

**The Dream of Medical Cooperation Hardly Seems
Possible Anymore**

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Israeli Hospitals Treated Kids from the Palestinian Authority, Gaza and Arab Countries



A convoy of ambulances moves along the border fence between Israel and Gaza. January, 2023. *Photo by Getty Images*

Israeli Hospitals Regularly Treat Kids from Arab Countries.

‘Even when missiles were flying, kids from Gaza came for treatment as usual,’ says Sahir Zaid, coordinator of the Arabic-language service in the Schneider Children’s Medical Center in Petah Tikva, where he translates and coordinates between the hospital and children who come for treatment from the Palestinian Authority, Gaza and Arab countries.

An abnormal system

Oped by Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish

My affiliation with Israeli hospitals began some 20 years ago, after I read a book by Israeli researchers in the field of fertility, which was of particular interest to me. I had just returned to Gaza after completing a residency in obstetrics and gynecology in London, and working thereafter in Saudi Arabia. I got in touch with Prof. Mark Glazerman at Soroka Medical Center, Be'er Sheva, who agreed to receive female patients of mine for consultation and treatments not available in Gaza. Periodically I would bring patients in my own car, and sometimes in a small minibus that carried between 12-15 women to Soroka. I realized that cooperation with the Israeli health-care system would benefit many of the patients.

In 1994 the United Nations requested that I take charge of women's health care in Gaza. After three years of unsatisfying administrative work, I wanted to go back to practicing medicine. I learned Hebrew at an ulpan and, in 1997, I applied for a residency at Soroka. I loved every day spent at that hospital, and all of the people there. To this day, we maintain good friendships. Later on I completed a master's degree in the United States from the Harvard School of Public Health, and served in Kabul as an adviser to the Afghan health-care system. Later I returned to the Gaza Strip.

I found a poor health-care system in the Strip. Anyone who steps into a pediatric ward at Sheba Medical Center or Sourasky Medical Center will encounter a large number of Palestinian children. Many are happy to receive treatment in Israel, which has one of the best health-care systems in the world. Cooperation between the two systems exists, although not to a satisfactory degree.

This cooperation can be compared to "medical tourism," except that in places where such tourism exists, the person plans for the treatment, comes to the

hospital, and even has fun. Here, one finds an abnormal system of medical tourism, between two peoples engaged in conflict - a fact that exacerbates the patients' suffering. The convoluted bureaucracy involved in obtaining guarantees of insurance coverage, and security permits for crossing into Israel from the Gaza Strip complicates matters. Even when someone manages to get treatment in Israel, he has difficulty returning for a follow-up appointment and continued treatment, because nobody promises to grant him those permits.

Another problem is the lack of communication between the physician who sends the patient from Gaza and the physician who handles the case in Israel. Frequently the patient's condition deteriorates upon returning to Gaza, and the doctor there is not up to date regarding his treatment history.

This system has been in place for years, but no one has looked into ways of improving treatment so as to make things easier for Gazans. In a research project I have initiated, we are studying the mechanism for transferring patients, with the aim of streamlining it.

I recently received a job offer from the University of Toronto. However, the tragedy we suffered changes all our plans, and I am now incapable of thinking about the future.

Dr. Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish lost three daughters to IDF fire during Operation Cast Lead. His surviving children have received treatment in Israel.

**I volunteered, transporting sick Palestinian children to hospitals
- it hardly seems possible anymore**

Joanna Chen is a British writer currently living in Israel she wonders if her dream of coexistence has been destroyed forever.

“I volunteer with **The Road to Recovery**, an Israeli NGO that transports sick Palestinian children from checkpoints around the country to hospitals in

Israel. When possible, I drive from my home in the Ella Valley of Israel to the Tarkumia checkpoint, close to Hebron, a mere 15-minute journey, to pick up children. I have always felt that small acts of empathy go a long way towards healing the decades-long hatred, that person-to-person contact helps bridge the gap between the two nations. Additionally, I have also always believed that Israelis and Palestinians can make peace, that we all want the same thing at the end of the day - to live quietly, to break bread with our families each evening around the kitchen table.

I worked with *Newsweek* in its Middle East bureau, and considered myself privileged to be able to speak to people on both sides of the conflict. When I say people, I am referring to those of us who are trying to go about our lives peacefully and respectfully, people like me and you who raise children, who care for our families. I spoke to Palestinians in Hebron, I spoke to Jews in Gush Etzion, I spoke to grieving parents on both sides. I once interviewed a woman in Nablus who had just been released from prison for assisting in a suicide bombing, and a teenager patrolling the barren hills of the West Bank with a gun in a holster. I thought I understood.

I don't attend demonstrations, nor am I affiliated with any political groups, but I did participate in an intensive three-month workshop organized by The Bereaved Parents Forum, an NGO that promotes understanding between the Israeli and Palestinians. The idea of the workshop was to both learn about and acknowledge each other's narrative, but I ultimately came out of those three months with a sense of gnawing pessimism. It was not enough. I met people from Jenin who had spent hours crossing through checkpoints to get to our joint weekends, I met three young women from the West Bank who spent a lot of time giggling together and sending text messages. In one activity, we switched identities and the Palestinians praised me for being a good Arab, and everyone laughed.

I admit, it was probably easier for me to open my heart to those contesting this troubled land. Unlike my husband, Raz, who remembers selling his own toys and teddy bears to raise money to buy fighter planes for Israel after the Six Day War in 1967, I lived an uncomplicated life. My home was never contested, I never had to sit in a bomb shelter.

