



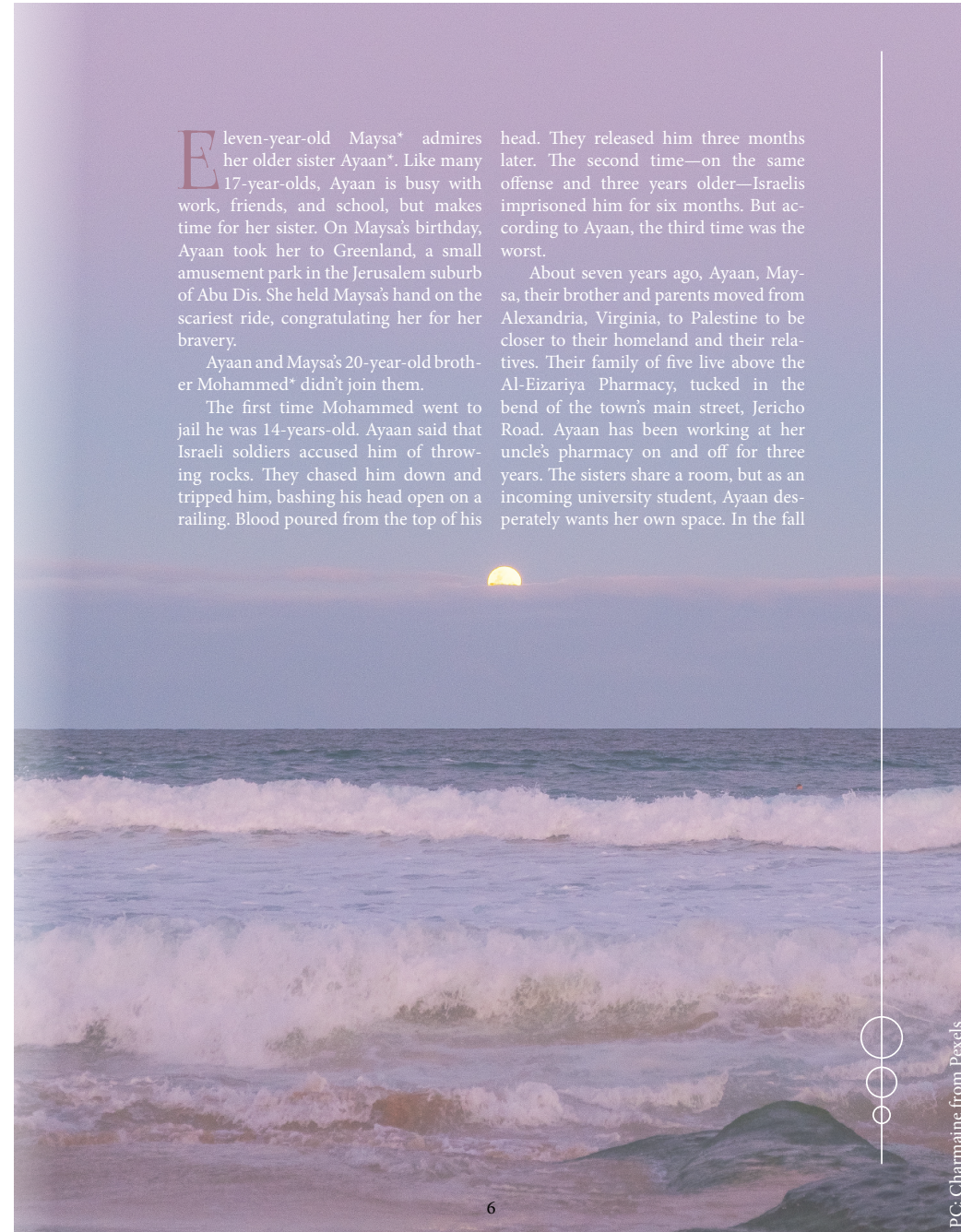
PC: Laila Shadid, Banksy's Walled Off Hotel

## THREE TIMES TOO MANY

Laila Shadid

*Since 1967, Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank have lived under Israeli military occupation, a discriminatory dual legal and political system that restricts economic opportunity, freedom of movement, livelihood, and other basic human rights. The effects of occupation have resulted in limited resources for youth and high exposure to violence.*

*The narrative of Israeli occupation too often excludes the perspective of children, arguably one of the most vulnerable demographics of this injustice. Through the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Laila Shadid spent eight weeks living and reporting in the suburbs of East Jerusalem, conducting interviews with children in the towns of Al-Eizariya and Abu Dis, and the Dheishah refugee camp in Bethlehem.*



Eleven-year-old Maysa\* admires her older sister Ayaan\*. Like many 17-year-olds, Ayaan is busy with work, friends, and school, but makes time for her sister. On Maysa's birthday, Ayaan took her to Greenland, a small amusement park in the Jerusalem suburb of Abu Dis. She held Maysa's hand on the scariest ride, congratulating her for her bravery.

