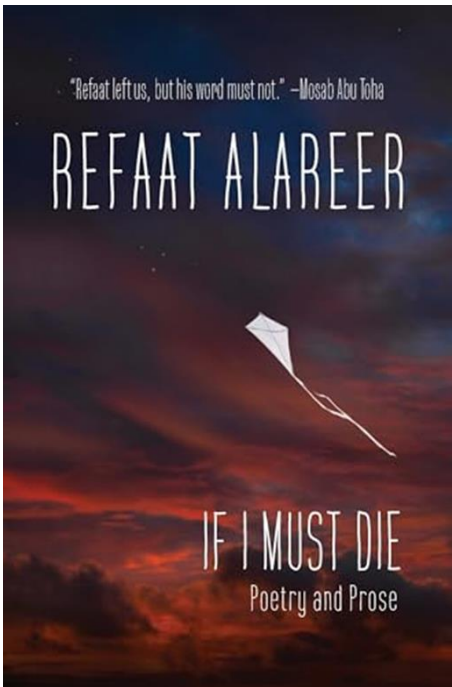


# IF I MUST DIE: POETRY AND PROSE

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On 6 December 2023, the Palestinian poet, writer, teacher and activist Refaat Alareer, was murdered by Israeli forces in a targeted strike in northern Gaza together with his brother, sister, and four of his nephews. He had been sheltering with his family in a UN school in the al-Tufah neighbourhood of Gaza city and received an anonymous phonecall from an Israeli officer who told him that they knew of his location which would soon be reached by advancing ground forces. Refaat moved into his sister's apartment which eyewitnesses confirmed was deliberately targeted following weeks of death threats. Refaat had used *The Electronic Intifada* (Barrows-Friedman, 2025) and

other online publications and social media sites to provide firsthand reportage of the horrors of Israel's genocide in Gaza (Albanese, 2024). It was the power and effectiveness of Refaat's online profile as an activist for Palestinian rights and an educator/mentor for his students that saw him targeted by the Israeli military.

Refaat was one of 519 educational staff killed during Israel's genocide in Gaza between 7 October 2023 and 25 February 2025 (OCHA, 2025a). In the same period, 12,441 students were killed, and 88 percent of school buildings were damaged or destroyed. The higher education sector was decimated with 57 university buildings damaged and 51 destroyed (Ibid.). This deliberate and systematic destruction of the Palestinian education system has been described as 'scholasticide' by the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza (Reliefweb, 2024).

*If I Must Die* is the title of a posthumously published anthology of Refaat Alareer's poetry, writings and interviews and, of course, includes the eponymous poem dedicated to his daughter Shymaa that has become an anthem of Palestinian humanity and loss in Gaza. It captured both the pain of bereavement and the exhortation to carry on living; a child's kite, 'white with a long tale', will bring 'back love' and 'bring hope' (Alareer, 2024: 19). In her 'Foreword' to *If I Must Die*, the Palestinian-American novelist, Susan Abulhawa, who corresponded with Refaat while he was writing his doctorate thesis at the University Putra Malaysia, writes that 'Refaat believed there was great value in speaking and writing to the people of empire to lay bare our humanity before them' (Ibid.: 10). This was why he risked so much to document and share the agonies of life under occupation, bombardment, blockade and genocide. The collection is edited and introduced by Yousef M. Aljamal, one of Refaat's students, who recounts his inspirational encouragement to become part of 'an army of young writers and bloggers' believing that in order to live in a free Palestine 'they have to create a free Palestine in their imagination through stories, films, novels and the arts' (Ibid.: xviii). Refaat fervently believed that education is a means toward breaking Israel's siege of Gaza and the isolation of its young people from the rest of the world. While he encouraged his students to pursue educational opportunities around the world, he also wanted them to return to Gaza and share their knowledge with learners. He described writing to his students as 'an obligation to ourselves and to humanity and to the future generations because it's usually the most important thing we leave behind' (Ibid.).

