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Obituary | An eye over Gaza

Rushdi Sarraj loved to record what others did not or would not see

The Palestinian photo-journalist and film-maker was killed in an Israeli missile strike on October 22nd



Palestinian photographer Rushdi Sarraj
image: instagram/wissamgaza

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the crowded backdrop of the Gaza shore, full of fishing boats, shacks and grim apartments, he snapped the birds over the blue open sea or against the blue open sky.

He enjoyed close-ups, happily recording piles of olives, rain on leaves, daisies and just-caught sardines. But he was even more fascinated by the birds' eye view of things. God's eye view, some called it, as if it was impartial, simply sweeping over the crammed hive of high-rises that was his home, hovering above the narrow streets, the teeming markets and the rare, scrappy outbreaks of green. He grabbed beauty wherever he could find it: sunsets, cloudscapes, an orange orchard. His film-production collective, set up in 2012 with his wife Shurouq, his childhood friend Yaser Murtaja and some other friends, was called Ain Media, "ain" meaning "eye". Its motto was "Deeper than you see".

A visiting Canadian film company gave them their first drone, a Phantom 3. Yaser loved to deploy it because it made him feel he was flying away from Gaza, as he never had. Rushdi's feelings were more complicated. He liked the lofty viewpoint, but also felt rooted in his city. His family had arrived there, via England where he was born, after fleeing from Jaffa in 1948 during the Nakba, the trauma of Palestinian displacement. They had settled at last in Tel al-Hawa in south Gaza city, a fairly well-off section, though battered in the war of 2008 with Israel. Over Tel al-Hawa, as over the whole strip, Israeli drones already flew with a constant humming. He could not forget this surveillance. Another favourite filming height, still bird-like, was from rooftops into tiny walled courtyards, or down through stairwells and railings, to catch, say, two teenage boys performing a pop song in the prison that was Gaza.

The world, he felt, did not see daily life there, for the good or for the bad. Foreign journalists were rare. For some of them, principally from Radio France and Le Monde, he was a fixer: guiding them round, setting up useful interviews, translating (into English, better than his French), and generally explaining the place. He also became a friend, sharing coffee and pastries as well as information. But the world's press did not have much to do with Gaza, and was sometimes barred from going in, as it was this October after Hamas attacked Israel. Many institutions then, including un agencies, Oxfam and the bbc, relied on Ain Media's photographs and video clips, as they often had before.

He and his colleagues therefore collected all the footage they could. The slightest incident with Israel would find them ready. Some of what they shot was desultory stone-throwing, but some was terrifying. In a documentary shot in 2021, "Targeting the Towers", Ain Media's camera was in the midst as three skyscrapers fell to an Israeli strike, not only hovering above the billowing plumes and collapsing floors but also pushing down the stairs, skidding over slippery pavements, running back in panic, blacking out. This too, alongside old men drinking tea, camels suckling and small girls in Palestinian-flag dresses, was life in Gaza.

His friends called him brave, but he did not think he was. He was terrified, in bad times, by the thought that while he chased the news story his house and family might be destroyed. His blue flak jacket, with "Press" on it in large letters, was supposed to guarantee his protection under international law. Yet he knew it might not. In 2018 in Khan Yunis he was recording the Great March of Return, a demonstration on the border for the Palestinians' right to their ancestral lands, when Yaser fell bleeding beside him. A bullet had entered under his left armpit, where the flak jacket had a gap; he died within hours. To Rushdi the shooting seemed deliberate, just as it did when his colleague Ibrahim Lafi was shot dead on October 8th at the Erez crossing. Ibrahim was 21, really talented, and another haunter of the beach. With 20 Palestinian journalists killed within two weeks, it looked to Rushdi like an effort by Israel to shut down news from Gaza, as if rolling power cuts and internet failures could not do that effectively enough.

The Israelis suggested that Yaser had been a target because he was on the payroll of the military wing of Hamas. Yet Ain Media had only just been cleared by America's State Department to receive a grant from usaid, which would have picked up that connection if it were true. Rushdi thought the charge ridiculous. As for him, he belonged to no political party. As a man who prized efficiency and good service ("I'm ready to start the work now, and I deliver work 24 hours a day!"), he was furious with the shambolic Palestinian Authority for its incompetence and its failure to replace his lost passport, which stopped him going abroad to showcase his films. The pa had cited "security reasons". But his only loyalty was to his people and his settled place.

He therefore stayed and kept reporting. As he explained to his French friends, he could either go out and do his job or sit and do nothing. For him, that was no choice at all. The present situation was the hardest he had ever experienced, a disaster, when added to the obvious dangers he also had to worry about finding food and clean water for himself, his wife and baby Dania, who was not quite one. But he did not think for a second of escaping by the Rafah crossing, even if it were allowed. He had no intention of dying in the dust at the side of a road to somewhere else.

The most famous film he worked on was Ai Weiwei's "Human Flow" of 2017, a documentary about refugees the world over. This too made much use of the bird's eye view, high above trails of people crossing deserts on foot or seas on inflatable boats. But the Gaza episodes he filmed included a laughing group of young Palestinian women, refugees as most Gazans are, perched on a mound of rubble under a bright blue sky. Yes, Gaza was one big prison, they said. But they were strolling and having fun. They were staying, and he would too, on the shore, watching the terns. ■

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