

'We're all at risk of being targeted': Doctors evacuate Rafah's last hospitals

Monday 10 June 2024, by [AMER Ruwaida Kamal](#) (Date first published: 5 June 2024).

Almost no facilities remain to treat the wounded in Gaza's southernmost city, as doctors fear a repeat of Israel's attacks on hospitals across the Strip.

Contents

- ['The Israeli army does not \(...\)](#)
- ['We saw tents catching fire](#)

Palestinians are treated at Al-Najjar Hospital in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, prior to its closure, February 1, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

On May 30, the World Health Organization [announced](#) that Rafah's last remaining hospital, the Al-Helal al-Emirati Hospital, had gone out of service. The destruction of the southern Gaza city's health care system, which comes after more than two dozen hospitals across the Strip have [completely shut down](#) as a result of Israel's assault, encapsulates the human toll of the intensifying Israeli [military operation](#) in Rafah.

Far from the "limited" invasion that Israel's leaders proclaimed, Israeli forces are currently occupying the heart of the city and remain in control of the Rafah Crossing and Philadelphi Corridor, while airstrikes continue to pummel camps for displaced families. Since Israel's incursion began on May 6, more than [1 million](#) Palestinians have fled [Gaza's last refuge](#).

In addition to the Emirati Hospital, the Abu Yousef al-Najjar Hospital and the Kuwaiti Hospital have been forced to [cease all functions](#) in recent weeks. With [several smaller clinics](#) closing too, all that remains to serve Rafah's sick and wounded is two small field hospitals in the coastal area of [Al-Mawasi](#) — one run by the United Arab Emirates, and the other by the International Medical Corps — which are ill-equipped to deal with the scale of suffering among those unable or unwilling to flee the city.

With Israel's ground invasion continuing to advance toward western Rafah, these remaining clinics may also soon be forced to evacuate. And while a trickle of seriously wounded patients had been leaving Gaza via the Rafah Crossing for treatment abroad, nobody has been able to escape the Strip since Israel occupied the crossing.

Muhammad Zaqout, the Gaza Health Ministry's director general of hospitals, told +972 that staff at Rafah's hospitals evacuated "because they feared a repeat of what happened at Nasser Medical Complex and Al-Shifa Hospital." Israeli forces besieged and raided both hospitals in recent months, in Khan Younis and Gaza City respectively; after their withdrawal, mass graves containing hundreds of bodies were found at both sites.

Palestinians bid farewell to their dead relatives at Al-Najjar Hospital in Rafah, April 20, 2024 (Abed

Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

“Hospitals in Tel al-Sultan [western Rafah] are being bombed by missiles and Quadcopter drones,” Zaqout explained. “The Indonesian field hospital was damaged, and the doctors there were terrified.” According to Gaza’s Health Ministry, nearly 500 healthcare workers have been [killed](#) as a result of Israel’s attacks across the Strip since October.

The field clinics that remain open, Zaqout added, “do not have advanced equipment to receive patients with serious injuries,” who must instead be transferred to the [European Hospital](#) near Khan Younis. This journey, he said, “requires an ambulance for an hour or more due to the long distance, the presence of [Israeli] tanks, and the continuous bombing of the city.”

Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, Zaqout noted, is slowly starting to receive new patients again after having been forced to shut down during Israel’s raids on the complex. But it, too, is able to admit only a small number of the wounded who are transported from Rafah.

According to Zaqout, the situation is similarly desperate in northern Gaza amid continuing Israeli military operations: with Al-Shifa and Kamal Adwan Hospital both out of commission, Al-Ahli Hospital is the only major medical facility offering some services.

‘The Israeli army does not exclude medical personnel from its attacks’

Dr. Rima Sadiq, 29, worked at the Kuwaiti Hospital until it was forced to close on May 28. “We received a large number of casualties during the first days of the military operation,” she said. “The bombing never stops. With every [attack], we received at least 10 [patients with] injuries of varying severity. All injuries require treatment and follow-up, and the presence of a hospital near [the wounded] saves lives.”

Sadiq explained that the staff were eager to continue working to serve the city’s residents but they ultimately had no choice but to abandon the hospital. As Israel’s bombardment intensified, staff feared for their own lives and the lives of their patients, as well as the potential damage to medical devices and equipment.

