

# 'People Are Constantly Cursing Sinwar': Gazans Opposing Hamas Are Sure They're the Majority

Thursday 4 April 2024, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2024).

**Four Gazans who spoke with Haaretz rail against the Hamas leader in the Strip and the decision to go to war on October 7. They say many people fear that Hamas will punish them for speaking out, and blame the Arab media for looking the other way when someone criticizes the group**

*Palestinians gathering for food in Jabalya in northern Gaza late last month. Credit: Mahmoud Issa/Reuters*

The donkey cart full of people and mattresses is one of the sights of the war on Gaza and the current siege. "More than once, I've heard a cart owner urging his donkey on and saying something like, 'Move it, Yahya Sinwar, move it,'" says Basel (a pseudonym, as I've used for everyone in this article).

Basel, 30, stayed in the northern [Gaza Strip](#) despite the Israeli army's order to evacuate, because his elderly parents couldn't move south. They live in a half-demolished house with plastic sheets - to cover the shattered windows - that don't protect them from the cold. Many of his relatives have been killed in the bombardment, including nieces he was close to. They were playing outside when a target nearby was hit.

Yes, Israel bombs and kills, Basel says, but he refuses to absolve Hamas from responsibility for the catastrophe that has befallen the Gazans. "People are constantly [cursing Sinwar](#), but this isn't reflected in the journalists' reports," he says.

As he put it in a phone conversation, not our first, he said, "Early this week, an elderly man standing in the middle of the market cursed Ahmed Yassin for giving us Hamas" - Yassin was one of the Hamas leaders assassinated by Israel in 2004. "I blew him a kiss for his courage. I'm not for cursing a dead man, but I love it when people rebel."

I didn't know Basel before we started our phone correspondence; he initiated the contact to express his fury at what he calls "Hamas' takeover of our narrative." He's angry that the Palestinians outside Gaza and their supporters expect Gazans to shut up and not criticize Hamas, because the criticism ostensibly helps the enemy. He rejects the assumption that doubting the decisions and actions of this armed group - and to do so publicly - is an act of treason.

"I have the right that they should know what I think and feel, even if I'm in the minority - and I know that I'm not in the minority. And I know that I speak for a lot of people," Basel says. "I have the right to speak, if only because I'm one of the millions whose lives Hamas is gambling with for crazy slogans with no basis in reality, which have dwarfed the Palestinian cause and turned the struggle for high and existential goals into a [struggle for a piece of bread and cans of food](#)."

After weeks of eating stew [made of wild plants](#) such as *anchusa* (leaves of tongue in Arabic), *khubeza* [a variety of a mallow] and sorrel, U.S. military rations from the airdrops began to appear, but gangsters stole them to sell them in markets. They go for 240 shekels (\$66) for a 12-ration box, says Basel, who adds that he isn't the kind to risk his life to chase food parachuted or trucked in. "I'm fine with the American food," he says.

Two friends and an old acquaintance of mine confirm that Basel's criticism of Hamas represents many people. Nura, who is in her mid-60s, has lost all [hope for a cease-fire](#), because "both sides - Israel and Hamas - aren't interested in us, the people, in our suffering," she said in a phone call last week, after many days without contact.

Basel offered the same idea in different words: "I don't know why Hamas is so proud of its achievement. It's obvious that the Israeli government isn't interested in the hostages and isn't really trying to save them."

*Food being dropped into Gaza on Thursday. American food rations are hitting the markets. Credit: Amir Cohen/Reuters*

In other words, the Palestinians in Gaza are feeling on their own skin how the meticulous military planning behind the October 7 attack wasn't accompanied by clear strategic political planning.

Ibrahim Abrash, a former political science professor at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, a native of the Bureij refugee camp and a former culture minister in [Salam Fayyad's Palestinian Authority government](#), resonates this criticism. In a late-February article published by the Palestinian news agency Ma'an, titled "Enough of Hamas' stubbornness," Abrash noted that even before the current war, Hamas' first-tier political leaders had fled Gaza for Turkey and Qatar, "leaving behind the Hamas activists and second-tier leadership to fend for themselves, headed by the released prisoner with no political or leadership experience" - Sinwar.