### **Gaza writes back**

While revisiting Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (2008), Refaat sees Israel's colonial intent in how 'Friday's story was mediated by a self-appointed, colonial, supremacist master assuming control of a land that was not his' (Ibid.: 35). Palestinians, he argues, 'have to own their own narrative' ... 'If Israel's apartheid has to be fought, Israel's narratives have to be challenged and exposed' (Ibid.: 35-36). It was the desire to assert the Palestinian narrative and challenge that written for them which prompted Refaat to invite his friends and students 'to write about what they endured' (Ibid.: 38) during Israel's twenty-three-day military onslaught in Gaza in 2008-09 called Operation Cast Lead. A total of 1,383 Palestinians were killed during Cast Lead, including 333 children and 114 women, and more than 5,300 were injured (OCHA, 2017). 'Every single person in Gaza had to mourn a loved one', wrote Refaat after Cast Lead, and his aim was to 'counterattack the twenty-three days of terror' with stories of 'life in the face of death, hope in the face of despair and selflessness in the face of horrible selfishness' (Alareer, 2024: 39). 'Writing is a testimony', he told his contributors, 'a memory that outlives any human experience, and an obligation to communicate with ourselves and the world' (Ibid.: 38).

A collection of fifteen stories was published under the title *Gaza Writes Back* (Alareer, 2014) and post-publication, Refaat embarked on a month-long tour of the United States (US) with two of the contributors to the book. He met with Jewish and Palestinian activists and learned about the 'often-invisible wall of racism' that scars so much of US society (Ibid.: 43). Refaat recognised a resonance in the struggle against police racism in the US with the struggle against isolation and segregation in Palestine. The journey from conceiving the idea for *Gaza Writes Back* to getting it compiled, edited, published and launched must have been one of the most rewarding of his career. He wrote that:

"*Gaza Writes Back* is a weapon to shatter the Israeli narratives of a land without a people, of a people without roots, a people who never existed and never will – through this writing, we not only assert our existence, but also envision our future" (Ibid.: 42).

### Operation Protective Edge

In 2014, Gaza suffered its third Israeli military operation in seven years. But Operation Protective Edge was of a scale and severity unprecedented to that point with the fifty days of relentless Israeli bombardment and ground assault killing 2,251 Palestinians, including 551 children and 299 women, with 11,231 injured (OCHA, 2015). Casualties on the Israeli side included six civilians and sixty-seven soldiers. For Refaat and his wife Nusayba, this was a traumatic period as they lost thirty members of their immediate family, including Refaat's brother Mohammed who he movingly remembers in a piece dated 28 July 2014 (Alareer, 2024: 47-53). 'There is a clear attempt to ethnically cleanse Palestine', he writes, 'to make us leave and never come back' (Ibid.: 52). He adds that: 'Israel has been acting like a wild rhino let loose in a field of lavender. Palestinians have been acting as they should: resilient, steadfast and even more determined' (Ibid.: 54).

As a teacher and parent, many of Refaat's articles deal with the impact of Israel's blockade and military aggressions on Gaza's children. He finds that his niece Raneen has become absent-minded since her father's death with a propensity to talk to herself. He writes about his fears of children growing up in a world that has betrayed them and forced to live in 'ruins and destruction' (Ibid.: 61). In a piece about 'Israel's killer bureaucracy' (Ibid.: 65), Refaat recounts how the blockade claimed the life of his eighteen-year-old cousin, Awad, who dies from bone cancer while awaiting Israeli permission to receive medical treatment outside Gaza. Israeli authorities often use permission to travel as blackmail to force patients and their families to become informants in return for what should be a fundamental right (Ibid.: 70). Medical permissions have also been used as traps to lure patients or guardians to a checkpoint on the promise of travel out of Gaza, only to find themselves arrested (Ibid.: 71). These bureaucratic cruelties are part of the daily apparatus of oppression visited on Gazans that are recorded so powerfully by Refaat's poems and prose. And, yet his poems find hope in the humanity around him such as that simply titled 'Mom' dated 30 July 2012:

"On Ma's face  
There is a book  
And life's preface.  
Between these lines

And in these two caves  
Life dwells.  
That line is hope.  
That one is love.  
That death.  
When she smiles,  
She gives hope,  
She gives love,  
She gives life,  
To life”  
(Ibid.: 93).

