

Narratives Under Siege (5): Hassan Sheikh Hijazi Flower Farm



The industrial refrigerator at Hassan Hijazi's farm stores 100,000 flowers. But he cannot sell them.

When Hassan Sheikh Hijazi first opened his flower farm in 1991, it flourished. "We had a very good family business," he says. "We exported hundreds of thousands of flowers to Holland – and from there our flowers were sold across Europe. The traders knew our flowers were good quality - and Gaza was open for business."

With its mild coastal weather and well drained soil, the Gaza Strip is an ideal location for commercial flower farming. There are more than a hundred small flowers farms across the Gaza Strip, and they employ some 7,000 farm workers between them.

The majority of farms are located around Beit Lahia in northern Gaza; but Hassan Hijazi and his family live just outside Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, where they have a small flower farm of 24 donums (a donum is around 1,000 square metres). They grow carnations and chrysanthemums. After more than seventeen years as a commercial flower farmer, Hassan Hijazi is now head of the local Rafah Flower Farmers Union.

"Ten years ago farmers across Gaza were exporting 80 million flowers a year to Europe, including roses" he says. "But the last few years have been extremely difficult, and this one has been the worst yet. I exported exactly 20,000 flowers this year due to the closure. I have lost more than one million Shekels; but so has every flower farmer in Gaza. We are all just losing money now."

The average annual turnover of Gaza's commercial flower industry is \$13 million. However, it costs the farmers more than \$5 million to plant and maintain their flowers, with every donum of flowers costing around 30,000 Shekels (\$7,500) to plant, plus another 1,000 Shekels (\$250) to maintain. In a good year a donum can yield up to 120,000 flowers. According to the Palestinian Authority (PA), 45 million cut flowers were exported from Gaza in 2006, representing more than 3% of all exports from the Gaza Strip. But this year, according to the Beit Hanoun Agricultural Association, farmers in Gaza have been permitted to export just 5.5 million cut flowers, yielding a total profit of \$28,000 between them. The closure is devastating Gaza's commercial flower industry, with some farmers resorting to uprooting thousands of flowers they can no longer afford to grow. In the last few weeks there have been demonstrations in Beit Hanoun and Rafah, with farmers offering bouquets women and girls – and feeding armfuls of loose flowers to cows and goats, to symbolise the wanton waste of their work.

Ahmed Fujou has worked on Hassan Hijazi's flower farm for the last thirteen years, and offers to show us around. We stroll down a mud track, and less than ten minutes later find ourselves surrounded by rows of greenhouses filled with ripe carnations. "We have fifty different shades of carnations" says Ahmed, as we wander amidst swathes of red and white, yellow and pink flowers. "We should have harvested all these flowers by now; but there is no point. We can't even sell the flowers we have harvested. Let me show you."

He guides us inside the farm warehouse, to a large industrial refrigerator. When he opens the door, it is stacked with carnations and chrysanthemums of every imaginable shade. "There are more than 100,000 flowers in here" he says. "But we can't export them because of the closure. We have another industrial refrigerator with the same number of flowers inside – we've been hoping to export at least some of them. But Gaza is closed – so we are going to have to turn the refrigerators off, and feed these flowers to the cattle. We can't even afford to pay the electricity bill." The closure of Gaza has imposed chronic shortages of electricity across Gaza daily.

We return to Hassan Hijazi's house for coffee, where we meet Hassan's son, Mohammed. "My father is sixty six year old now," says Mohammed. "He should be enjoying his retirement, but instead he is going to have to close his farm. But this issue is not just about my father – this is about the destruction of Gaza." Hassan and Mohammed Hijazi say they are angry and frustrated that Israel is effectively killing the entire farming industry across the Gaza Strip. But they also hold the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the European Union responsible for their silence in the face of the continuing closure.

"Shame on Israel" says Mohammed Hijazi. "But shame on the Palestinian Authority, too. My father represents many local flowers farmers in southern Gaza, but no-one from the Ministry of Agriculture has even contacted us during this crisis. And shame on the European Union, because they have done nothing either. Why are they standing back in silence and allowing this to happen to us. Tell me – what is the security risk in exporting flowers?"