

An Interview with Brian K. Barber

No Way But Forward: On Writing and Publishing about Palestine

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Keywords

Palestine

Life writing

Conflict

Memoir

Gaza

Abstract

This contribution provides a reflection on life writing in contexts of conflict and violence through an interview with Professor Emeritus Brian K. Barber (University of Tennessee), who published a book offering first-hand insight about life in Gaza during the Israeli occupation and the genocide.

“The devaluing of Palestinian life is not a supposition, it is a statistical fact” (Jones 2024). Although this statement by *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones dates back two years, it continues to resonate in current debates. Recent data indicate that, in both the US and in many European countries, sympathy towards Palestinians has increased significantly over the same period (Power 2025; Smith 2025). At the same time, however, the Western attitude towards Gaza and what happened (and is happening) in the Gaza Strip and in other occupied territories has been and still is ambiguous at best.

Some scholars have examined the notion of “selective empathy” (De Vogli 2025) from a psychological point of view, suggesting that the West has indulged in its own bias against Palestine and thus literally turned its gaze away from the atrocities of what has often been defined as “the most documented genocide in history” (“Gaza Is Most Documented Genocide” 2024). Other contributors have decided to foreground first-hand testimonies of life in Gaza under Israeli occupation. Among these, Brian K. Barber’s *No Way But Forward* (2025) offers a perspective of everyday life focusing on the experience of families living there. The book was presented to European audiences during a tour in the fall of 2025, and was shortlisted for the 2025 Independent Author Network Book of the Year Award in the general and inspirational nonfiction section. It was also awarded the 2025 International Book Award for Best Cover

Design. *No Way But Forward* has been translated into Italian and German; a French version is currently in preparation, and Arabic and Hindi translations are anticipated.

Brian K. Barber is Professor Emeritus at the University of Tennessee and has extensively worked on individual and social development in situations of conflict. His most relevant publications include the edited volume *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence* (2008) and several articles in journals such as *PLoS One*, *Lancet*, *Journal of Palestine Studies* and the *American Journal of Public Health*. Between 1994 and 2017, he also carried out three projects on individual and social responses to conflict: *The Palestine Family Study* (1994–1995), *The Gaza and Bosnia Youth Project* (1998–2000), and *The Impact of Political Conflict on Well-being* (2009–2017).

No Way But Forward: Life Stories of Three Families in the Gaza Strip follows the lives of three Palestinian men – Hamam, Hussam and Khalil – whom Professor Barber has interviewed regularly and lived alongside over the past thirty years. The narratives are composed of the events and periods of time identified by the three protagonists themselves as key moments of their lives, from their childhood and education to employment, marriage, child-rearing, all unfolding within the context of the systematic destruction of Gaza by Israeli forces. The personal and emotional dimension of the narrative contributes to its effectiveness, fostering reader engagement and empathy. By not shying away from possible contradictions or inner conflicts, Barber offers a complex and layered portrayal of Gaza, its culture and its people.

We met Professor Barber in Verona, where he presented his book¹ last November during a series of events held at the University and at an independent bookstore as part of his European tour. Some of the questions included in this interview were inspired by that presentation.

Serena Demichelis: *No Way But Forward* is the result of a very long editorial process, during which you faced rejection, opposition and the hardships of self-publishing. When did you start thinking about this book?

Brian Barber: I started thinking about this book quite late in my involvement in Palestine. I went to Palestine first in 1994 as a social scientist interested in youth involvement with political conflict, particularly conflict that involved much violence. Specifically, I was interested in if, when, why, and how young people engage in political activism and how that involvement and the harsh reactions it receives impacts them psychologically, socially, and civically. Such a study was appropriate to be done in Palestine at that time because Palestinian youth had participated to a very high degree in the six-year long *intifada* which ended in 1993.

¹ Barber's book has been translated into Italian by Cloe Curcio for the publisher Sensibili alle Foglie with the title *Resistere a Gaza. Storie di vita di tre famiglie nella Striscia* (2025).

