

Out of Hours Books

Night in Gaza Mads Gilbert

Skyscraper Publications, 2015, PB, 190pp,
£16.00, 978-0993153365



FROM THE FRONT LINE

Modern warfare has become increasingly impersonal, with high-tech weaponry that can be dispatched from great distance by pressing a button, but the consequences for casualties and health professionals are as dramatic and as devastating as ever, if not more so.

Mads Gilbert is a Norwegian professor of emergency medicine who, in each of the last four Israeli military attacks on Gaza, has worked in Al-Shifa Hospital, the principal emergency receiving hospital in the Gaza Strip.

In this book of 21 short essays, he documents his 15 days at Al-Shifa in July 2014, with a mixture of narrative, clinical experiences, pen portraits, over 120 photographs, and data from official reports. It is an insider's tale, providing perspectives not covered by Western journalists in their helmets and flak jackets.

When the hospital received casualties from an overnight attack on Shuja'iyya, a district on the eastern edge of Gaza City, the Israeli Defence Forces told all foreign journalists to stay at their hotel, which they did. Gilbert provides 20 pages of text and photographs from that night and the following day. During the conflict, viewers of Al Jazeera saw a lot more than viewers of the BBC.

Over 55 days, 1492 Palestinian civilians were killed, including 299 women and 551 children, of whom 88% were at home, 21% sitting with their families, 28% were asleep, 10% were eating, and 8% were watching TV or playing computer games.¹ On the Israeli side, there were six civilian deaths (including one child and one migrant worker). The focus of this book, however, is on the wounded (11 231 Palestinians,

including 3374 children, 2088 women, and 410 older people, compared with 255 Israeli civilians) and, especially, the 850 Palestinian men, women, boys, girls, and babies who required major surgery at Al-Shifa.

Many of the pictures are harrowing. Most people remember the news story of four boys killed while playing football on Gaza beach. It is a shock to see their corpses lying side by side on stretchers. Every image in the book was evaluated by senior medical staff at Al-Shifa and by the Palestinian Ministry of Health with regard to whether it was ethically justifiable to publish them and to whether patient confidentiality had been respected. For cultural reasons, there are few photographs of women, although many women were injured. The pictures show wounds, blood, operations, shock, tears, grief, and despair, but also resilience and determination. A quarter of the images show people smiling.

There are pen pictures of the medical director at Al-Shifa, an ambulance worker, an obstetrician (on average, Gaza has about 1000 births every week), an anaesthetist, and a local news cameraman. Gilbert also tracked down and interviewed two young girls, whom he treated for injuries in the attack on Gaza in 2009 and who have created new lives with disability. After the 2014 attack, up to 1000 wounded Palestinian children are expected to have a permanent disability.

The clinical teams at Al-Shifa have more experience of receiving serious casualties in high volume than any other hospital in the world. Gilbert describes not only their skills and professionalism, but also their spirit and camaraderie. I was reminded of Norman Bethune, the Canadian surgeon who worked in the Chinese army as it fought for independence:

*'Here I have found comrades who belong to the very hierarchy of humanity; they have seen cruelty, yet know gentleness; they have tasted bitterness, yet know how to smile; they have endured vast suffering, yet know patience, optimism, quiet wisdom. I have come to love them; I know they love me.'*²

The book includes a reference to Desmond Tutu's much cited remark,

'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.'

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Gilbert is on the side of the Palestinians, has no truck with their internal politics, but stands in solidarity with their work, their suffering, and their struggle.

When Mads Gilbert spoke recently in London about his experiences in Gaza, 900 tickets were sold in a day. Readers of Norway's largest tabloid newspaper *Verdens Gang* voted him Person of the Year in 2014. Celebrity furthers his purpose, drawing attention to a tale that only a front-line doctor can tell.

If, or when, there is another Israeli military attack on Gaza, Mads Gilbert will not be there, having been banned by Israel from ever entering the Gaza Strip again. He comments:

'When a pen, a camera and a stethoscope are seen as security threats, we know we are dealing with a regime that is afraid of the truth and that believes that power confers rights.'

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DOI: 10.3399/bjgp16X683257

Graham Watt is a Trustee of the UK charity Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and a member of the steering group of the Lancet Palestinian Health Alliance (LPHA).

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