

Palestinian poet Mosab Abu Toha detained and beaten by Israel Defense Forces

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Mosab Abu Toha, an acclaimed Palestinian poet, was detained last week by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which questioned and beat him before releasing him. The poet's ordeal is a distilled expression of the barbarity of the Israeli state, which is attacking not only Palestinians themselves, but also their culture.

Abu Toha was born in a refugee camp in Gaza and has lived in the enclave throughout his life. He wrote his first poems in 2014 as Israel was attacking Gaza from the air, the sea and the land. In 2019, he traveled to the United States to become a Scholar-at-Risk Fellow in Harvard University's Department of Comparative Literature. He returned to Gaza in February 2021.

Abu Toha's first collection of poetry, *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear* (2022), won an American Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award. His writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times* and the *Atlantic*, among other publications.

Like many other Palestinians, Abu Toha and his family were fleeing to southern Gaza on Monday, following the Israeli government's warnings that they would not be safe in the north. The poet, his wife and his three young children were traveling to Rafah, where they hoped to cross into Egypt.

"It is worth mentioning that the American embassy sent him and his family to travel through the Rafah crossing," the poet's brother Hamza Abu Toha wrote on Facebook. The *Guardian*, too, reported that the US embassy in Israel had told the poet that he was on a list of US citizens and their families who were allowed to enter Egypt. One of Abu Toha's children was born in the US and is an American citizen.

At a checkpoint between northern and southern Gaza, the IDF ordered Abu Toha to put down his three-year-

old son, whom he had been carrying in his arms, and put his hands up. Soldiers then arrested him and took him away with about 200 other men.

The IDF later said that Abu Toha and the others had been detained because of "intelligence indicating of a number of interactions between several civilians and terror organizations inside the Gaza Strip." Aside from being extraordinarily vague, this assertion deserves as much credence as the IDF's claim that the Al-Shifa hospital was "the main headquarters for Hamas' terrorist activity."

Diana Buttu, a Palestinian-Canadian lawyer and a close friend of Abu Toha, wrote on social media that the poet had been beaten while in Israeli custody and began receiving medical treatment after he was returned to his family. Information about his condition was not available as of this writing.

The gratuitous violence inflicted upon Abu Toha reflects the desperation of the crisis-ridden Netanyahu government, which rests on far-right parties that promote Jewish supremacism, political ignorance and social blindness. The treatment of Abu Toha also reflects the brutal, reactionary character of Zionism itself.

Zionist violence has punctuated the poet's life, but he has often created positive things in its aftermath. In August 2014, Israel bombed the Islamic University-Gaza, destroying its English department, where Abu Toha was studying. "Just a few days before that, our house was badly damaged in a separate Israeli airstrike," he told PEN America. "My small book collection was pierced by the shrapnel of an F-16 bomb. On Facebook, my friends and their friends started to offer to send books to me to rebuild my collection." As he received more and more books, Abu Toha decided to found the Edward Said Library, which

now has three branches.

After the Israeli onslaught began, the poet and his family took refuge in the Jabaliya refugee camp. In an article published October 20 in the *New Yorker*, he described what he saw on his return home to Beit Lahia. “On the main street leading to my house, I find the first of many shocking scenes. A shop where I used to take my children, to buy juice and biscuits, is in shambles. The freezer, which used to hold ice cream, is now filled with rubble. I smell explosives, and maybe flesh.”

In his interview with PEN America, Abu Toha spoke eloquently about the writer’s role. “A writer must speak on behalf of the unheard, those who cannot articulate well what they feel or see, and most importantly to me, those who lost their lives under the rubble of vicious wars. That’s part of resistance—keeping memories of oneself and others, eternalizing shared feelings in human life.”

He acknowledged various ways in which writers can respond to oppression. “Other writers may pen revolutionary poems or manifestos,” he told PEN America. “This can move people to act and lead marches and clashes with their oppressor. But we mustn’t forget that what writers also need to address are the details—the unnoticed in people’s lives, as well as the inner and recurring feelings that people have daily. Glorifying people’s resilience may well affect how far they can advance towards liberty.”

In the same interview, Abu Toha described poetry as an essential part of our humanity and our mutual connection. “Poetry is something that confirms to us that we are part of this world. All of us. No one is alien when it comes to war or suffering. When blood seeps through our flesh, the earth doesn’t mind absorbing it. It doesn’t ask for an ID; it doesn’t look for the color of skin or the language or belief of the bleeding.”



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