

# Many Killed in Gaza Were Buried Under the Rubble. They Died Slowly and Quietly

Monday 23 October 2023, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 23 October 2023).

**Hundreds of thousands, including infants, elderly, disabled, and the sick, flee for their lives due to the IDF attacks, yet nowhere in the Gaza Strip is truly safe. For the survivors, it's evident that if Israel's threats materialize in full, many will have no place to return to**

In the early morning hours of Saturday - a few hours after the release of Judith and Natalie Raanan, and a few hours before the Rafah crossing was opened for a drop in the needed sea of humanitarian aid - Israeli bombardments managed to kill some 60 Palestinians throughout the Gaza Strip, according to reports by Palestinian news agency Sama.

According to Gaza's Health Ministry, the number of those killed in Israeli bombardments has already passed 4,380, including 1,756 children and 967 women, as of Saturday evening. Over a thousand people are missing: Most are those the rescue teams failed to extract from under the rubble, and remain beneath them. Some were killed instantly, while others died slowly. Some are dying as I write these words.

Among those killed that morning are seven in Rafah, as reported by an al-Jazeera in English reporter. The constant pressure, choking the throat since October 7<sup>th</sup>, has only intensified. Many of my friends and acquaintances live in Rafah, or have evacuated there after Israeli warning and bombings forced them to leave their homes in Gaza and the Shati and Jabaliya refugee camps.

It's been hard to reach them on the phone for a few days now. Either the infrastructure has been damaged, or the network is overwhelmed. I leave WhatsApp messages each day, which usually only garner a single checkmark, meaning they go unread because there's no internet. Messages on Facebook Messenger have also gone unanswered.

Actually they aren't really messages. I only write the name of the friend, or write habibi or habibti, or where are you. To let them know that I'm waiting to hear from them. Each single checkmark or lack of reply is another boulder on the heart. Among those I've written to - a mother and her daughter from the a-Samouni family, survivors of the 2009 war. 29 of their extended family members were killed then, among them 21 in the bombing of a structure in which soldiers gathered some hundred of them, after ordering them to leave their homes. They aren't answering me either.

*A woman sits amid the rubble of a building destroyed in an Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on October 21, 2023. Credit: SAID KHATIB - AFP*

According to the Health Ministry in Gaza, in the current war, as of October 18, 79 families have lost 10 or more family members. 85 families lost between six and nine of their kin, and 320 families have lost two to five members each. B'tselem field researcher in Gaza, Ulfat al-Kurd, lost 15 family members in a bombing. The eldest a 65-year-old woman, the youngest a boy of two.

One of the targets of Israeli bombings on Thursday was the Greek Orthodox Church compound in

Gaza's Zeitun neighborhood. As in every war, this time as well, the church served as shelter for hundreds of uprooted people – Christians and Muslims. 18 people were killed in that bombing, Muslims and Christians, including four relatives of friends of mine, who themselves had moved to Ramallah 10 years ago.

At 10:30 on Sunday morning, my friend Salma responded on WhatsApp. What a relief. "Good morning," she wrote, out of habit, and confirmed: "It was a hard night of bombing, hard to describe." A week ago she fled Gaza with her son and grandchildren to her sister's home in Rafah. I wrote to her: I hope you can sleep now, because they're just reporting that the Rafah Crossing will be opened for 20 trucks with humanitarian aid, and surely they won't bomb during that time, but she answered: "Amira, my home in Gaza is gone." Since when, I asked. "Now, they bombed our whole housing project now." The only thing I could write to her is what I keep writing and saying: "I have no words."

*Palestinians evacuate a victim following an Israeli airstrike on Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip on October 17, 2023, amid the ongoing battles between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas.Credit: MOHAMMED ABED - AFP*

I know for certain of five of my friends and acquaintances who have lost their homes in the Israeli bombings. Two families lost their homes in the first two days of bombing. I imagine that many others of those I know, whom I have been unable to contact, have also lost their homes. In Beit Hanoun, in Beit Lahia, in Jabalya. I don't know where they are wandering now. If they're alive. Up till now, those three words refused to be written.

