



The cats of Gaza or why Nakba is a multispecies catastrophe

written by Neha Vora
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Like many of my friends and colleagues, I have been relying on the social media accounts of Gazan journalists, photographers, and others (some so young they could be my students) who are risking their lives every day to show the world what genocide looks like in real time. Over the past several weeks, I have seen a growing trend in the videos and photos from Gaza, and that is images of cats. Individuals and organizations are posting and re-posting photos and videos of cats in trauma after experiencing bombing and the loss of family members and cats starving in empty lots because they have managed to escape the horrors of urban destruction, images like the one below, which is from Israel's bombing of Gaza in



May of this year.



Days of Palestine Facebook page

The cat posts also focus on humans rescuing cats from the rubble of the bombings, and, most recently, Gazans fleeing the North with their children, pets, and meager belongings in what many are calling a second Nakba.



The Palestine Chronicle





Amidst the horrific scenes of displacement, we also see videos of children playing with cats, and explaining how their cats are also affected by the bombings—these videos and their smiles provide fleeting moments of hope and happiness amidst a sea of death and destruction.



Source:

<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/israel-hamas-war-3-cats-give-rare-moments-of-joy-to-displaced-children-in-war-torn-gaza-4561122>



Despite a water and food shortage, Gazans are going out of their way to feed and rescue nonhuman kin—cats, dogs, donkeys, horses, and even birds.



Doctors are treating injured animals alongside injured humans even as their supplies are dwindling and they are being bombed, like the cat below who was provided a cast at a human hospital.



Gazans are also mourning animals and caring for their corpses even as they lose their homes and family members. One of the saddest videos I saw last week was of a young girl, devastated and crying inconsolably, holding the dead body of her beloved parakeet, who did not survive the bombing of their home. Motaz Azaiza, a 24-year-old photographer who has been chronicling life on the ground while fighting back tears for all he is witnessing, recently lost his cat due to the inability to find adequate veterinary care. His post about her death—reposted by thousands—was a video of him smiling and petting her in his Kevlar “press” vest as she sat on his shoulder, with the caption “I really am loosing [sic] a lot every day.”



As of the writing of this piece, over 15,000 human lives and countless nonhuman ones have been extinguished by the Israeli attack on Gaza. Many of the living are children left on their own after losing their parents and family members—their cats are their remaining kin, and a source of comfort within the unfathomable experience of loss. This image of a young boy covered in dust arriving by himself at a hospital with his rescued kitten has been shared many times across many social media accounts, as it both chronicles the devastating impacts of this genocide on children and showcases the enormous love that Palestinian children have for their pets. It also shows how humans and nonhumans rely on each other for comfort and care amidst the destruction of their world.





6:13



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Mariam Dagg





It would not be surprising to anyone who knows me that I repost these hopeful and tragic accounts of the cats and other animals of Gaza. I am a self-proclaimed “crazy cat lady:” I carry cat treats around in my purse to feed the strays I encounter in Sharjah and Dubai (I have recently relocated to the United Arab Emirates), and I teach my introductory anthropology class through cats. At first the latter was a schtick to get students more engaged in a core class that many were taking to fulfill some requirement. My students in the United States usually found my cat memes and examples cute or eccentric at best, but for my students in the UAE—mostly Muslim Arabs and South Asians who grew up here—it makes perfect sense to discuss cats as central to stories of human world-making. Cats have a special position in Islam, and street cats are also ubiquitous in many Gulf neighborhoods, with residents regularly caring for and adopting them. As my research interests have moved toward animal studies and human-nonhuman kinship, I am realizing that my “anthro through cats” gimmick is in fact reflective of both my political commitments and my suspicion of anthropology’s problematic embrace of humanism as a supposed corrective to the violences of slavery, settler colonialism, genocide, and environmental racism, as well as to colonial ways of knowing.

Everyday I encounter more photos and videos of Palestinians with cats and other animals being posted and reshared and on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and other venues. I am clearly not the only one who finds these to be important moments to chronicle and share. While much of the text attached to these photos tries to elicit sympathy for animals as the innocents who are caught within a human war, others are intended to humanize Palestinians—who are constantly referred to as animals by Zionists—by showcasing their care for others, including



animals. What these images show me is that Palestine and being Palestinian is more than human—it includes the entire cosmology of place—the olive trees, the waterways, the donkeys, the companion animals, who have cultivated a way of life over centuries that the Zionist occupiers are purposefully trying to negate through walls that cut humans off from their land and cut nonhuman animals off from their migration routes and food sources; through pollution of water and contamination of land with sewage and chemical waste; through bulldozing olive groves; through the introduction of nonlocal species that strain existing ecosystems; and through the current deliberate displacement and murder of all life in Gaza in order to serve the interests of extractive capitalism—are we at all surprised that in the midst of this “war” Israel has been selling contracts to explore natural gas reserves estimated to be worth billions of dollars off the coast of Gaza to several corporations?

Many people invested in the end to this occupation and genocide have been saying that humanity is failing, and calling on global leaders to express better collective humanity through demanding ceasefire. However, we forget that the concept of humanity itself is one that was forged in the belly of the twinned beast of colonialism and capitalism, used to justify the enslavement and mass murder of those who were deemed less than human, and to position the world as a source of neverending surplus value. Settler colonialism and apartheid are not just about control and dehumanization, they are about the destruction of longstanding intimacies and kinship between land, flora, and fauna. Of course this is not a new argument—indigenous communities the world over have documented how terraforming, deforestation, and the severing of traditional relationships between humans and nonhumans are fundamental components of genocide, and in fact foundational to what many now call the Anthropocene (although not all of us have been included in the “anthro” of this term until rather recently). Humanity **has** failed, because humanity is what got us here in the first place, to a way of thinking about land as property, nature as controllable, and persons as limited to ever-shifting definitions of who counts as human enough.



What the cats of Gaza teach us is that Palestine's trauma is a multispecies trauma. They do not teach us that Palestinians are human, too, for that is an iteration that continues to define the human against something that it is not, something that will always be excluded and abject and therefore excisable. Palestinians and their cats I think are so compelling to many of us because they challenge liberal understandings of humanity and expose them to be colonial ways of defining the world, personhood, and imaginings of freedom. "Humanity" will never lead us to a universal justice and peace. The ongoing Nakba since 1948 is a structure of violence that attacks all life—and therefore Palestinian multispecies world-making is central to resisting this occupation. In our support for Palestinian life, then, perhaps we should stop appealing to humanity and to proving who is human enough to live—what would our forms of resistance and



fight against occupation look like if we abandoned the idea of shared humanity and centered radical multispecies kinship instead?



[https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/oct/18/israel-
hamas-war-live-news-gaza-hospital-west-bank-update-joe-
biden-visit-protests-latest-updates](https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/oct/18/israel-hamas-war-live-news-gaza-hospital-west-bank-update-joe-biden-visit-protests-latest-updates)

Please follow and share the accounts of Gazan reporters and Palestinian animal rescue organizations. Here are but a few:

@byplestia

@motaz_azaiza

@mariam_abu_dagga

@m_abu_samra

@mohammed.h.masri

@sulalaanimalrescue (Gaza-based)

@hot_vet (Nablus-based)

@yespets_rescue (Hebron-based)