

Bridging Understanding | Amal's story

In the *Bridging Understanding* series, McMaster students who have experienced global crisis, war or conflict share their experiences in their own words. For more on the series, please visit the [McMaster news website](#).

Warning: The topics covered by the interview subjects include grief, loss, trauma, sexual assault, aggression and sexual and gender-based violence. The content of the interviews may be triggering for some. All interview subjects reviewed and approved the material prior to publishing. Views expressed are strictly those of individual participants and are not endorsed by McMaster University. For support, please see the university's [resources page](#).

Interviewer: Tell us about your connection to Palestine.

Amal: I'm Palestinian — I was born there. I came to Canada as a student directly from Palestine to McMaster. So, when I came to Canada, I was a McMaster student.

Palestinians are not privileged people, but I was privileged to have the courage to apply to McMaster and then get accepted. It was kind of something Palestinians do not expect — universities to appreciate them and accept them.

When I came, I had a delay to get my visa because I need the security clearance from the Israelis. They took forever and when I got the visa, I came late into the semester. But I remember at that time the professors were sending new materials and preparing me until I got here.

So yeah, I'm from Palestine and my family is there. I'm by myself in Canada because I came as a student. I stayed for work and then I found love. So, I'm privileged again. And I'm back to finish my degree at Mac.

It is tough to be here at this time and your family is there.

[long pause]

I was born under occupation, and I was born in an isolated town, separated either by checkpoints, gates and fences. I grew up in a fenced village. All the neighbourhoods were fenced and isolated from the main roads Israelis shared.

It was tough for children in elementary school, as a child to go through this – and then sometimes when we got very close to our neighbourhood, because everything is fenced, so they can tell you, “You can't back, go back to the other gate.” And the other gate takes another 45 minutes. And it depends on the weather – if it is hot or cold.

So, to be born in that situation, and then come to a nice, safe and beautiful country.

This privilege turned to trauma.

I am not equal. I don't think I'm different, but it's just like how we live and how they live and all this ... thinking where we are in the world with other people is kind of like taking a lot from us, with war or without war. Because we've never been equal.

And I remember when I came to Canada, people didn't believe I came from Palestine:

“Oh, don't lie. Are you coming from Lebanon? The Gulf countries?”

“No, I am from Palestine.”

“And how did they let you leave?”

Yes, it is very difficult for people to leave or to get a visa or to get approved to go and live in Western country. But again, I was privileged to be here. Brutal.

Another one was “Cool! You're Palestinian.”

What's cool about being Palestinian? We are under occupation. We've been traumatized all our lives and going on trauma for 75 years. I don't know what's cool about it, but some others react with a silent moment, wishing they didn't ask.

There are those awkward moments since I came, and they happen day-to-day. You know, like every time when we're asked, “Where are you *from*?”

We should not normalize, but I mean it's kind of a normal question for Palestinians if they express their identity clearly to other people.

What has it been like for you over the past year to balance what's been happening with your studies?

It is very difficult. This war has a different impact — not just on me, on others — than any other war. The intensity ... it's so intense.

At the beginning of the war, I was in a shock. In a huge shock. All the trauma surfaced so severely. I had huge anxiety, panic attacks. I didn't leave the house for months. I didn't go anywhere. I was in a huge, huge mess. And sickness.

All the trauma from childhood until the time I made it to Canada. I did not make the decision to come to Canada just because I want to seek further education. I applied to come to study in Canada because I just feel like I couldn't take it anymore. I'm a survivor, sexual assault survivor and a war survivor.

So, this war...took all the best of us out.

So that's why the first six months were difficult because the sexual [assault] stories were used in the media everywhere and wherever you go, everyone using it in the way they want to use it without acknowledging there are people under attack at that moment while you are writing this message and there are survivors there who are struggling and there are people who didn't make it.

How many women died in sexual violence?

And how many other voices have never been heard?

My voice was never heard.

[...] After all this anxiety, I had the...I don't know what it was: Lack of sleep? Lack of control?

After October 7, everyone from every side was talking about sexual assault propaganda. I'm a sexual assault survivor, a checkpoint survivor.

I was sexually assaulted on my first day going to a new job.

You need a permit to go to Jerusalem. At that time, cars took us to work, but on the first day the arrangement was not finished yet. So, I had to go by myself.

I couldn't tell anyone about that.

After all this time, this was triggering and painful and led me to speak about my experience for the first time.

So this year, it was very tough.

It was not just the killing and the amount of the mass killing and mass violence against women and children.

Even when I was working there, I witnessed children impacted by the occupation, women in the Israeli prison. I was not able to talk about my experiences because women back home are at risk because of their husbands and their children.

They will threaten you if you open your mouth, they will come after your siblings, your brothers, your husband, your — any male in the family. And that's how women are carrying all that back home.