### **The great march of return**

In a transcribed interview titled ‘every Palestinian was a target’, Refaat recalled his participation on the first day of the great march of return, an overwhelmingly non-violent and grassroots weekly protest held at Gaza’s perimeter fence with Israel (Ibid.: 95). The demonstrations persisted between 30 March and 31 December 2018 despite Israel’s use of lethal force on unarmed protesters. ‘This was not a political march’, argues Refaat, ‘it was a popular march’ (Ibid.: 96). An independent international commission of inquiry on the protests carried out by the Human Rights Council found that 189 Palestinians were killed, 170 of whom died from live ammunition shots to their heads and torso (Human Rights Council, 2019: 6). The inquiry found that, with the exceptions of two incidents, ‘the use of live ammunition by Israeli security forces against demonstrators was unlawful’ (Ibid.: 18). These findings are consistent with Refaat’s account of the first day of the great march return with Israeli snipers firing early in the day as families assembled before and after Friday prayer. He recalled a general mood of hope and optimism as many of those who gathered on the march genuinely thought they were returning home. An estimated 100,000-150,000 gathered at the fence which meant that many of those who assembled were unaware that live fire was being used on protesters at the front of the march. Reflecting on Israel’s brutal and indiscriminate use of lethal force on peaceful protesters Refaat concludes: ‘no matter what method of resistance we will use, Israel will brutalize us, demonize us’ (Alareer, 2024: 100).

Refaat's interviews, poetry and writings have a broad chronological structure covering the period 2010-2023 and address a wide range of topics including: cyber-surveillance; Israel's use of administrative detention (imprisonment without trial) and Palestinian hunger strikes; education as resistance; and Western complicity in Israel's human rights abuses. There is inevitably a degree of duplication in the anthology as he returns to critical themes related to the welfare and rights of Gazans under blockade and the constant threat of violence. Perhaps the most tender passages are those that deal with the impossible choices he faces as a parent to try to protect and reassure his children. As the children become swept up in the displacement, hunger and constant danger posed by Israel post-7 October 2023, Refaat writes: 'And the kids know. They feel all the lies we tell them, that it's going to be okay, that the bombing is far away. They're not working' (Ibid.: 187).

### **A war against everything**

The final section of the book carries Refaat's articles and interviews between October and December 2023. On 7 October, Hamas killed 1,200 civilians and military personnel in a surprise attack on southern Israel (OCHA, 2024). Israel's subsequent ground and aerial military assault on Gaza claimed 48,405 Palestinian lives and injured 111,835 others by 4 March 2025. Refaat describes this as a 'war against everything'; 'a brutal European colonial enterprise that has been brutalizing Palestinians for over seven decades' (Alareer, 2024: 180; 182). He is devastated by news that the Islamic University has been targeted and fears for his 1,500 colleagues left without employment and 20,000 students without classes. There is a darkly comical tone to his description of the 'brutal normality' of the conflict which has settled in like a 'grumpy relative' who you can't stand but can't get rid of (Ibid.: 203). When his home is bombed, Refaat moves his family into a UN school like hundreds of thousands of Gazans carrying their most valuable possessions in plastic bags. He identifies the five major emotional stages during conflict: denial, fear, silence and numbness, hope, and despair and submission (Ibid.: 217). These final pieces are poignant and moving because we know they lead us to the end of Refaat's life on 6 December 2023. He was spared the agony of knowing that his beloved daughter Shymaa, for whom he dedicated the poem *If I Must Die*, would herself be killed with her family in an Israel airstrike on 26 April 2024 (Abunimah, 2024).

Refaat's anthology is infused throughout with hope and humanity. He writes in 2022:

“we are very hopeful that the grassroots – the organisations, the unions, the people who vote – can say something. The more people take to the street, the more hope we have that this is going to have an impact” (Ibid.: 157).

His anthology is a fitting testimony to a life dedicated to education and his many students. He wrote that ‘knowledge is Israel’s worst enemy. Awareness is Israel’s most hated and feared foe’ (Ibid.: 34). Development educators will be uplifted by Refaat’s faith in critical understanding and awareness raising, and his Freirean sense of education as the basis of anti-colonialism, anti-racism, anti-oppression and hope. Refaat posed this question to readers of *Gaza Writes Back*: ‘Reader, as you peruse these chapters, what can or will you do, knowing that what you do can save lives and can change the course of history? Reader, will you make this matter?’ (Ibid.: 137). The very same question can be posed to readers of *If I Must Die*.

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