Perhaps this is why I naively stuck to the idea that I could make a difference, even a small one; The Road to Recovery seemed like the perfect way for me to make that difference. I have driven babies and children, accompanied by their mothers, fathers or grandparents to Sheba Hospital in Tel Aviv, often early in the morning when it's pitch dark outside. On these journeys we have conversed in broken Arabic and broken Hebrew and it was enough. Some journeys have been totally silent, the parents exhausted, or worried.

A few months ago, during an early evening emergency pickup, the exhausted mother of a toddler had a panic attack as we turned onto Highway 6. I stopped the car by the side of the road and put my arms around her. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she mumbled. An hour later, I dropped her off at the entrance to the Pediatric ER of Sheba Hospital and I will never forget the little boy, in his mother's arms, turning his head to me and waving goodbye weakly. That same evening, I gave a five-year old boy and his parents a lift back to Tarkumia. It was late, and I didn't want my passengers to make the long walk through the checkpoint to the parking lot, carrying their son and numerous bags filled with clothes. I drove through the checkpoint and stopped by the parking lot. They knew not to leave me alone there, so the father stood by my car while the mother went to get a taxi. I was grateful, and so were they.

But when I was asked this week to drive to the Tarkumia checkpoint to pick up a sick child who needed urgent treatment, I said no. I felt sick to my stomach with fear. Two days earlier, on October 7, I was awoken at 6:35 in the morning by loud explosions as Hamas missiles began falling. Soon after, the sirens began. I watched online as the horrific events began unfolding and as the hours went by, the world as I knew it fell apart.

Returning to anything remotely resembling hope suddenly seems impossible. I can no longer see the horizon of reconciliation. Last night my entire village stood in silence, heads bowed, at the entrance to our normally quiet community, as the funeral procession of a young man who grew up here traveled out to the local cemetery. Meanwhile, the foundations of my house shudder and shake as Gaza is pounded again and again by Israeli forces, and Hamas missiles continue to fall.

Unbelievably, a number of volunteers with The Road to Recovery have been kidnapped into Gaza: Haim Perry, Vivian Silver, Oded and Yochke Lipshitz, Tammy Sohman. The daughter and grandchild of Moshe Lotem, another volunteer, are among those kidnapped, according to the letter. I am devastated, I no longer feel safe.

“We are praying hard,” says the newsletter sent out this afternoon to volunteers, “together with the families of our volunteers who were kidnapped on Shabbat by the savage terrorists of Hamas.”

As another hard, sad day draws to a close, I wonder if the road to any kind of coexistence can be rebuilt.

Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish is a Canadian-Palestinian medical doctor and author. He was born in Gaza, and was the first Palestinian doctor to work in an Israeli hospital and has been active in promoting Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. During the Gaza War in January 2009, he lost three daughters to IDF fire during Operation Cast Lead. His surviving children have received treatment in Israel.

His three daughters and a niece were killed by Israeli tank fire directed at his home. He had been calling in reports about the effect of the war by phone to a TV station. In his regularly scheduled report, in tears, he described their killing on-air, in a video that was widely circulated in Israel and around the world.^[1] The Israeli military initially claimed that Dr. Abuelaish's house was targeted because it was the source of sniper fire. A day later the Israelis claimed to be targeting militants. The Israeli military further tried to justify the shelling of the house by falsely claiming that the dead girls' bodies contained shrapnel from Qassam rockets.^[2]

He emigrated to Canada and wrote a 2011 memoir entitled *I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity*. He now resides in Toronto, Canada, with his remaining children.

Joanna Chen is a British writer currently living in Israel. Her essays, poems, and literary translations have been published in The Los Angeles Review of Books, Poet Lore, Asymptote, Newsweek, and The Daily Beast, she said:

I was not born here. I arrived in Israel at the age of 16, because my parents wanted to live here. I knew nothing about Judaism, let alone Zionism. I learned about World War II in school. I had heard about Anne Frank but had very little idea what the Holocaust was. I knew nothing about the history of the Jews, or even the history of my own family.

In 2019, when a friend suggested I join **the Road to Recovery**, a non-government organization that coordinates the safe passage of sick Palestinian children from the West Bank and Gaza to Israeli hospitals, I decided to give it a go.

The premise of the organization is simple: you drive in your own car to a military checkpoint near home, pick up passengers (usually a child with one parent or grandparent), drop them off at a hospital, and that's it. These are children who are battling life-threatening ailments and who are unable to receive suitable treatment in Palestinian hospitals, most of which are not adequately equipped to deal with complicated medical conditions.

“An Abnormal System Oped” by Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish, Haaretz, January 30, 2009.

“Israeli Hospitals Regularly Treat Kids from Arab Countries. This Man Gives Them a Voice” by Ido Efrati, HAARETZ, Feb 1, 2023.

“I volunteered, transporting sick Palestinian children to hospitals - it hardly seems possible anymore” by Joanna Chen, Forward, October 14, 2023.

The Dream of Medical Cooperation Hardly Seems Possible Anymore? Israeli Hospitals Treated Kids from the Palestinian Authority, Gaza and Arab Countries.

Subject: Into the pediatric ward at Sheba Medical Center or Sourasky Medical Center will encounter a large number of Palestinian children. Many are happy to receive treatment in Israel, which has one of the best health-care systems in the world. Cooperation between the two systems exists, although not to a satisfactory degree.

A number of volunteers with The Road to Recovery have been kidnapped on Shabbat by the terrorists of Hamas into Gaza.

If the road to any kind of coexistence can be rebuilt?

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