Ayaan and Maysa's 20-year-old brother Mohammed\* didn't join them.

The first time Mohammed went to jail he was 14-years-old. Ayaan said that Israeli soldiers accused him of throwing rocks. They chased him down and tripped him, bashing his head open on a railing. Blood poured from the top of his

head. They released him three months later. The second time—on the same offense and three years older—Israelis imprisoned him for six months. But according to Ayaan, the third time was the worst.

About seven years ago, Ayaan, Maysa, their brother and parents moved from Alexandria, Virginia, to Palestine to be closer to their homeland and their relatives. Their family of five live above the Al-Eizariya Pharmacy, tucked in the bend of the town's main street, Jericho Road. Ayaan has been working at her uncle's pharmacy on and off for three years. The sisters share a room, but as an incoming university student, Ayaan desperately wants her own space. In the fall

of 2022, she began her college-career at the local Al-Quds University with hopes of becoming a doctor.

The morning after her brother was arrested by Israeli soldiers, Ayaan had a pop quiz in English class. Her younger sister stayed home, but Ayaan could not skip a day of 11th grade and jeopardize her attendance record. It was May 2021, and the school year was coming to an end. Ayaan was focused on maintaining a high grade point average to maximize her options for college admissions.

Mohammed was one of five to 700 Palestinian children prosecuted in Israeli military courts each year, according to Defense for Children International–Palestine (DCIP).

“Kids as young as 12 can easily be taken by the army and thrown in jail,” Ayaan said, citing a statistic confirmed by DCIP. “Boys have to be more careful with their lives here...Even if they’re just walking past and a soldier sees them and thinks that they were throwing rocks, they can be taken.”

Since the fall of 2020, the Israel Prison Service (IPS) has stopped supplying B’Tselem, a non-governmental organization and information center for statistics on Palestinian human rights, with numbers of minors in Israeli custody. However, at the end of September of that year,

there were a total of 157 minors being held as “security detainees and prisoners” and considered “criminal offenders” by the IPS. DCIP estimates that 13,000 Palestinian children have been “detained, interrogated, prosecuted, and imprisoned” since 2000.

Ayaan shook her head. “They literally don’t care who you are.”

On that fateful night, Ayaan’s mother went to answer the loud knocks at the front door, but she could not make out the figures’ faces without the porch light that they turn off at night. Her mother thought that something must have happened to her grandmother, why else would men be standing on her doorstep at 2 a.m.?

“So [my mother] opened it,” Ayaan said, “and they swarmed in.”

Maysa heard her mother scream—she was nine years old at the time. She remembered that her mother did not have time to put on her hijab. She also recalls the two female soldiers who entered her and her sister’s room. They woke the girls up, instructed them to move to their mother’s room, and waited with guns pointed at their door—guns Ayaan described as “huge.” Another 10 to 15 soldiers searched the home, flipping mattresses, tearing pillows open, and throwing clothes out of dressers. They

wore bulky padding and bullet proof vests, leading police dogs in and out of the rooms.

While Ayaan remembers her younger sister being scared of the soldiers, or *jeish* in Arabic, Maysa tells a different story.

“When they came to my house I was kind of panicking at first,” Maysa said, “but at the end...I was just walking around them like it’s nothing. They were just looking at me, and my mom was really screaming—she was scared [for] me. I was like, I don’t care, they can do anything.”

Maysa sighed. “[The Israelis] ruin my childhood.”

They stayed in their mother’s room until the soldiers left, and when they finally did, Ayaan and her mother stood on the balcony to watch them walk away with Mohammed.

Ayaan couldn’t even step foot in her room—it was torn apart. Instead, she sat on the couch and waited for the sun to rise.

Ayaan’s mother wished she realized who was standing at their front door. She wished she had taken her son’s phone before the soldiers did. But Mohammed was talking on the phone that night, planning a visit to his father’s in America. His mother was the only one who said goodbye—the girls didn’t know he was

being arrested.

Whenever Mohammed was arrested it was at the end of the school year, so Ayaan’s teachers and classmates were not surprised when they heard the news. By the third arrest, Ayaan was more angry that she could not find her school clothes in the morning amid the mess.

“I had a test that day and I had to tell my teacher, ‘I can’t take the test, I’m only on two hours of sleep. They came and took my brother.’”

“I was...really mad.”

Ayaan recognized that occupation forces children to mature quickly, especially young boys like her brother. When they were young, Ayaan said, they were protective of each other.

“We were best friends—you wouldn’t believe we were siblings.”

Once they arrived in Palestine, they drifted apart. By the time Mohammed was in 8th grade, they stopped talking all together.

“He got sucked into the environment here,” Ayaan said.

Since his last arrest, Mohammed has been released from jail, but he remains distant from his sisters.

Ayaan wishes that they could “go back to being best friends.”

*\*All names have been changed.*