Whether that's indifference about the fate of the people or a lack of understanding and political skill by the highest military commander, the result is the same. An end to the people's suffering is not in sight.

"We're exhausted," Nura concludes, lacking the words to describe the difficulty of surviving. Like Basel, she and some of her family refused to leave northern Gaza and are wandering from one half-destroyed home of a relative to another. She's hungry, but she's especially concerned about her 2- and 3-year-old hungry granddaughters. Several times, she and her family, like Basel and his family, were only seconds from death in the bombings.

She too hears the curses against Hamas everywhere: at the hospital that couldn't treat her wounded granddaughter, when she's waiting in line to fill their water container, and when passing by piles of stinking garbage that no one clears - and there's nowhere to take it to anyway.

She hears the curses when she visits family and friends packed into schools that serve as shelters for thousands of [displaced people](#), and when she goes out to buy vegetables, whose prices have skyrocketed: green beans at 100 shekels a kilo, eggplant at 80 shekels, a half kilo of potatoes at 50 shekels. Apparently, they still grow in southern Gaza and are loaded on the few aid trucks that manage to reach the north.

"I sat with some friends at a café," says Shaher, 75, unintentionally shedding light on another detail from their former life that hasn't disappeared even in wartime and that people cling to: a café where men spend hours analyzing the situation - or in shared silence surrounded by cigarette smoke. Shaher, a retired teacher, now lives in a tent made out of plastic sheets, after his house and his son's

house in Deir al-Balah were destroyed in an Israeli bombing.

On rainy nights, I'd wake up with my mattress soaked. I'd go outside to shake it and remove the remaining water that drained from the plastic sheeting," he says with the hurt of a man who worked and saved all his life to send his children to university and guarantee them and his grandchildren a roof over their heads.

So he and his friends sat at the café and criticized Hamas. But, "the owner heard us and told an employee not to serve us until we went," Shaher says and adds: "The café owner may agree with the criticism, but it was clear he got afraid." Meaning, he was afraid that someone from Hamas might overhear and harm him in one way or another.

*Treating the wounded at a hospital in Rafah last week. Credit: Hatem Ali/AP*

"Obviously, there's enormous anger and bitterness everywhere against Hamas," says Amal, another woman in her mid-60s, whose apartment building in Gaza was bombed at the start of the war a few days after she and her family moved south. She has also heard about people "who were threatened after they expressed their opinion in public" - and whether it's a true report or just a rumor, it's enough for people to be cautious about where they express criticism.

Nura tells how someone proposed that they demonstrate, but others were afraid that Hamas would shoot at them. "So we'll die once, and that's it, instead of dying once again every moment," she says over the phone and continues: "But most people have no strength to demonstrate or argue, because they're all busy with the humiliating search for food. One more box of canned beans, one more kilo of flour."

Basel tells about Hamas operatives shooting into the air near demonstrators demanding bread. Shaher tells about demonstrations that called for Hamas to release [the hostages](#) in order to end the war. "Applying a typical tactic of a dictatorship, anonymous supporters of the organization mixed in among the demonstrators until the slogan was changed to 'We demand to go back to the north of the Strip,'" Shaher says.

As Basel puts it, "Hamas' military power in Gaza has been almost totally destroyed, but not its power to oppress us." He says that before the war he took part in demonstrations by young people from [the We Want to Live cost-of-living protest](#); the demonstrators were violently suppressed and summoned for interrogation.

But even nonpolitical events and normal social activity by people his age wasn't being permitted before the war, he recalls; for example, friends gathering at a hall by the beach. It turned out that a gathering by more than 10 people required a permit from the Interior Ministry. Going out with a girlfriend also was impossible. The modesty police - who they worked for wasn't clear - were a deterrent.

Basel says he comes from a religious family of Hamas and Islamic Jihad supporters. Of course, when he was young, he took part in activities of the Hamas youth, but he discovered that the questions he asked ("It's my nature") clashed with the organization-imposed groupthink. From about 17, he began moving away from Hamas' ideology. The three other people I spoke with, older than him, always affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Basel and Shaher boil with anger when they talk about the silence of the Palestinian and Arab-world media - and about the freelance photographers who turn their cameras aside when one of the people gathering around the rubble cries out against the Islamic resistance movement rather than only against Israel, the United States and the world in general. Whether they're photographers who

support Hamas or are simply afraid of the group, the result is the same.