Wounded Palestinians arrive at Al-Najjar Hospital after an Israeli airstrike on their home in the city of Rafah, southern of Gaza Strip, October 19, 2023. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

“The situation has become very dangerous,” she said. “Two paramedics were martyred during their work to transport the wounded. The Israeli army does not exclude medical personnel from its [attacks]. We are all at risk of being targeted or arrested.”

“There are patients who were forced to leave the hospital in poor condition who require follow-up,” Sadiq continued. “Field hospitals are unable to receive large numbers [of patients] due to their clinical capacity and lack of treatments.” The lack of food, she added, only worsens their conditions and prevents a full recovery.

Yet just as the ability of Rafah’s health services to treat the wounded declines, the need is becoming ever greater. As Israel’s ground assault intensifies, so have the army’s attacks on Palestinians who remain in the city — including in areas it had designated as “safe zones” such as Al-Mawasi and Tel al-Sultan.

Around 45 Palestinians were killed in a [single attack](#) on a refugee camp on the night of May 26, when much of the encampment was engulfed in flames and many burned to death inside their tents. [Another attack](#) two days later on tents in Al-Mawasi killed 21.

'We saw tents catching fire and children burning inside'

Marwa Asraf, 38, witnessed the attack on Al-Mawasi. Originally from Beit Hanoun in the north, Asraf was displaced to Al-Mawasi with six of her family members. "What we are experiencing in this area is terrifying," she told +972. "We do not feel safe at all. Shells and missiles are falling continuously."

At the time of the Al-Mawasi bombing, Asraf had gone to search for water for their family. "I left my children with their father and grandmother," she recounted. "Suddenly, I heard the sound of an explosion and then the screams of the displaced people. I fell to the ground from the intensity of the sound. I was crying. I thought that my children had been bombed."

*Palestinians inspect damage after an Israeli air strike in Al-Mawasi, west of Rafah, May 27, 2024.
(Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)*

"I started running mindlessly, and left the water jug on the ground," Asraf continued. "I returned to the tent and found my children crying. Their grandmother was crying, too; she told me that my husband Ahmed ran toward the tents to check on the wounded, and that she was very concerned for him. I did not believe that my children were okay. One displaced person staying near us was killed when shrapnel entered the tent."

"This situation is very tiring," she went on. "We are tired of being displaced from the northern Gaza Strip, for eight months, and we are waiting to return to our homes. We were a little reassured because we were in a 'safe area,' but whoever says that is a liar. We lost more than seventy people, including women and children, while they were in their tents."

Beyond its emotional cost, Asraf explained, constantly relocating with her family has taken a financial toll. "We need to hire a taxi to take us to a new place every time we have to move. We spent all our money during this war just to buy basic necessities. Now I very much regret [leaving] the north. I wish I had stayed there and died in my home instead of here in the area they said was safe."

Riyad Rawida, 43, was also displaced to Al-Mawasi from his home in the center of Rafah. He fled with 20 of his relatives after they spotted Israeli tanks penetrating the Zoroub roundabout area, approaching Tel al-Sultan. "We began to hear shelling and clashes," he recalled. "We saw people leaving their homes and fleeing to Al-Mawasi. Tel al-Sultan became almost empty. We had no choice."

Unlike the vast majority of Gaza's displaced residents, this was the first time Rawida and his family had been forced to flee their homes. "It was difficult for us — we were in our homes from the beginning of the war for more than seven and a half months. Many [Israeli] statements reassured us that the area was safe, and that the world rejected any Israeli military operation in Rafah. But the army broke those lines and attacked the city, gradually advancing toward the western areas."

"Now we are in Al-Mawasi and we are afraid of being targeted at any moment, as happened in the tents last week," he continued. "There is no safety at all. I fear for my children. The tents do not protect anyone. In Tel al-Sultan, we saw the tents catching fire and children burning inside them. The situation in Rafah is dangerous, the streets are empty, and unfortunately life has stopped here."

Ruwaida Kamal Amer

P.S.

• +972. June 5, 2024:

<https://www.972mag.com/rafah-hospitals-evacuated-gaza/>

Ruwaida Kamal Amer is a freelance journalist from Khan Younis.

• 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.

[BECOME A +972 MEMBER TODAY](#)