



# مجلة بيروت الأدبية والفنية

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# CROSSHAIRS

## ESSAY

BY

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النبة | Al-Naba'a, by Hussein Nassereddine

The sniper is like a lone onlooker who inspects from the shadows. He enjoys the detachment from his subjects. Akin to a spectator witnessing a couple's squabble, he briefly perceives them as mirror images of his own petty disputes with his lover. We are all distant observers at times, casually watching with delight a stranger in a café or noting a neighbor's late arrival.

The sniper's first pleasure is the pleasure that distance allows. Yet, the sniper's kinship with his target ends where his livelier role begins. With chilling precision, he selects his mark, keenly attuned to the impending kill. In his imposition, he finds dark pleasure, as he stubbornly cosplays the Angel of Death. Despite his role within a rigid military hierarchy, he singularly claims credit for his actions, convinced of his unique artistry and the mastery of his craft. Like a poet who relishes in obscurity and seclusion, the sniper thrives on the stories of others, while remaining on the spectator-God bench. Returning to the sanctum of the barracks, the euphoria starts to erode, and perhaps only then does he contemplate the justification for his performance. Are his targets less than human or merely foes? Could they be mere skeletons lacking souls? Sometimes, the mere pleasure of a successful hit surpasses the need for queries or moral reckoning.



Nearly a decade ago, a sniper's bullet colonized my flesh, an intimate invasion where the cold metal kissed my ankle. There was a perverse fortune in locking eyes with my assailant, witnessing the elation in his act and his casual high-five to his fellow soldier boasting of a successful knockout—such a strange, dark mirror to the man's face. His delight was a stark revelation, and my smile was almost a rejoinder to his elation, a reaction to the eeriness of my almost-killer.

The bullet announced its approach buzzing in the air before bursting my skin, a sound that declared its intent with creepy precision. In that suspended moment, the rules of Israel's open-fire regulation were crystalized to a singular point of focus: my lower body. During those years, Israel emphasized maiming rather than killing. Marked for the hit, I became a fatal note in a symphony of triviality, I was then the hunted "human animal" at the end of an unwavering grip of a youthful soldier, too generous for the rifle's embrace. By some twist of mercy or oversight, I was spared the "upper hit."

I have always been told I am too sensitive, too easily bruised by the world's indifference. Many around me insist I must shield myself against the

bureaucratic coils that squeeze with the cold, meticulous precision of indifference—like the time my school's bureaucracy accused me of stealing 2.5 Shekels (seventy cents) when I was actually the one who gave them away, or the time the Palestinian Authority accused me of soliciting when I was merely protesting their normalization, or the time Israeli soldiers stamped on my feet and left me blindfolded in the cold, accusing me of being a “terrorist” when I was merely protesting the theft of a natural spring. “Do not take it to heart,” they chide. They tell me that when a large bureaucratic machine makes a decision, it is just that—a cursory and callous command. And so, when a bullet hits you, you are not its genuine target. The soldier restricts your freedom of movement, and the intelligence officer subjects you to torture, yet it’s not you that they are really after. It is only what you appear to be.

As I collapsed to the ground, my tall frame borne by two young men, blood gushing from my wound, I felt an eerie calm. The children gathering from the nearby refugee camp did not see me as one of their own. They repeatedly questioned my origins. All I could muster then was, “I am from here,” though perhaps I should have added, “I am from the here and now.” Indeed, something inside you transforms when you start to see yourself as a “target.”

In that moment, you do not summon a past or display a successive stream of memories, the stuff that makes you recall who you are. At that peculiar moment, there is no future to speak of either, no aspirations or hallucinations. You are present in the consciousness that you appear as a target. I imagine that every Palestinian has confronted that moment.

After the “incident,” I gradually absorbed the sniper’s vigilant eye into every bone of my precarious body. I learned to carry the weight of his gaze, to live not as a student nor a teacher nor as the ever-growing pile of lies I spin in my everyday life nor the truths I hold dear and near nor for the various forces ruthlessly pushing to shape my being, those that lie within and those that lie without.

In the sniper’s view, I am not my mother’s child, my father’s joy, or the persistent butt of my younger sister’s jokes. In that moment, it dawned on me that I am both a mark and a target—my very being, a canvas for the twisted delight of those who wound and slay.





الفرحة | Joy, by Hussein Nassereddine

The sniper, a lone figure in the grand theater of war, stands as a classic incarnation of remote death, executing the grim dictates of murder from a distance—a ghostlike figure entwining weapons and desire. Paradoxically, amidst the ravages of Gaza today, the sniper's role has evolved into one of

the most personal and intimate forms of lethal engagement.