Like Basel and Nura, Amal also emphasizes the misery and humiliation. "In all conditions, in all the times of struggle and siege, we never had such hunger," she says.

Some people don't dare go as far as my four interviewees in their criticism of Hamas, but they criticize the organization for not ensuring the needs of the civilian population in time.

"During the Israeli siege of Beirut, the PLO and Arafat made sure there was enough food and water for everybody. We didn't reach a situation of starvation and black-market prices," says a former Gazan who was in Beirut in 1982. She's aware of the geopolitical differences between the Lebanese capital and besieged Gaza, but stresses that the PLO understood its duty to take care of the civilians, while Hamas openly rejected this duty.

*Gazans waiting for food aid in Gaza City late last month. Credit: Mahmoud Issa/Reuters*

Basel and Shaher strongly doubt the wisdom, effectiveness and righteousness of the armed struggle for national liberation, especially under conditions of Israeli military supremacy. They may represent a minority, and few Palestinians will express such an opinion openly.

"Armed struggle is a game played on the field of the occupier that's a thousand times stronger than us," Basel says. He believes that the PLO's armed struggle, for example in the '80s, didn't achieve the promised results.

Shaher says Hamas doesn't understand how much Israel is [a Spartan society](#) that can't be defeated militarily. He says the armed struggle, as led by Hamas, is falling into Israel's trap. He, Amal and Nura are convinced that most Gazans don't support the October 7 attack, and that they too were shocked by the atrocities against civilians and the kidnapping of babies and the elderly, which contradicts their religion and all their values, as the three put it.

Based on their experience, they and Basel find it hard to believe the results of a Palestinian poll that found that support for October 7 was still high, and that the majority - which did not see the videos of the atrocities - believe that no crimes were committed during the attack.

Shaher generalizes, saying, "It's very hard to conduct surveys among Arabs. Everybody has two opinions concerning nationalist and military pride: one opinion for the external world including the pollster, and a second opinion, the real one, that you keep to yourself.

"Everybody knows that the people who committed [the crimes on October 7] were part of a small group that gave Israel an excuse to destroy all of Gaza," he says, adding that he believes that "95 percent opposed [Hamas' attack]." Nura puts this number at 75 percent, while Amal says "the majority oppose."

Basel offers a more complex picture. "Most people have no problem in principle with the attack, but they criticize the timing and the results," he says. "Everybody saw the videos. I would assume that a third claims that Hamas didn't commit crimes, and another third recognizes that there were crimes but won't call them that - and argues that they came in response to crimes Israel committed over the years. And a third - me included - don't kid ourselves and know that these were crimes."

All four say almost the same thing: Hamas said its people didn't kidnap babies and the elderly; civilians did that. If that's the case, why not release the hostages immediately? You didn't control the border? You didn't know where the hostages were? After all, you tightly control society and know everything that happens there.

As for the Palestinian prisoners set to be released in exchange for Israeli hostages (including Arab Israelis) and foreigners, Basel and Amal each say that the prisoners aren't more important than the lives of the children in Gaza. Basel is particularly firm.

"Let nobody lecture us about the basic principles of the Palestinian people's cause. The Palestinian prisoners should make their position heard about what's happening in their name in Gaza," he says. "If they agree for us to be slaughtered and expelled for their sake and if they agree to leave prison on the ruins of our homes and the blood of our children, we won't forgive them and they will be shamed for the rest of their lives."

These are harsh words that aren't uttered in public, but Amal, many of whose friends and relatives served long prison terms in Israel for their anti-occupation activism, confirms that many people think the same. And she says exactly what Basel said: "The prisoners voluntarily chose their path. Why should we pay the price for their personal decision?"

**Amira Hass**

---

**P.S.**

• Haaretz. Apr 1, 2024 :  
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-01/ty-article-magazine/.premium/people-are-cursing-si-nwar-gazans-opposing-hamas-are-sure-theyre-the-majority/0000018e-9ada-dfd2-afce-deff025f0000>