

Voices from Gaza are coming through in podcasts



Unsettled host Ilana Levinson spent two months trying to reach one of her contacts in Gaza for an interview. She had stayed in touch with Isam Hammad, a manager for a medical equipment company in Gaza City, since covering his work organizing the March of Return protest in 2018. But after he fled the city in November, the two hadn't shared much more than the occasional WhatsApp voice note with one another.

When Levinson finally got ahold of Hammad in January, he was in Rafah, trying to get his family to Ireland on a family reunification visa. "I have no internet," he said. "I have had to wake up every night since I made my [visa] application and go to the rooftop, turn on Vodafone Egypt, get the internet, check the list, and go back to sleep."

Levinson and her co-producers spent years building relationships with peace activists from Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. They now find themselves in the position of having access to people on the ground who can give frank accounts of what is happening – access that has been increasingly hard to

come by as the war churns on with no end in sight. That is especially true in Gaza, where foreign journalists are barred from entering unescorted by the Israel Defense Forces, connectivity is spotty at best, and more than 1.7 million people have been displaced from their homes.

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“I think after October 7th, people were really craving these personal stories and context,” said Levinson. “We felt a real obligation toward those new and existing listeners – there is a real need for it in this moment.”

For the media, maintaining access to Gaza has been a challenge, both due to limited communications within the region and strict limitations on physical entry from the outside.

Daniel Estrin, NPR’s international correspondent in Israel, reported from Gaza many times during his tenure at NPR. But since the start of the war, his access has been whittled down to the occasional IDF-guided tour just across the border. A colleague based in Gaza, reporter and photographer Anas Baba, shares accounts and sound from inside the enclave, but Baba has to navigate the same communications blackouts as everyone else.

As a member of the board of the Foreign Press Association of Israel, Estrin was party to a petition sent to the Israeli Supreme Court demanding access to Gaza. “This war is unprecedented in the amount of time that Israel has prevented journalists from entering independently into a war zone,” Estrin said. The petition was denied.

Even within Israel, it can be difficult to get people to talk. *Israel Story*, known as the Israeli *This American Life*, normally operates as a seasonal, narrative show produced in English and Hebrew that sticks to decidedly nonpolitical topics like buses and cows. But after October 7th, the show

shifted into high gear, sending its producers out to all corners of the country gathering people's perspectives. The result has been *Wartime Diaries*, a collection of more than four dozen episodes featuring Israeli citizens impacted by the war. They have included accounts from an archeologist who picked through the ruins of Kibbutz Nir Oz, a Druze journalist fighting for equal rights for his people within Israel, and a resident of a settlement in Gaza who dreams of returning.

Many Israeli-Arab people are afraid to go on the record amid a state crackdown on speech

The series struck a chord with American-Jewish listeners in particular who want to feel connected to Israel during this crisis. Downloads for *Israel Story* have tripled since before the war, and host Mishy Harman and senior producer Yochai Maital began hosting live shows in the US earlier this month.

But the show has struggled to get Israeli-Arab people – who make up 20 percent of the population of Israel – to agree to participate in the *Wartime Diaries* series. Harman says that many are afraid to go on the record amid a state crackdown on speech that has targeted Israeli-Arabs in particular.

"I think we've accrued a reputation as being an honest broker. However, I do think that we are not actually living up to that reputation at the moment," Harman said. "We really are telling a [Jewish] Israeli story here."

The challenge has put an emphasis on the news outlets that were already well established in the region. Al Jazeera, which had staff based in the Gaza Strip before the war, has become a leading source for audiences in the US and Europe due to its established access – access that has been imperiled by a recent ban inside Israel as a result of the outlet's reporting. It has also thrust *The Take*, Al Jazeera's daily news podcast, into the spotlight.

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“With the dearth of access, Al Jazeera is this eye into Gaza. That puts a lot of responsibility on everyone’s shoulders,” said *The Take* executive producer Alex Locke. “What are you going to do with that lens? And how are you going to digest that into a podcast?”

The show has shifted most of its coverage to the war, featuring dispatches from Al Jazeera reporters about the increasingly dire humanitarian and security situation in the enclave. And while most of Al Jazeera’s audience is consuming the news through TV or the website, *The Take*’s team focuses on what audio alone can deliver.

“When you are listening while you’re on your daily commute or washing dishes, and then you stop because you hear tears or you hear what an airstrike sounds like – there’s just something so powerful about that, that no picture can even really can encompass,” said *The Take* host Malika Bilal.

Other podcasts have worked around the lack of access. NPR’s *Throughline*, a series that frames current events within historical context, has seen boosts in listenership around episodes that thoughtfully explore topics like the rise of Israel’s right wing and the origins of Hamas. “You often need to look at something from a 360-degree perspective, which requires you to potentially step back and cover the same moment in time from different vantage points,” said co-host Rund Abdelfatah.

Audio war reporting is a century-old practice, but the shows that are able to gain access today can have an even larger impact thanks to podcasting’s global reach. At the time *Unsettled* aired Hammad’s story in January, he was hitting a wall getting his wife and five kids out of Gaza. Because his son is an Irish citizen, there was a pathway to get some, but not all, of his family members out on a family reunification visa.

Hammad shared on the podcast that his son in Ireland has cerebral palsy. That resonated with a listener in Ireland who has a child with a nonverbal disability as well. After hearing the episode, she got in touch with Hammad, lobbied local politicians, and worked with the Irish government to get him and his family out in March. They are now together in Dublin, waiting until it is safe to return to Gaza.

“For so long, it hasn’t felt like people are even paying attention to what happens in Israel and Palestine,” Levinson said. “In this moment, people are really paying attention, and I’m overwhelmed that it’s possible for journalism to have this kind of impact.”

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