Killed in an Israeli Airstrike, Gazan Poet Refaat Alareer Broke Through the Blockade's Borders

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Refaat Alareer, who died alongside several close family members, wrote in English about life in Gaza. A severe critic of Israel, he taught young Gazans to use their writing as a tool of Palestinian resistance

On December 7, Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer was killed in an Israeli airstrike on Gaza City along with his brother, sister and her four children. In a tribute to the poet, CNN noted that he was killed a few weeks after saying that he and his family had nowhere to go.
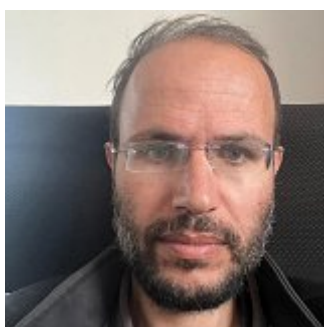
The late Gazan poet and professor Refaat Alareer, who was killed in Gaza this month.Credit: Screenshot from X

CNN, one of many international media outlets to eulogize Alareer, added that he had asked that if he died, could CNN publish the last thing he told the network's Sana Noor Hak? The message: His father, brothers, sisters and his own family all had to evacuate. They deliberated whether to stay together or separate, so that if something happened, at least they wouldn't all die.

A Palestinian woman holds a sign with a quote from a poem by The late Gazan poet Refaat Alareer, this week in Ramallah, in the occupied West Bank.Credit: MARCO LONGARI - AFP

The 44-year-old Alareer, who was married with six children, was also a professor of English literature at the Islamic University of Gaza. His writings have been translated into several languages.

"Alareer was one of the leaders of a young generation of writers in Gaza who chose to write in English to tell their stories," The Guardian wrote, adding that he had written a raft of eulogies for Gazans on social media during the war. Time magazine noted the last audio message Alareer sent in before he was killed: The world needed to know what was happening in Gaza.

Before October 7, the name Alareer meant nothing to Israelis, but readers of his tweets on X now know about his criticism of Israel, some of which triggered harsh responses. Alareer denied that Hamas raped anyone on October 7 and mocked claims of babies being beheaded during the massacre (claims that turned out to be false).

He said all this was Israeli propaganda. Following these and other statements, some people said the Israeli military should kill him.

Gaza resident Muhammad Shehada was one of Alareer's students; Shehada writes English-original op-eds for Haaretz. He wrote on X after Alareer's death that Refaat had criticized him a lot, but Shehada was the first to mourn him. He also noted a key event in Alareer's life: In 2014 an Israeli bomb hit his house, killing 30 of his relatives and leaving him homeless.

Alareer's tweet denying that Hamas raped Israeli women on October 7.

Years ago, Alareer strove to tell the world what was happening in Gaza; it was difficult to get permission to leave and tell people in person. He started writing short stories in English; 15 such efforts by young writers were collected in the 2014 book "Gaza Writes Back," edited by Alareer. He was also a founder of the initiative We Are Not Numbers, which since 2014 has been collecting English-language short stories by young Gazans.

These efforts made Alareer better known in the West. In 2015, he edited the book "Gaza Unsilenced," whose essays and poems document the ways young Gazans contended with the blockade by Israel and Egypt. He taught young Gazans to use their writing as a tool of Palestinian resistance. He gave them a platform and provided guidance not just on writing but on life in general.

Actor Brian Cox read a poem by Alareer.

Last year, he wrote a piece for the English-language anthology "Light in Gaza: Writings Born of Fire."

The young Gazan poet Mosab Abu Toha eulogized Alareer on social media: "My heart is broken, my friend and colleague Refaat Alareer was killed with his family a few minutes ago. I don't want to believe this."

The Gazan editor Jehad Abusalim added that he had known Alareer since he was 17; Alareer had taught him in his first writing course in English. He said Alareer was more than a teacher, he was a mentor and friend, someone who looked after his students beyond the classroom.

According to Abusalim, Alareer's passion was English; for him, language was a tool for battling the academic, cultural and intellectual blockade on Gaza. A few days before his death, Alareer posted a poem he had written in 2011. "If I must die, let it be a tale," he wrote. Since his death, young Palestinians have been quoting this line at demonstrations. In a tribute to Alareer, the Scottish actor Brian Cox ("Succession") read the poem in a video posted on X.

Sheren Falah Saab

P.S.

• Haaretz. Dec 17, 2023:
https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2023-12-17/ty-article-magazine/.premium/killed-in-an-israeli-airstrike-this-gaza-poet-broke-through-a-blockades-borders/0000018c-77ee-d1e1-a3ae-77eee0560000