Like I witnessed my grandmother being tortured. Her clothes had been ripped for [owning a banned] book and then she tells me: "Don't tell anyone. Do not tell your grandpa. Do not tell your father. Do not tell anyone about what happened to us. We women will take care of us. We will clean up and then we will continue."

So then, to see these cases have been dealt with no responsibility in social media. I was dying, mentally dying. I am so grateful I have my community's support. I have therapy, and, at that time, I used to have three sessions a week, because the panic attacks were about to kill me.

I am not 100% of course, but better.

Then in December 2023, Christmas Eve, we had a FaceTime with my family and my dad had stroke through the FaceTime. So I called the ambulance. My uncle is a doctor, so he came in first and then the ambulance. And we watched when my dad in the ambulance couldn't pass the checkpoint.

We didn't make it to the hospital because the hospital was under siege.

The worst part was that he died in his bed. He couldn't make it to the hospital.

The worst part for me and my siblings was that we thought, "Oh we are so grateful. He died in his bed clean and safe and not in the street. Imagine how many bodies are in the street!"

You minimize your trauma because there are other traumas stronger than yours. There are other tragedies happening worse than yours.

And then you are ashamed even to speak because he died normally from a stroke in his bed. He couldn't make it to the hospital. And if he could make it to the hospital, he probably would have survived. We don't know about that.

If you are sick, you can't seek good health care. Hospitals are not an option at this time, with checkpoints.

In my time before I came to Canada, it was over 715 checkpoints; At this time, I think it's 870 checkpoints. And imagine, you know like ... my town has been historically with checkpoints controlling movement in and out from both sides and those limited everything in your life, everything, everything: Movement. Access to health, access to education — people don't use the main roads, everything is alternative routes.

And because I know that life. And not just feeling the survivor's guilt and because I know what's happening when someone talks about all the torture — I know how it looks and how it happened and how the atrocity was because I witnessed it. I lived it. I was there.

It adds more in my body. It adds more of that "Why am I not there? Why am I here? I don't fit here."

And then you think, you know, this year as much as we work to fit and belong to this society, we found out we do not belong to this society at all.

Because we felt we are alone, a lot of people are scared to even mention the word Palestine.

If you want to get support from your friends, they have to think about it multiple times before they give you this support because they don't want to lose their job because they don't want to see ... like all this hesitance.

And then makes you think, "Why am I here, why am I not there?"

And I'm just like, "Why are they not living the same life I live?" But I do want you to come and live, you know, because I can't pull you out of that. And then the rest: Not feeling well, staying in the same occupation and all this...

I told my therapist the other day she told me: "You are taking it in — like, the responsibility, you are doing this and this and this, and that and that and that."

And I want to help this. I want to donate that. You know like after these six months of crazy life at home, screaming and crying and all the trauma.

And now it's just come to: I want to help everyone.

I ended up sending an e-mail to someone, a newcomer, and said, "Hey, welcome to McMaster. We have these services at Mac. Do you know that the community..." and then one of my professors called me and she said, "you are taking too much on yourself, and you can leave it. Everyone will find their resources by themselves."

I know, I know. I'm just trying to help. Anyways, and then all this is not going to help you. And of course, in your achievement and your deadlines.

You mentioned therapy and the community are very important. What are other things that help you get from one day to the next?

I'm struggling in one of my classes.

I had the courage to speak to the professor, and she was very supportive because I'm missing a deadline and she's very supportive and understanding of what's going on back home and how it's impacting our health mentally.

"OK don't worry about the deadline, you know, like work on your project and keep submitting. Take your time." And I appreciate that at the education level.

Here, of course, you know, like the healing circles are really good, but not enough. Not enough services inside the university and it's just kind of like the person has to go and scratch and look for it. It's not going to come to the Palestinian students at Mac.

No one will call you [and say], "Oh, you are Palestinian, and you might be struggling," or something like that. No one will do that. No, you have to go by yourself. And this is tough. And between the load of work, it's very difficult to think about services.

I have the support from my professors but it's individuals, not systematic.

What kind of advice would you give other students who might be struggling in a similar way? You mentioned wanting to help people.

I do. I do. I pay attention to students, if they are doing OK, if they need any help. I haven't been asked for any help, but I have been raising it, like, "Please, if you are not OK, if you are having any struggles, you will find the support not just from me, but from professors or others."

I tried to speak up to them, but it's sometimes a little bit... it's just sensitive.

Do you find it hard to find hope in this situation?

Hope is not ... hope is ... I'm an optimistic person and I'm struggling very much. Look, as a student, I see these bright students and they are so smart and bright. And it's just like they are my happiness. When I'm around them, I see how they work and ask questions.

But it's a sad moment because my nephew is back home in university, and he's not been in full time school. He doesn't have the life these students have.

They have been in virtual on and off for a year and a half. The whole first year was virtual, and I thought when the pandemic was done — not for the Palestinians. And then when I think of him, it just makes me very sad. Very, very sad.