War, a visceral horror of flesh and blood, is now sanitized by the western war machine's affinity for distance—a treasured void where death decrees are dispatched lacking the chaos of bodily entanglements. This detachment speaks volumes of the alienation felt in postmodern societies, as the savagery of war is redirected through drones, algorithms and data, performed not on battlegrounds but on screens in Tel Aviv's sterile boardrooms.

The technological advancements of modernity with its pursuit of autonomous systems, nihilistically celebrates the appropriation of the algorithm as a calculus of who and how many, and what to kill in Gaza. Murder by a thousand “equations” sprayed on us from the sky, piling one number over another.

Now, revelations have surfaced about Israel's deployment of a complex AI system to designate and produce targets in Gaza, ominously named “The Gospel.” A system born of the jumble of revenge and paranoia—baptized with a label that once meant “The Good News”—now precipitates death, its algorithms coldly calculating the fate of those marked for demise. The math insulates the colonizer from his victims, permitting the act of killing without accountability, as Palestinian bodies and homes become numbered and fed into a system with hundreds of thousands of “target files.” For the Israeli war machine, war is the nexus between punishment and conquest, it's always directed at the quick overcoming of obstacles, the race to the finish line. As the machine races, it might lose some of its passengers (soldiers), but loss is always an exception. For Palestinians, war is a rhythmic alignment with existence, echoing the gushing of wind and the flows of sunlight. It is akin to that lonely breath on a solemn cold winter day, when a single breath is folded within you as if you're inhaling the universe. War is the nexus of sacrifice and existence, a sacrifice that transcends the question of its immediate utility. This is, perhaps, the clearest distinction between the Palestinian resistance and the Israeli machinery of death: the stark fact that when Palestinians kill, they almost invariably face death for their actions, or even kill themselves in the act. A Palestinian committing an act of disobedience also commits to the real possibility of their impending death and imprisonment.

What remains unequivocally evident is that Palestine has long been singled

out, and Palestinians perpetually marked and reduced to data points that fuel systems of categorization and control, dissected and distilled into equations. Viewed from above, or through a sniper's lens, Palestinians are always under the invasive and corrupting scrutiny of an intelligence officer or a killer in uniform, or on many occasions a plain clothed civilian wreaking havoc in the hilltops of the West Bank. They are on the receiving end of an entire machine that builds both the logic of rendering them targets and then aiming with relentless anger and joy. We are earmarked for demise, incarceration, or allowed conditionally a stringent existence. To those who tread these sinister landscapes, what might seem like a shady unveiling is no shock; it is the lived experience of those dwelling in what is, tragically, a vast field of targets.

Yet, there is perhaps nothing more telling than the delegation of human targeting to an artificial mechanism. Consider when Palestinians, for example, forged a fusion of human and machine in the form of a human bomb, where the individual carrying the explosive device triggers the explosion, causing mayhem while also perishing in the act.

Man and machine reigned supreme, fused into one device.

For Israel, the algorithmic rationale of the Hasbora AI machine obscures the stark realities of its war on Palestine: erasure, ethnic cleansing, and the indiscriminate targeting of Palestinians. This logic aids the operators of these systems in distancing themselves from the decision-making, allowing machines to select and produce targets. Then, as operators execute the act of killing, they employ another machine to protect themselves—not just from potential harm, the possibility of their own demise, but also, more significantly, from the guilt associated with committing an outright act of homicide. Here, both decision and action are outsourced. The human shielded in a corner office simply watches the machines as they unlock. Nothing is left but the pleasure of the voyeuristic bearing witness to machinic murder. No artistry, no craftsmanship, not even the poetics of killing and being killed.

Math and machine reign supreme.

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قمر | Moon, by Hussein Nassereddine

At the age of twelve, no more than a young boy, I was scaling the school's towering walls on a restful Sunday, to chase the ball with my partners-in-mischief. The school guardian was a silent accomplice, turning a blind eye to our playfulness, voicing an unspoken pact between us with a wink and a nod as we claimed the field as our own. During the peak of the Second Intifada, as children brimming with the urge to imitate, we fancied ourselves as the Zidane's and Ronaldo's of a modest, dusty playing field.



On that day, the commonplace childish squabbles that engulfed the dusty soccer field were abruptly interrupted, banished by an uglier quarrel. Bullets carved their swift bladed arguments through the air above us, engraving their deadly conclusions into the ground around us. Our game ceased; we were unsuspectingly recast as targets in an absurd moment where the energy for survival kicks in, our youthful agility mutated under the shadow of an incomprehensible threat. The slowest among us spurred by the invisible hand of fear became the fastest among us. It was only when we found sanctuary that our laughter erupted not from joy, but from the dark recognition of our own fragility, a sarcastic echo in the face of the tank's blind mercy.

