

With no safety in Rafah, Palestinians are fleeing back to Gaza's decimated center

Escalating attacks, unlivable conditions in tents, and a looming Israeli invasion are forcing many Palestinians to abandon the Strip's last refuge

Tuesday 19 March 2024, by [AMER Ruwaida Kamal](#), [MAHDI Ibtisam](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2024).

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Palestinians at the site of Israeli airstrikes in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, February 12, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

Rafah is nearing breaking point. The small city on Gaza's southern border with Egypt [has swelled](#) in recent months to accommodate approximately 1.5 million Palestinians displaced from all over the besieged Strip. Residing predominantly in hastily erected and poorly insulated tents, and [starving](#) from the severe lack of food, every family here has a heart wrenching story of loss and survival. The fear of what's still to come, though, is overpowering.

Rafah was supposed to be a “safe zone,” a haven in which to seek refuge from Israel's relentless bombardment and ground assault. But this was never really the case: Israel has been bombing Rafah [the whole time](#). Now the airstrikes are intensifying — even [targeting the tent encampments](#) — and the Israeli army's long-threatened invasion of the city appears imminent.

On March 2, an Israeli airstrike [killed](#) at least 11 Palestinians living in tents next to the Emirati Hospital in the Tel al-Sultan neighborhood, west of Rafah's center. Mahmoud Ahmed, 36, was nearby with his family. “We were sitting and talking in our tent when suddenly we heard the sound of a powerful explosion and felt the tent being blown aside,” he told +972.

“My son was playing with the neighbors, and I rushed out screaming and looking for him,” Ahmed recounted. “After an hour, he came back crying and shaking. He had been near the site of the bombing, and out of fear he forgot where our tent was.”

Aya Rous, a mother of four who is also 36, was already living in Rafah with her family before the war started. “At first we thought Rafah was safe,” she explained. “We took in many relatives displaced from the areas that the army ordered them to leave. But suddenly, life in Rafah changed. Places started being targeted more. Now, we are afraid to leave our home. There are no safe areas here.”

Palestinians at the site of a destroyed building from an Israeli airstrike in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, March 12, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

On March 9, Israel [bombed](#) Burj al-Masry — one of the largest residential towers in Rafah, which was home to approximately 300 people — after warning the residents to evacuate. And it was nearby to where Rous is living: “This tower is huge, and around it are schools sheltering thousands of

displaced people. Everyone rushed out in fear, screaming and looking for another safe place. The missiles didn't succeed in destroying the whole building, but does that mean we're safe? Of course not."

As a result of the intensification of Israel's bombings in the city, some Palestinians who took refuge in Rafah have fled to areas further north. "The displaced people who were sheltering with us in our home went elsewhere in the [Al-Mawasi area](#)," Rous explained. "They became afraid of the city and felt that they were in danger."

"We are all terrified that we will experience what we saw in Gaza City, Khan Yunis, and other areas of the Gaza Strip here in Rafah. Where will we go to find safety? All we can do is pray daily for the negotiations to succeed and for the war to stop."

'I fear constantly that the bombing will reach me'

"We came to Rafah because [Israel] said it was safe," Rana Al-Louh, a 35-year-old mother from Gaza City, told +972. "We couldn't find a house to rent because the city was already overcrowded, so we pitched a tent in the Tel al-Sultan area [west of the city center]. Thousands more displaced people did the same, and before long the area had turned into a tent city."

Al-Louh explained that she lives in a daily state of tension and fear due to the continuous bombing of the city. "Recently, the targeting has increased everywhere," she explained. "The sounds of shells and missiles never stop. Sometimes I imagine the sound of a missile landing and where it will explode."

Palestinians who were displaced from their homes seen near their tents in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, February 5, 2024. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

"Even worse is targeting the tents," Al-Louh continued. "They know that the tents contain displaced people who left their homes looking for a safe place, but unfortunately there are no exceptions for anyone. I fear constantly that the bombing will reach me. I'm afraid of losing my children. We are all targets."

Her daughter, Balsam, is 9 years old. "She asks me every day when we will return to our home," Al-Louh said. "She keeps telling me she misses her room and her toys, and she complains about the lack of food."

"In the Emirati Hospital, where I took her because she was sick, she saw a child who was martyred," Al-Louh went on. "She screamed and cried for her. She was terrified, and ever since then she has been dreaming of that girl and asking me, 'Am I going to die like her?'"

On March 3, Rania Abu Anza, 32, lost her husband and their infant twins along with 12 other relatives in an [Israeli airstrike](#) on a residential building in Rafah's eastern Al-Salam neighborhood.

"I gave birth to my two beautiful children after 10 years of fertility treatments," she told +972. "I spent so much money to make this birth successful. So many injections. Once I knew I was pregnant, I took such good care of my health for the pregnancy. My husband accompanied me like a shadow so that I wouldn't get tired. He tried to provide me with everything I needed — medicines and food."