My research teams and I conducted a series of studies over the ensuing decades, always focusing on that same cohort of youth as they aged. Our studies involved individual and group interviews as well as large-sample surveys in all of the occupied Palestinian territories: the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Critical to the success of these studies was my decision in 1996 to begin living for long periods with families, mostly in the Gaza Strip, so I could learn the culture and know the relevant issues to investigate. Between 1996 and 2020 (when the coronavirus hit hard), I spent weeks or months in Gaza, typically twice per year.

Our projects were rigorous and all of our attention was focused on revealing information that we could publish in scientific journals to enlighten the academic community about the lives of Palestinians, virtually all of which challenged the prevailing narrative in Western media and science of Palestinians being an angry and vengeful people. We were successful at publishing our findings widely in numerous highly respected journals.

The first thought I gave to writing *No Way but Forward* was when we had completed our final research project in 2014. All of my other books were academic in nature; I had never considered writing a narrative nonfiction. But I realized that I had a wealth of information on life in Gaza that I wanted to share with broader audiences to help them appreciate the goodness and competence of Palestinians as I had come to know them. Over the decades, I had interviewed countless male and female Palestinians, but for various reasons I focused particularly on three men (with whom I am still in touch): I had first met them when they were in their twenties, and I followed their progress through education, employment, marriage and child-rearing. I was not able to include a female because the prevailing culture then and now does not permit me, as a foreign male, to be alone with an unmarried woman to probe the depths of her experiences.

New America (NA), a progressive thinktank in Washington DC, became very interested in the idea of this book and brought me on as a fellow. NA supports fellows to write books that they view as paradigm-shifting: in my case, they thought that my book would provide a deep and personal view of Palestinians as they make life work, instead of the typical political or economic treatises about the Palestinians. I was very encouraged by NA's interest in the project and worked on assembling the information for the book. Eventually, NA referred me to a prestigious literary agent in Washington DC who had represented books by many past fellows.

For academic books published in the US one doesn't need a literary agent, so I was unfamiliar with this process. For narrative nonfiction works like this, the author works with an agent in crafting a proposal that the agent then markets to publishers. While it was initially very encouraging to be represented by a prominent literary agent, this is when the multi-year nightmare began.

The agent was eager to join the project and had me send him a sample chapter for the book. What followed was a series of four in-person meetings in Washington DC over a period of a couple of months, each meeting lasting approximately thirty minutes.

During the first meeting, the agent inquired about my religion, wanting, seemingly, only to create an opening to declare to me that he was Jewish. In the second meeting, he introduced me to one of his editors, as a “good Jewish girl from Boston.” In the third meeting, he disclosed that he had been torn because half of his friends said he should not represent this book and the other half said that he should. To resolve this dilemma, the agent consulted his Rabbi who said he should do it if the material was true. In the fourth and final meeting, he declared that he needed to be honest with me that the book would not sell as well as other books and that he could not market it to publishers unless it had the endorsement of several prominent Jewish people. Essentially, Bob was saying that a Palestinian voice could only be heard through a Jewish filter of approval. I was stunned and very disappointed.

I consulted another fellow at NA, a successful author who told me that: first, I should shop around for agents before deciding to go with one, and second, an agent needs to be an advocate for the author and book and that this agent appeared clearly not to be so. I was relieved. Fortunately, the agent had not had me sign a contract.

I asked my colleague if he had received an email like I did from an even more prominent literary agent in New York City seeking to represent my book. That agent had learned of my project through NA’s website. I had dismissed it as a generic email to all of the fellows and hadn’t responded. My colleague said he had not received it and advised that I should contact the agent. I did so and agreed to visit Sam on my upcoming trip to Gaza. That meeting lasted four hours.

He was very enthusiastic about the book idea, said that the Gazan story needed to be told, and wanted to sign me on the spot. Knowing that I had not yet resolved things with the DC agent and that I wanted to consult my NA mentor before formally leaving him, I declined the offer to sign, saying that once I returned from Gaza, we could have another discussion.

