

Israel's Bombs Are Wiping Out Entire Palestinian Families in Gaza

Tuesday 2 January 2024, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2024).

Around 1,800 Gazan families have lost many members in the war. As one researcher puts it, 'The social and familial support of the past - material, emotional or symbolic - is almost nonexistent now. People are mainly in survival mode'

A funeral in Rafah in Gaza in November. Every day Israel bombs dozens of targets. Credit: Mohammed Abed/AFP

Almost from the beginning of the war, Gazans have lived with the knowledge that at any moment multiple members of their family and they themselves can be killed by Israeli bombs or bleed to death under the rubble.

Phone conversations with them increasingly resemble a farewell to someone on death row. Every day their relatives and friends outside the Gaza Strip repress the menacing, unexpressed thought that they too will receive the dreadful news of the death of loved ones - old and young, women and men, all of them together.

"The erasure of an entire family from the population registry," as Palestinians call it today, isn't merely a fear but a blood-curdling assessment based in reality.

Nothing can be done against the realization of this possibility. Every day, Israel [bombs dozens of targets, if not more](#) - people, buildings with the people still inside, tunnels or markets. The space into which it squeezes 2.3 million people is shrinking. The "safe zones" the military has declared are also shelled.

Add to this the fact that married brothers commonly live with their families in an apartment house they built with their savings, with their elderly parents and unmarried siblings on the ground floor. It's only natural for the family to stay together when war breaks out, whether in their home or in a public shelter for the displaced. It's only natural that the lucky ones will crowd into the home of relatives after their own neighborhood has been bombed.

And so, when a bomb lands, it's only logical that among the many dead will be people with the same last names, related by blood or marriage. And since Israel's government and military are [preparing for many more months of war](#), the number of families wiped out is only expected to rise.

"At first we compared the war in Gaza to [the Nakba](#)," the Palestinian sociologist Dr. Honaida Ghanim told Haaretz, "but gradually we realized the scale of the killing and the wiping out of entire families go beyond what we experienced in the Nakba."

Palestinians in Deir al-Balah in Gaza mourning their relatives killed in an Israeli airstrike a week ago. Conversations with Gazans increasingly resemble a farewell meeting with a condemned person. Credit: Adel Hana/AP

The expulsion, destruction and loss of the homeland when Israel was established are a central process in the history of the Palestinian people, but according to Ghanim, "The damage now is to the core of Palestinian existence itself. The exile was tolerable to a certain extent because the structure of the village and the structure of the extended families were maintained. The internal social mechanism continued to function.

"For that, you need living people. Families were also killed in the 1948 massacres, but now the number of families being killed is much greater. Their annihilation leaves a black hole. No language can describe what's happening there."

The building collapsed on them

By November 19, when the number of fatalities recorded by the [Hamas](#)-operated Health Ministry in Gaza reached 11,078, it was estimated that 1,330 families had lost several of their members. That day, added to these [suffocating statistics](#) were Shafiqa Abu Skheilleh, 83 (Full disclosure: I knew Shafika and loved listening to her memories.) She perished along with her great-grandchildren; Dunya, the wife of her eldest son (she traveled to Egypt for cancer treatment before the war); Maram, the wife of one of her grandsons; and some additional relatives of Dunya, Maram and their children.

Shafiqa's youngest daughter, Salwa, doesn't know how many of her relatives were in the building in [the Jabalya refugee camp](#), north of Gaza City, that collapsed on them, including her mother. Salwa didn't know many of them, because she has lived in [Ramallah](#) since she left to study at Birzeit University about 40 years ago.

Since 1991, Israel has forbidden free movement between Gaza and [the West Bank](#), and the last permit Salwa received to visit her family in the Strip was in 2000. In 2013, the mother and daughter kissed and hugged for the last time when Shafiqa was permitted to go to Ramallah for medical care. Since then they have seen each other only on video calls.

Palestinian sociologist Honaida Ghanim. "Families were also killed in the 1948 massacres, but now the number of families being killed is much greater."Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

The shock was evident in Salwa's tearless eyes. "I don't grasp that Mom is gone, and that this was her end," she said in the distant, matter-of-fact tone in which she also related her mother's final days. Five months before the war, her mother had a stroke. She couldn't speak or move except for her eyelids, which she would blink to show that she understood what was being said to her.

Two of her grandchildren were always at her home, and a physiotherapist came twice a day. Granddaughter-in-law Maram, too, cared for her lovingly, which moved Salwa. "The nurse at the clinic said that there was progress and that she had never seen such devoted care," Salwa said. Shafiqa started to move more than her eyelids.

When the war broke out, Shafiqa's sons moved her from her old refugee house to the apartment building in nearby Beit Lahia where they lived. Then the Israeli army ordered all residents of northern Gaza to leave for the south. Many chose to stay, either because they didn't believe that the safe zone was actually safe or they had difficulty traveling.