On that day, our almost-killer was hidden to us, known only through the hostile imprecision of his absence. We felt the horror of his intention, but not the man nor the eyes; neither his hands embracing the rifle, nor his face lighting up after a successful hit. His presence was a shadow that wrapped itself over us, urging us to perish then and there.

We were denied the sight of his pleasure at our chaotic dance of evasion. We were not privy to the torment of his failure when he, to our luck, missed the hit. We were left only with the aftershocks, the muted reverberations of violence that knows no face, no name, no remorse. This is exactly how the Israeli war machine appears to us: a machine that shields its operator from death, and a sniper that takes gratification in the hit.

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الحرب | The War, by Hussein Nassereddine

The question many in the world pose today—What could be Israel's designs on Gaza?—finds its answer woven into the fabric of Palestinian existence—a knowledge as intimate as breathing. The target, we know, is us—we, who are inescapably marked from the moment we enter this world.

The rhetoric of Israeli leaders, their speeches weaving narratives of ancient enemies and degrading labels of “human animals,” all while the history of national socialism is displaced on our semitic faces. Ironical enough, these

speeches are not a revelation to us. They have long since adorned themselves into the very glossary of our being, becoming part of the air we breathe, even in the silences and slow rhythms of our daily lives.

In the quiet, we carry on, each step a testament to a life lived in the crosshairs of being real or potential targets in a complex mathematical, human, machinic system that produces us always as targets to kill, to maim, to imprison, to deprive, or even as a symbolic onslaught asking us to surrender and give up. For Israel, Palestinians must act as vanishing mediators so the colonizer can ease the anxiety of its theft, a constant demand from us to recognize that their theft was legitimate, that their sovereignty is now whole and complete.

We can almost hear Foucault saying, "The most murderous states are also the most racist." But again, we do not need Foucault to know this. Haven't we, again and again, heard Israelis proclaim that Palestine and Palestinians are killable? Haven't we seen the modern machinery of war making this killing an industrial site of awe and horror? Haven't we also seen the discourses of high modernity celebrate the (in)accurate massacres from the air, employing AI, and producing targets en masse? This form of killing is more humane, we are told, more rational, more expressive of the civilized man and woman.

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The essence of the hunter is entwined with that of the prey, and within this entanglement, there is a sense of reverence for the prey's primal nature, a sense of awe at its untamed spirit. The perilous nature of the hunt only serves to amplify its allure. In the tricky dance of hunter and hunted, as depicted in the Israeli Netflix series *Fauda*, one intimately observes the hunter's psyche. We become privy to the hunter's vulnerability and the necessity imposed on him to deal with constraints of the law, restraints the hunter repeatedly lashes out against in an overt and angry rebellion, as he shrieks, "The wilderness of the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon understands no civilized law!" Isn't this one of Israel's most authentic roles in the "global order," a place to experiment with new codes, regulation and codifications, a revisionist state that reformulates the entire architecture of rule-based



Empire, empowering it with innovative practices and ways to transgress its own rule-making power? Indeed, in the West Bank and Gaza, where empire is malleable and in flux, transgressions are made into law. This is precisely why we Palestinians never take international law seriously, or at least many of us don't. We know what the rest of the world will grow to know: that these laws serve only the pleasure of the hunt.

*Fauda* offers a window into the psychological process of exalting the prey, of recognizing a formidable essence in its defiance. It is a portrayal of a hunter who derives fulfillment, not from the act of killing itself only, but from the knowledge that the prey is a worthy opponent, a being or a thing whose elimination signifies not merely an end but a conquest of equals, a thrill of successfully testing the limits of the hunter's own ability. The prey here is both an obstacle and the threshold, a site to reassert power and both test and transgress its limits.

This is the real thrill of the hunt, and this is exactly what Israel attempts to outdo through its fresh systems of murder: It allows for the hunting to commence without the quandaries and fragilities of the hunter while maintaining the watch and the gratification of viewing from afar even if its active role is limited out of a deep-seated fear that the hunted can become the hunter.

Still, this does not answer if there is life in being rendered killable. How does one live in the crosshairs?



Writing about life at the crosshairs, or life as a target is a funny undertaking. This lifestyle requires one to be perpetually present in the moment—to survive an encounter with death, only to find another around the corner, each employing a cutting-edge method of killing. This successive play is a collective play, it's comedic indeed, since it always summons laughter at the absurdity of the hunter, the things that set them off. Then there's the laughter at almost being killed.