A friend of mine and her family, including her elderly mother, were in an apartment in Gaza until two days ago, along with a brother-in-law in a wheelchair, nearly completely immobilized, who prevented them from evacuating south. "We're in the corridor," she wrote. It's somewhat protected. When we managed to talk she let me know that I was on speaker, so everyone could hear me, but the connection was spotty. "We're OK," she wrote to me on Friday afternoon. "It was a terrible night (of bombing – A. S.). Like in hell." Since then, I haven't heard from her. They live by the Red Crescent hospital, which on Friday received notice from Israel to the administrators, saying that they must evacuate the premises of patients, staff, and displaced persons sheltering there.

"At least 30 percent of all housing units in the Gaza Strip were destroyed or damaged since the start of hostilities, according to the Gazan housing ministry," says a UN report published on Sunday. I accompanied some of my friends 25 years ago when they added a floor to the family home in the refugee camp, and then when some left the camp or moved to Gaza City, saving penny by penny and even incurring debt. These are apartments I've slept in, been a guest in, played in with the little ones, who by now are 18 or 20.

I imagine the books in my friend Salma's apartment and the one beneath it – her son Karmel's. Books buried under the rubble of the building, or burned. I imagine the grandchildren's toys, the computers on which my friends curated the stories and articles they wrote, research papers and letters and photos. How many of them were saved on the cloud? I think of the heavy furniture in R's house and the scant furniture at N's. The surprising gardens some of them managed to tend in tiny yards. When the nightmare ends, it has to end at some point, they will be destitute. Like their parents and grandparents were in 1948.

*Palestinians work to remove debris as they search for bodies at the site of an Israeli strike, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, October 19, 2023.Credit: IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/ REUTERS*

And should Israel follow through on its threat to shrink the Gaza Strip even further (meaning to take over and annex part of it) – they will also lose the land upon which their tenement or house was built. Again.

The number of wounded as of Sunday evening stood at 13,000 at least, according to authorities in the Strip. Some of them are at hospitals, where according to reports surgeons are forced to operate by their mobile phone flashlights, because there is no power. The clinics and hospitals that still function also house thousands of uprooted people seeking shelter and a modicum of security. Since the explosion at al-Ahli Hospital, people know for certain that no place is safe.

The World Health Organization has documented 62 attacks on healthcare providers: 29 structures providing healthcare services were hit and damaged, including 19 hospitals, and 23 ambulances were struck. Seven hospitals ceased operations: Whether due to being badly damaged, or due to being required to evacuate patients and staff. Will the large Red Crescent hospital join them now, or will UN and international medical organizations' efforts prevent this?

Among the statistics are also seven members of one family of friends of mine in Rafah. An Israeli bomb struck directly at a home near theirs. Two occupants were killed. Direct shrapnel, shockwaves, collapsing walls, windows blown out, panes shattered in my friends' home caused the injuries of the seven. This was a week ago, on October 12<sup>th</sup>, when more and more residents of the northern Gaza Strip were fleeing toward the south and to Rafah. I knew nothing yet.

On October 13<sup>th</sup> I wrote as usual to Yazan, whom I met during the 1<sup>st</sup> Intifada, when he was 16 years old. "We're OK," Yazan replied. I took advantage of the fact that the internet was working and made a voice call. And then he told me of their injuries. One of the children was kept in the hospital overnight. On Friday morning he once again wrote that "We're alright." To my question, he replied that there was very little water, but gave no specifics. I decided to stop bothering him with questions.

*Smoke rises following an Israeli airstrike in the Gaza Strip, as seen from southern Israel, Friday. Credit: Francisco Seco /AP*

Another friend forced to flee Gaza to Rafah, to his sister's home, wrote that they paid 400 shekels for a tank of water containing 500 liters. But that is not drinking water. Clean potable water currently goes for 15 shekels a liter.

Another family of friends from Gaza City found refuge in the apartment of friends in Deir al-Balah, and another family – in Khan Yunis. Friday saw 15 people killed in the bombing of structures in Deir al-Balah and 38 in bombings in Khan Yunis. Hundreds were injured in these attacks, according to UN reports.

Another family of friends found shelter in a UNRWA school in the center of the Strip. 13 family members, in a classroom 20 sq. meters (about 220 sq. ft.) in size. One grandmother is blind and paraplegic. The other suffers from fibrosis. Both were young girls in 1948. One of the brothers has Parkinson's disease. And there are two infants, eighteen months old, who command the attention babies do.

"Each of us plays hide and seek with Israeli killing. We will triumph and overcome," my friend wrote, and in the next message he wrote: "So far, physically, we're all right."

**Amira Hass**

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