinians have reported problems at U.S. airports since October 7th. “There’s a lot of intelligence sharing between Israel and the United States,” Patel told me. But we had no way of knowing whether that had played a role in my case. Saher Selod, the author of “Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror,” connected my experience to the Bush era,

when the screening database was expanded. She also mentioned another policy from that time, the now-defunct National Security Entry-Exit System, in which people from twenty-four Muslim-majority countries (and North Korea) were made to register for fingerprinting, photographing, and interviews. “If you’re wondering if being Palestinian is part of this . . . absolutely,” she said.

I kept checking the Web site where the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the T.S.A., reviews complaints. For ten weeks, my case was “in progress.” Then *The New Yorker* sent the T.S.A. questions about my experience. Two and a half hours later, I received a “Final Determination Letter” from the D.H.S. It said, in part, that some airport screenings are random, and that the agency “can neither confirm nor deny any information about you which may be within federal watchlists.” The letter referenced “systems which contain information from Federal, state, local and foreign sources” that can sometimes lead to the misidentification of travellers. It also said that the agency has “made any corrections to records that our inquiries determined were necessary, including, as appropriate, notations that may assist in avoiding incidents of misidentification.”

In response to questions from *The New Yorker*, a spokesperson for the Israeli Army said, “We do not comment on information shared between Israel and its strategic partners.” The T.S.A. shared background information about secondary screenings and said, “TSA works closely with the intelligence and law enforcement communities to share information.” It declined to comment on my experience at the airport.

On a Friday in August, I was at home in Syracuse when the doorbell rang. The kids were playing outside, and I heard a male voice ask them, “Is your father home?” Maram and I found two men at the door. For a moment, I thought they worked for the school district where we were trying to enroll the kids. Then I saw that one of them was wearing a badge and a pistol. “Hi. We’re

from the F.B.I.”

One of the agents told me that he had heard about my experience with the T.S.A. at Logan Airport. He asked if I had a few minutes to talk about it. They remained standing while I sat on the couch; one took notes on a tiny pad. I told them about my airport experiences. Then they started to ask about a wide variety of other topics—how we felt about the neighborhood, what we had done in Egypt and Qatar, what our lives were like in Gaza. Then they asked me about my “interaction” with the Israeli Army.

I told them that I had already described my experience in this magazine and on CNN, but they wanted me to talk about it. I was starting to explain how I was blindfolded and handcuffed when I realized that Yazzan was sitting next to me. I did not want him to experience my pain again, so I sent him upstairs before I continued. I explained that, since October 7th, I had lost thirty-one members of my extended family in a single air strike, an Israeli sniper had killed one of Maram’s uncles outside a school shelter, and Maram and I had each lost a grandparent to illnesses that were exacerbated by conditions in Gaza. Many of our relatives now live in tents. I got the feeling that they had not really come to ask me about my experience in the airport.

After nearly an hour, one of the agents asked me if I had any questions or concerns, or if I wanted to tell them anything. He sent me a text message and invited me to reach out. Before they left, I asked for help with my T.S.A. complaint, or with removing my name from any watch list I might be on. They said that they couldn’t help with other government agencies. They gave me a nameless business card for the local F.B.I. office and left.

Maram came downstairs with Yazzan. We ate lunch together, but I was unable to enjoy it. She told me that when I had sent Yazzan upstairs, he had asked her, “Are they going to take Daddy?” When *The New Yorker* asked the F.B.I. about

my experience, a spokesperson declined to comment on where the agents had got my name or why they had visited me.

A couple of years ago, I wrote on Facebook that I was in Cairo for a visa interview, and my friend Ahmad saw my post. “I’m in Egypt, too,” he messaged me. We spent a few serendipitous days together. Ahmad is a foodie, and one afternoon, we met for lunch in a restaurant that overlooked the Nile. Another day, we travelled together to the Red Sea—two Palestinians, exploring a place that was usually out of reach.

Earlier this year, I wrote to Ahmad in Gaza. “You just came into my mind yesterday,” I told him in Arabic. “Do you remember our time together in Suez the summer before last? How are you doing?”

“I’m just doing some travelling, like you,” he joked, wryly. “But I’m doing it from one school shelter to another.” He had recently been in Rafah, where more than a million displaced Palestinians had taken refuge, and had tried to raise the money needed to leave Gaza with his family. Then Israeli forces had invaded Rafah, shuttering the border and displacing many families again. As of late August, Ahmad was living in a tent with his wife and three kids, in the Mawasi neighborhood of Khan Younis—the fifth place where they have stayed in the past year.

Ahmad begins each day at 6:30 A.M. “You cannot have a moment of sleep after that, because of the flies in the tent,” he told me. He lines up to buy bread while his wife prepares breakfast, usually from canned food. “To make tea, I have to find someone who has lit a fire,” Ahmad said. Then he spends about an hour and a half waiting to fill buckets of water. In photographs, he looks much thinner than he does in my memory.

Ahmad always dreamed of taking his wife and kids on a trip to Egypt, and beyond—to ride with them on trains, to try restaurants and cafés, to take

pictures of new places. Now he dreams of adopting some other nationality, so he can escape in times like this. He is a refugee, not a traveller. “I’ve lost hope that we will return to our previous life,” he told me. “I feel like we will remain refugees forever.” ♦

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