That second discussion lasted another four full hours, with the agent telling me he had just discussed the book idea with a leading publisher with the editor saying he would be very interested in the book. While in Gaza I had communicated with my NA mentor, who simply reiterated that an agent should be an advocate and that it was perfectly legitimate for me to leave that agent. Thus, at this agent’s renewed request for me to sign on, I felt free to do so. While doing so, I told him about my ordeal with the other agent while not divulging his name. He persisted in trying to get me to divulge the DC agent’s name until he finally guessed right.

He knew that agent and was shocked that he would have treated me so. He said he too was Jewish but would have no prejudice about the book whatsoever. He went so far as to say that my book would be a book of a lifetime for him. Clearly, I was very encouraged.

The NYC agent turned out to be a poor mentor over the next years. Repeatedly, he responded to a draft of the book proposal with “not what I’m looking for, try again,” with no input on how it needed to change. There were long delays in getting feedback on partial drafts and what slowly became clear was that he was struggling himself to know how to pitch the book in the proposal. For example, we worked for over a year on a pitch that began with my experience – why I went to Gaza, why I stayed – only for him to say once the final revision was ready, “Well, I’ve decided we need to go in a different direction.” All that time had been wasted. This time he wanted to begin the proposal with a scene from one of my characters. I felt hostage to him in the sense that he was expert in getting proposals to succeed with publishers. I was not. So, I’d go with whatever he recommended. For my part, I was confident that I could write the actual book, in part because early on he had said that my draft of a scene for Hussam was the best first draft he had ever seen.

Well, all of a sudden, that same draft was badly wanting. He said I needed to get deeper into my characters, that I had not really portrayed them as they are, that they talked about politics too much. How bizarre for someone who does not know my characters or their culture to assert this to the me, the psychologist, who had intense exposure to Gaza over the decades, especially to these three individuals, who, moreover, had read and approved everything I had written about them.

I made a special trip to Gaza to reinterview Hussam and the others to be sure I got deep inside them. I was certain that the subsequent draft of the scene for Hussam would be satisfying. Alas, it was not, but this time finally he revealed what he wanted by inserting into the draft questions at every point that he wanted more detail or insight. Finally, some guidance! I interviewed Hussam for 10 hours in three Zoom sessions, transcribing into the draft his detailed answers to the agent’s question. Surely this would be finally satisfying to the agent, for here were direct answers from Hussam himself.

Then came the fatal email from the agent: “Brian, you need to push Hussam past the political to reveal a deeper, more genuine self that accords with traditional psychology that Americans would understand. And, if you don’t do this, this can’t be considered a human story.” I am still stunned when I reread these audaciously xenophobic statements. Eventually, I replied to the agent, quoting back those two sentences and explaining how terribly wrong they were. Really? I am supposed to transform my characters so that their lives are familiar to Americans. Really? The characters’ experiences should reflect traditional psychology that was developed decades ago by Western, white men? Really? Theirs are not human stories? The agent responded meekly,

said he understood, and that it would be alright to end our relationship. He closed with the shockingly disingenuous statement: “All I’ve wanted to do is help you write the book you’ve wanted to write.”

After this split, I decided to write the proposal on my own. I sent it to many publishers but none bit. By then, October 7 had come and I felt it urgent to get the book out. I was persuaded to self-publish it through Amazon, the most highly rated service.

The journey with Amazon has been fraught with issues. But that’s another story.

SD: This must have been extremely tiring and frustrating, especially since your aim was not to impose your own views on the subject of your writing, but rather to let the stories speak for themselves. In your book, indeed, you offer first-hand insight into life in Gaza through two different narrative strategies. While the first part of *No Way But Forward* comprises three biographical narratives about Hammam, Khalil and Hussam, the second includes your WhatsApp conversations with them dating from October 7, 2023 to October 7, 2024. Why did you opt for this particular format?

BB: This format was not planned. From the beginning, I intended that the book narrate the life stories of these three families up until I submitted the manuscript for publication.

