

A Gazan Motherhood

by

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One of the most important lessons I learned during my visits to Palestine is that feigning ignorance of local cuisine is the easiest way to procure a dinner invitation. So when the poet and journalist Donia Al Amal Ismail asked if I'd ever eaten *maqlouba*, I shrugged. I knew that the upside-down Palestinian biryani is usually served on special occasions, and was honoured my visit to Gaza warranted such a dish.

Donia and I sat in her living room and waited for the maqlouba to bake. We drank orange Fanta from champagne stems while Donia told me about her life in Gaza. Her three teenaged daughters perched on the sofa behind her and fixed Donia's English whenever she stumbled.

"It is difficult for womans in Gaza," Donia said.

"For *women*," a daughter chirped.

Donia ignored her and continued, "The Palestine people..."

"The *Palestinian* people," another daughter said, then giggled.

"Look how my daughters correct my English," Donia said and shooed her girls away.

When Donia was herself a clever teenager, the Israeli military rounded up her entire family and forced them across the border into Egypt. It was 1985. Donia's father owned a construction company, and his family's forced exile was punishment for his refusal to build settlements for the Israelis who occupied Gaza at the time. "We left without clothes. Without money. Without anything," Donia said. Just before they crossed through the border post, Donia looked up at the Israeli soldier charged with her expulsion, pointed a fierce finger in his face, and said "I will be back."

Donia made good on this promise in 1994 after the Palestinian Authority took control of Gaza. Donia's friend at the newly-formed Palestinian Ministry of Culture helped her obtain a three-month residency permit. Once the permit expired, Donia had to return to Egypt and stay for six months before she could apply for another three-month permit. Donia performed this

bureaucratic dance across the Gaza-Egypt border until 2000 when, during one of her stays in Gaza, she got married and pregnant. Donia's parents begged her to return to Egypt to have the baby and renew her Egyptian residency papers. Donia refused. She wanted her baby born in Palestine. Her permit expired, and now Donia is considered an illegal resident of the place where she was born.

In her writing, Donia has long challenged Gaza's power brokers, Israeli and Palestinian both. "I have trouble with all authority," she said. Her articles in *Haqiqqa*, a magazine she both wrote for and edited, often infuriated the Palestinian Authority. On mornings after one of her particularly critical articles ran, Donia would arrive at her office to find a gathering of armed men waiting to scold her. In 1998, the PA publicly burned copies of Donia's first book, a collection of political articles and reportage, on Gaza's old British prison grounds.

After Hamas defeated the PA in the 2005 elections, Donia had a new target for her scorn. Donia penned a sarcastic poem about the rise of Hamas called "A Good Life" and read the poem aloud at a poetry reading. She immediately started receiving threats online and on her mobile phone. The messages did not worry her at first. "I am used to that," she said. But then Hamas did something her PA nemeses never did: they targeted her daughters. A member of Hamas' security force messaged Donia: "We know you have girls. And we know their school. And we can take them." Donia kept her daughters home from school for two weeks until she and her husband decided that they wouldn't let the authorities stop them from having a normal life.

Donia did not stop writing. And while Hamas never made good on their threat to "take" her daughters, they kept after Donia. After she penned an article accusing Hamas of torturing political opponents, a message appeared on the Hamas website authorizing Donia's murder. "She is an infidel because she criticized Hamas," the statement said. "You can kill her." Donia's husband, who works at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, asked the Hamas officials what was going on. Hamas invited him and Donia to meet with them in their office. Fearing a trap, Donia's husband refused. An official then said "Tell your wife to shut her mouth and calm down."

Then, in December 2014, Donia saw a notice on her Facebook page attributed to the Gaza affiliate of ISIS. The statement accused eighteen Gazan poets, authors and journalists of apostasy and immorality, and threatened to kill them within three days if they did not publicly repent. Donia's name was first on the list. Nobody took the threat seriously. Few believed that ISIS existed in Gaza at all. Sure enough, three days passed and instead of the promised assassinations, another Facebook post appeared apologizing for the first.

Hoax or not, Donia regarded the faux threat as a sign her writings were growing dangerously unwelcome. "Since the ISIS statement, I am thinking of leaving Gaza," she told me. Her daughters want to go. They've grown weary of hearing accusations that their mother is a troublemaker and a bad Muslim. "I am suffering," Donia said. "And my daughters are suffering because their mother is different from other mothers. Different from other womans."

"Different from other *women*," one of the girls chirped again.

Donia would move to France if she could. She's been there before. "It is a very romantic city," she said. But she shook her head when I asked her if this was possible. Strict border closures enforced by Israel and Egypt have rendered Gazans prisoners in their own territory. "It is a dream," she said. "And all the dreams died. We are under siege. A geographic and spiritual siege. We cannot do anything. It is very hard. For a writer. For a poet. For a mother. For anyone."