That was the case for the Abu Shkeilehs, who moved to the familiar Jabalya refugee camp. They spent one night in a school that became a shelter, and realized that Shafiqa was suffering terribly. They moved in with relatives: most of the men and boys in one home and the women, children and a few of the men in another.

The frequent airstrikes frightened Shafiq. During the nights, she tightly gripped the arm of her granddaughter Sumaya, who slept next to her. Once, Shafiq's daughter-in-law Dunya had to tear her daughter's sleeve to release her from the grandmother's grip. Sumaya was saved, though the bombing left her with severe burns on her face and fractures in her spine and legs.

The aftermath of an Israeli strike on the Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza a week ago. Credit: Shadi Tabatibi/Reuters

She's in the European Hospital in [Khan Yunis in southern Gaza](#), "where all the time there's gunfire and shelling around it," Salwa said. The hospital is also suffering from a shortage of beds, doctors and medication. Sumaya's father, who is still in [Egypt](#), has not yet managed to bring his daughter there for treatment.

"A friend of my sister's visited my mother as often as she could," Salwa said. "When she came the morning after the bombardment she was shocked to see a pile of rubble. Neighbors managed to rescue Sumaya and recover five bodies: my mother, Dunya and her brother Talal, and Maram and her young daughter Rama.

"They were buried immediately. The rest of the bodies were removed from the ruins later and were buried during the truce in late November. The friend tried to call me 100 times before she succeeded. I still can't believe that it happened."

Once during our conversation, a spark flashed in Salwa's eyes when she recounted how her mother, who was widowed at age 27, began doing embroidery to support her children and send them to university. "I remember her traveling to Ramallah and Jerusalem to buy thread and fabric and returning with the big bundle on her head," Salwa recalled. Shafiq learned to read and write when her children were in school so that she wouldn't have to sign documents with a fingerprint.

Salwa also noted that "in the late '90s, when my children were small and my mother received permission to visit us, I wanted her to stay here with us, and she refused. She loved Gaza, her home in the Jabalya refugee camp, life in the big family that was there, the warm ties with all the relatives and neighbors." Then the spark disappeared and the distant tone returned. "Imagine, my mother died and I couldn't say goodbye to her."

Residents of the Bureij refugee camp arriving in Deir al-Balah in central Gaza after an evacuation order last month. Credit: AFP

Bereavement all around

"Islam regards social and community support in times of mourning - such as attending funerals and comforting mourners - as a religious obligation," Dr. Maram Massarwa writes in her 2015 Hebrew-language book "The Religio-politicization of Bereavement in Palestinian Society: Gender, Religion and Nationality," which focuses on families of Palestinians who were killed by the Israeli security forces.

Especially when it comes to violent death in the context of the occupation, "these rituals have a role in providing support and expressing social and emotional solidarity. They also contribute stability and a sense of security through the symbolic representation they give to the loss," Massarwa, a researcher and lecturer at Al-Qassemi College and Tel Aviv University.

But now, when so many people are killed every day, when 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) is too long because of the shelling and the sad news sometimes arrives only days later, the living can't say goodbye to the dead.

In the face of daily mass death, Gazans “don’t manage to experience the universal human processes of loss and bereavement,” Massarwa told Haaretz. “You don’t get to go through the grieving processes, neither personally nor collectively. ... This collective trauma, which is repeated all the time, doesn’t allow for mourning for what was, and then another death is announced. By the time you start to take it in, another one arrives. An inflation of loss and bereavement is created. This reality is emotionally exhausting.”

She agrees with the conclusion of a resident of the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza, who told me that people have become numb to the death that surrounds them, and to their own deaths.

Like Ghanim, Massarwa also sees the scale of the killing in Gaza as “a situation that was unfamiliar to Palestinians. With all the loss that Palestinian society has experienced for generations, the number of fatalities in Gaza today is incomprehensible, both numerically and in terms of the brutal trauma of the death.”

A woman and children in the ruins in Rafah after an Israeli strike last month. The collective trauma doesn't allow for mourning. Credit: Mohammed Abed/AFP

She infers from this that “the social and familial support of the past – material, emotional or symbolic – is almost nonexistent now. People are mainly in survival mode, accompanied by constant existential dread. People can’t find any [food](#), they don’t sleep at night, they have no blankets, there’s no drinking [water](#). This survival experience renders people lonely inside the trauma.”

The apartments of Salwa’s siblings, in the Beit Lahia development and in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood, were leveled in the airstrikes. She doesn’t know if her childhood home still stands.

Like Salwa, Rafiq (a pseudonym) lives in Ramallah. Unlike her, the daughter of refugees from the now-destroyed village of Burayr, he is from a Christian family that has lived in Gaza City for 400 or 500 years.

Thirteen members of his extended family were killed on October 19 when a bomb hit the compound of the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius, where displaced Christians and Muslims were sheltering. Rafiq didn’t know the young children who died. He feels the pain of their fathers, who survived, in every one of his bones.

“In the beginning I still called all my friends and family in Gaza every day. I’ve stopped now, and I only go into my room, close the door and cry,” he said.