After all of the delays in trying to get the book published traditionally, I was nearly ready to self-publish it when October 7, 2023 took place. I had been communicating continually with all three protagonists, and some of their family members, over the years via WhatsApp. That communication continued after October 7 and it soon occurred to me that it might be highly valuable to report that information in the book as an ongoing narration of life under what came to be the brutal genocide. Instead of extending the narratives I had written, I thought it would be especially powerful to report the messages I was receiving from the three families. Thus, I created a second part to the book comprised of the straightforward recording of those WhatsApp exchanges over a year’s period, beginning on October 7, 2023 and continuing through October 7, 2024. It is a dramatic, heart-wrenching, and inspiring account of survival through that horrendous first year of the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The book, therefore, is unique in two ways. It is the only detailed account of family life in Gaza over a period of three full decades, and, as far as I know, the only year-long account of the experiences of three Palestinian families during the unrelenting bombing, killing, destruction of infrastructure, disease, and starvation of Israel’s continuing assault.

SD: You mention “destruction of infrastructure,” which immediately brings to mind hospitals and schools. Some scholars have claimed that what Israel has been doing in Gaza can also be

termed “scholasticide” (Alarabed 2025). I remember you said the Israelis are not succeeding in this, thanks to the Palestinian love for culture and learning. School, education and the pursuit of academic knowledge emerge as central themes in the narrative – partly because of the protagonists’ professional involvement with education, but also because of the role they play within the Palestinian culture. You are an educator yourself and have researched adolescent development, including the experience of young people in war and conflict: how has this background shaped your work on life in Gaza?

BB: It was actually the work in Palestine that impacted me as a researcher. I was trained as a quantitative social scientist relying mostly on surveys to gather information. Large-scale surveys can be a very valuable research tool as a means of testing hypotheses and theories on populations well-known to the research team creating the survey instruments. In other words, the researchers know the relevant questions to be asked. Another key limitation of survey research is that it can’t get much depth on any topic.

This is how I came to learn this profoundly. We began our work in Palestine in 1994 with a large survey constructed from the questions we could glean from the English-language literature about youth and families in Palestine. There was not much of it. Naturally, as Western researchers typically do, we imported scales on topics we thought would be relevant. We had the 25-page survey (one each for mother, father, and adolescent) carefully back-translated from English into Arabic, and we eventually administered it to 7,000 families in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. We had access through UNRWA² to all 9th grade classrooms (the highest grade in the UNRWA system) across the territories. Students took the surveys home and returned them to school. Research was so novel in those days in Palestine that we achieved an astounding 95% response rate from all three participants in the families. To my knowledge, this remains that largest study ever done on Palestinian families.

As impressive as the rigor and breadth of our study was, I felt uncomfortable when the team began publishing the findings. We had studied twenty-one thousand Palestinians (three per seven thousand families) but hadn’t really spoken in depth to many. This sense of inadequacy was enhanced by a finding that particularly interested me. Western medical and psychological research taught that human beings, especially young people, are injured psychologically and emotionally by exposure to violence – even to just one episode of violence. I had every reason, therefore, to expect to encounter a Palestinian youth population in serious trouble, having spent six years in violent confrontations with Israeli forces. Quite to the contrary, our findings showed unambiguously that this cohort of youth were functioning remarkably well: high self-esteem,

² United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

academic achievement, positive relationships with family and peers, hope for the future, and so on. My academic knowledge could not explain this.

I needed to get much more information from them in order to understand their well-functioning. This is what led me to begin living with families in the Gaza Strip. Or in more academic terms, I needed to switch my research strategy to a more ‘qualitative’ approach akin to anthropology or cultural psychology, whereby I learned to observe and listen carefully to understand the salient issues behind the functioning of the people.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge Dr. Petra Bjelica’s fundamental contribution to the development of this interview. As co-mediator during the meeting with Professor Barber in November, she offered valuable insight into the most pressing issues raised by *No Way But Forward* and helped shape my own intuitions.

Bionote

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