Palestinians search for missing people under the rubble after an Israeli airstrike on a house belonging to the Abu Anza family, Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, March 3, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

"At the beginning of the war, I was eight months pregnant, and he tried to calm me down so that I wouldn't worry, which might affect my pregnancy," Abu Anza continued. "But two days after the war began, I needed an emergency C-section. At the end of the eighth month, I gave birth to my two children, Wissam and Naeem. All of my relatives who lived with us in the building took care of my health and supported me to successfully give birth. We were so happy with these two children, and my husband worked all day for NIS 20 (around \$5.50), in order to provide milk and diapers for the children.

"On the night of March 3, I was at my mother-in-law's house," she recounted. "Everyone was helping me with the children, and I fell asleep. Suddenly, I woke up to the sound of people pulling me out of the rubble. I was screaming, looking for my husband and my two children, but I found them all martyred. I wished I had been, too. I do not know how I will live without them.

"This heartbreak will remain with me forever. We were planning for the month of Ramadan, and how to take care of our children. Now I am alone, without any of my dreams."

'A tent cannot be compared to a house — even a damaged one'

In mid-February, Benny Gantz, a member of Israel's war cabinet, announced that Israel would invade Rafah if Hamas did not release the remaining Israeli hostages by the start of Ramadan. This threat, along with the intensification of Israel's attacks on the city and the difficulties of living for a sustained period in a tent, has led some Palestinians who had sought refuge in Rafah to flee north to other parts of Gaza.

Munther Matar spent two months in Rafah before returning to live in his partially destroyed home in Al-Maghazi refugee camp, in Gaza's central area, at the end of February. He originally fled the camp in late December after Israeli airstrikes leveled an entire block, killing more than 80 people.

Palestinians wait for a hot meal prepared by volunteers in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, February 9, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

"I feared for my family, especially since I have a child suffering from quadriplegia; when he is afraid, his body stiffens and becomes heavy and difficult to move," Matar told +972. "I decided to move to Rafah after the [Israeli] army said it is a safe area."

In Rafah, Matar couldn't afford to buy his family a tent of their own, so they lived in one belonging to his in-laws in the west of the city. "But then all my children fell ill because of the conditions in the tent, and my daughters became infected with head lice," he explained. "It was difficult to use the toilet in the tent camp, and with the constant Israeli threats of an invasion, I decided to return to my home in Maghazi. I wanted to spend Ramadan at home, too."

Before returning to the camp with his wife and children, Matar went to the area to make sure it was safe and that it would be possible to find water. He sealed off two rooms that were badly damaged in Israel's December attacks, and moved his family back in to the rest of the house. "I cannot describe the difficulty of life in a tent," he said. "It cannot be compared to living in a house — even a damaged one."

"The most difficult thing is to keep moving from one place to another and adapt to the new conditions each time," said Umm Muhammad Haloub, who has now fled three times since the war began along with her husband and the families of their three married children: from Beit Hanoun in the north to Deir al-Balah in the center; from Deir al-Balah to Rafah; and from Rafah back to Deir al-Balah.

The family made the decision to leave Rafah after Feb. 13, when the Israeli army fired an artillery shell at tents near where they were sheltering in the west of the city, wounding several Palestinians. "We survived these attacks once, so I pressured my husband and children to return to Deir al-Balah," Haloub explained.

Raed Al-Shafei fled to Rafah in early November with his wife and five children amid Israel's bombardment of Nuseirat refugee camp. "It was very difficult to find a place to take refuge because Rafah was very crowded and there is no empty spot in the city," he said. "But one of my neighbors saw me by chance; he hosted me in his tent and allowed me to put up a tent next to it."

After 45 days, however, Al-Shafei decided to return to Nuseirat — despite the risks entailed. "I began to hear about the threats to invade Rafah by the Israeli army, as well as hearing about the return of many [Nuseirat] camp residents. We were told that the conditions are calmer there, even though there is no safe place. To live in your house is better than a tent, where there is no dignity."

Al-Shafei left his tent standing in Rafah and gave it to a neighbor from the camp, who insisted on staying in the southern city because his home in Nuseirat had been destroyed by Israel's attacks. "The tent was left standing for any future reason, as the situation in this war is unstable," Al-Shafei added. "We do not know what the Israeli army will do."

Ruwaida Kamal Amer and Ibtisam Mahdi

P.S.

- +972. March 14, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/khan-younis-safe-corridor-abuse/>

Ruwaida Kamal Amer is a freelance journalist from Khan Younis.

Ibtisam Mahdi is a freelance journalist from Gaza specializing in reporting about social issues, especially concerning women and children. She also works with feminist organizations in Gaza on reporting and communications.

- Our team [+972] has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible

period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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