To be hunted is to live as a threshold on the threshold, at the edge of an abyss. No future appears, and no past intrudes on the rhythmic dance

*of catch me if you can.*

Let me tell you a short story.

My friend Ibrahim attributes his relentless compulsion for cleanliness to the Nakba. A cleaning cloth is his constant companion; on the rare occasions he sets it aside—to ignite a cigarette or engage in an unchecked conversation—he always keeps it within arm's reach. This ensures he can promptly resume his sanitization ritual every thirty minutes. With vigorous determination, he expels the traces of coffee and the haze of tobacco that linger after our drawn-out meetings.

Ibrahim's home is unassuming in its essence, but its tidiness rivals that of the pristine homes showcased in furniture showroom catalogs, every detail meticulously attended to. The positioning of the frames adorning the walls is a study in precision; each week, he meticulously ensures that the paintings and pictures of historical figures of bygone revolutions maintain their exact alignment.

Ibrahim is propelled by a profound need to maintain order, his every action underscored by a desire to ensure all things remain in their designated places. He often shared this sentiment with me in jest, remarking with a cynical smile, "My disdain for Israel stems from it being in the wrong place; it simply isn't where it's supposed to be."

On one long night, stretching into the pre-dawn hours, he offered me insight into the depths of his compulsion:

"The mental burdens carried by a refugee are elusive to you, *madani*, who hails from cities. They include profound guilt and the raw bite of having lost our original home. It's this inherited burden of shame that drove my grandmother, followed by my mother, and now me, to incessantly clean, almost as if by preserving our surroundings we might prevent the loss of our home once more. It is our own redemption for the home we lost."

Ibrahim and I first crossed paths during a modest protest that blossomed in the heart of Ramallah. Unlike the other protesters, Ibrahim exuded a sense of purpose rather than resignation. Each morning, he would rise before the break of dawn and meticulously catalog his daily tasks in a small notebook. He harbored a belief, perhaps a hopeful illusion, that with every completed task, he was inching his way back to the home he once knew through his grandmother's face.

Ibrahim once recounted to me how he locked eyes with a sniper some

hundred meters away, advancing with calm and measured steps, a stone in his grip, fully aware the sniper had marked his move. Having known that he was injured that day, I interrupted his story with a question.

Why didn't you run for cover from the bullets?

Without hesitation, he replied, "I stood, awaiting my fate with the sniper's bullet. Simply put, I lacked the will and desire to move or to hide. At that moment in my life, in the face of that damned sniper, escape seemed an unhealthy clinging to illusions. You know, I thank God daily that the bullet did not strike my back, or God forbid... the muscle just below it. Imagine becoming the butt of your jokes for having been shot in the ass!"

He continued, "We bear an inner sniper within us, just as we bear the weight of imprisonment. Some label this relentless companion within us as pragmatism, others call it realism. You may deem me insane," Ibrahim declared, "but remember, there's nothing bad in a touch of madness. As I stood awaiting the bullet's inevitable path to my flesh, not a single recollection of my mother came to mind, nor did my life flash before my eyes, nor did nostalgia draw me back to my playful childhood. In that precise instant, everything was in its rightful place: the sniper, the bullet, and I. Collapsing to the ground, I could not help but smile."

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الذاكرة | Memory, by Hussein Nassereddine

To live in the crosshairs is to occasionally yield to the dominance of the sniper's lens. In this realm, two types of submission are recognizable. The first is to dodge, to acknowledge the sniper's omnipotence, to shield oneself from death and to persist within the boundaries of the scope's vision. The second is to stand defiantly, touched with a dash of madness, unconcerned with the meticulous contemplation of one's past or future. It is to be utterly devoted to the present, a moment of absolute submission to the now.

To live in the crosshairs is to grow accustomed to being “undesirable” and “untouchable” except through the deadly kisses of bombs and bullets sprayed from a distance. Indeed, to resist is to assert the preeminence of the present, to prioritize the immediacy of the here and now. Thus, if one questions whether resistance is a form of madness, the answer is yes, it is indeed mad to resist the supremacy of math and machine. Yet, there is no idiocy in a touch of madness, for it is the only way to affirm existence.

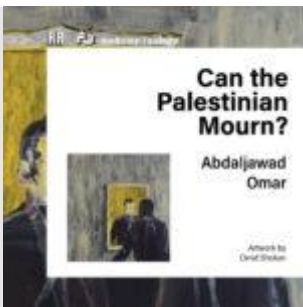
## Contributor



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