How McMaster provides for students, and my people back home and my [nephew] is not getting the same educational environment we have here, or the safety to access education.

What are your thoughts or plans about the future?

It is too much, you know? Like I know, I know we Palestinians — we teach life. There is Palestinian poetry that says we teach life.

I know we have to get up every day and continue, but it is tough.

Back home, people are always in bombing. There are massacres, we mourn, we don't work the next day but then yeah, we have to go.

You don't know when you are in lockdown. You don't know when you are allowed to move. So, for them, it's always about resistance. Like how their movement is going to work, going to school. [...] we have to check that the checkpoint is open or not because they allow you to leave to go to school.

But here, at this moment, it's so difficult to be a dreamer.

It's very difficult because what's the future? I know my future in Canada and it is not 100% secure because I'm Palestinian. If I say anything, I don't know if I'm going to be questioned or investigated or if my immigration or citizenship would be impacted etcetera. So, we all have this attached to our day-to-day thinking.

My partner is not Palestinian, and we talk about going to Palestine. We say that we're going to go one day. But it's *one* day — when we are allowed, when it's safe, when it's this and that. It's not something you can...

Two-thirds of my life before I came to Canada was under curfew and lockdown.

And here, I'm free ... and I'm not.

Sometimes it's so difficult to say yes, I want to be a professor, I want to be a researcher. I want to be this. I want to be that. And then your country is not part of your tree. Your family back home is not part of your tree. You can't mix these lives together.

It's very difficult. It's so lonely in everything. That's why, even when you look at the resources, it's lonely to look for the resources. It's lonely to deal with all this at this moment.

When my nephews or my nieces call, they ask, "Do you have soldiers? Do you have a bomb or something?" Then I say no, and they ask, "How come you don't have the same thing?"

My brother in another country says the same, asking 'Why just us?' We all grew up around it.

Is there anything else you would like to cover?

We talk about sustainability ... Harvesting storm water is illegal by the Israelis. Palestine is not even part of the conversation at Mac, inside the class.

Palestinian students can't even share their experience in the subject, even if it is professional or technical things inside the room, because it's not welcome.

Like, even if the professors or the teachers are sympathizing, it's the fear that will end the conversations or make it, you know, like "I didn't hear." And it bothers me a lot.

And that's kind of like, it's not fair, it's not bringing any equal involvement or engagement, within the students.

I remember discussing policies about chemical materials in class. I said in Palestine those policies are different. The worldwide policy is not applicable because health is not the important thing. We are banned from this material for safety.

Israel banned it so we can't have access to it because it's explosive. It's not because it's increased the health issues. If we drink it, they don't care, but they don't want us to have access to any explosive material.

In policy, it's different. You can't bring this policy to Palestine because it's not applicable.

I wasn't able to continue in this conversation. It wasn't something they wanted to talk about. Instead of saying, "Oh, I didn't know that," it was "Let's change the subject to not go further into that."

Those things need to be to be addressed at McMaster to bring equity within the students, because we are here to bring diversity because diversity brings and widens knowledge.

If I'm from Palestine, I have the right to share how things have been applied in Palestine. And if my perspective is not allowed ... Why are we here? How are we going to belong?

Because I was born under occupation, I've been labeled for all my years, and my voice has not been heard.

Before I came to Canada, I witnessed all the advanced weapons. If you want to conduct research about weapon development, go talk to Palestinians because all the weapons around the world have been tested on us.

When I was child, [we had] this rubber bullet.

This rubber bullet didn't kill you; it just hurt you or something. Then the rubber bullet advanced to rubber bullet with a needle inside. So, it will hit you and then the needle goes and will break inside or something. And then the shape of the bullet changed from round to cylinders because the cylinders damaged more than the round. And then from one needle to a bunch of nails that will explode inside you. From a rubber bullet with nothing to one full with bear spray.

When we had a conversation about drones, I'd leave the class. Because drones, it's 24 hours monitoring us back home. If I brought my mom on the phone right now, you would hear the drone in the background.

And then I came and engaged in the discussion of this technology. I've never been comfortable around it because ethics is missed. And when we say, Oh, the ethics around it and we talk about the policy around it, it's just that those are applicable on the Canadian soil, but not applicable on other soil.

How are you going to use these drones? What kind of impact is it going to have on the people and the ecosystem?

I don't want to use drones because it's not applicable to Palestinians because the ecosystem is everyone in the ecosystem. If you damage the land and the trees and human beings, you damage the ecosystem. It's all connected.

When I support the divestment inside McMaster, I support to divest because of this. We should not allow our bright future and bright students and bright brains just to be used to damage and kill others.

Why are our students working in the weapons factories after all these years of engineering education to just to develop weapons?

When I speak to the students and we talk about sustainability, I always put focus on ethics and nature and human beings. You never do any work that will harm nature or human beings. It's not sustainable.