His family’s ancient home is in the Zeitoun neighborhood, which had been the core of the city, along with the Tuffah, Daraj and [Shujaiyeh](#) neighborhoods. The houses were sandstone; there was a fountain in the yard, surrounded by fruit trees. If his house hasn’t been destroyed, it will be soon.

“All the churches in [Gaza City](#) are in Zeitoun,” he said, adding: “If they haven’t been destroyed, they will be soon. I feel like a man without a history. I knew every corner and tree in Gaza City. Now there’s nothing left: no place, no people.”

Worshippers at a funeral in Gaza City after an Israeli strike that damaged the Greek Orthodox Saint Porphyrius Church, where Palestinians who fled their homes were taking shelter. Credit: Mohammed Al-Masri/Reuters

Four generations

As of Wednesday, when Gaza’s Health Ministry said the death toll in the Strip since October 7 had

reached 21,110 (not including the thousands still missing), 1,779 families were known to have lost several members. One of these is the al-Mughrabi family. An Israeli airstrike on December 22 on a building in Gaza City killed Issam al-Mughrabi, 56, an employee of the UN Development Program. It also killed his wife, Lamia, 53, their two daughters, their two sons and a daughter-in-law. It was announced that 50-60 members of the extended family were in the same bombed building, many of whom were killed as well. The IDF Spokesperson's Office replied that it was not familiar with the details as presented to him on December 24.

The latest figure of families with multiple fatalities also includes the dozens killed in [the Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza](#). During the night between Sunday December 24 and Monday, four homes were hit. Without streetlights, the darkness pierced only by cell phone flashlights, neighbors and volunteers in rescue teams tried to extricate the living from the piles of concrete and broken furniture.

According to initial reports, the dead and wounded were from the Ghaban, Abu Rahma, al-Nawasra, Abu Hamida, Masem, Qandil and Abu Awwad families. A few of the survivors said that in every house there were also displaced relatives from northern Gaza. (The army later acknowledged that it was a mistaken bombing, for which it was sorry.)

The wounded were rushed west to Al-Aqsa Hospital in Deir al-Balah. Videos from the camp showed bodies covered in blankets and stacked in an ambulance. The roads out of Maghazi and the refugee camp north of it, Bureij, were also bombed that night. This impeded the ambulances, but in the end we saw the familiar sight: corpses wrapped in white plastic sheets lying side by side in the plaza outside the hospital.

Abdel Latif Al-Haj, a surgeon who is also a director at the Gaza Health Ministry, moved recently to work at the hospital in Deir al-Balah. Until about a month ago, Al-Haj was at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis. He was there on November 21 in a never-ending shift when an Israeli plane dropped a bomb on his home in Nuseirat camp before dawn.

Palestinians carrying away a body after an Israeli airstrike on the Maghazi refugee camp a week ago. Credit: Adel Hana/AP

Since the first week of the war, relatives who were displaced from northern Gaza have crowded into the house. The bombing killed his eldest son, Majd, a 32-year-old software engineer, Majd's wife, Amani, and their baby; his daughter, Dima, a WHO employee, Dima's husband, Mohammed, and their 5-month-old; his 17-year-old son Omar; and Al-Haj's sister, Fadwa, 52, and her two children, aged 17 and 18.

Also killed were 34 relatives who were sheltering in their home - including Al-Haj's wife's parents, her aunt, her brothers and sisters, their children and grandchildren. Four generations were erased of a family from the 1948 depopulated Palestinian communities of Kawkaba, Iraq Suwaydan and Majdal. Al-Haj's wife, his 22-year-old daughter and two of his grandchildren, a 9-year-old boy and a 2-week-old girl, who lost their parents, were pulled from the ruins alive.

All the survivors suffered from bruises, broken bones and bleeding. They are recovering from their physical injuries at the home of other relatives. There is no point wasting words on the emotional wounds.

And these are the names of the 17 young grandchildren and great-grandchildren who perished in the bombing: Sari, 4 months; Abd al-Hakim, 5 months; Sara, 14 months; Siwar, 2 years; Yahya, 4; Leen and Wasim, 6; Mohammed, 7; Adam, 9; Adnan, Kanan and Ismail, 10; Liyan, 13; Lubna and Izz al-

Din, 14; Misk,15; and Zayn, 16.

Smoke billowing over Gaza after an Israeli bombardment last week. As of Wednesday, 1,779 families were known to have lost several members.Credit: Jack Guez/AFP

Lubna was honored with an obituary on the Facebook page of Birzeit University's Edward Said National Conservatory of Music. She studied violin at the school's Gaza City branch "and sang and played for the sake of life and joy, and her ambition was for music to be a fundamental part of her future," wrote an aunt who lives outside of Gaza. The military spokesperson told Haaretz it was checking the report.

"The family was and is the strategic depth of Palestinian society, in a situation where there is no state, or it does not operate and function for the people," Ghanim said. "When you are under oppression and an occupation regime, the family is a support mechanism. Now, when so many families are being annihilated, the social support wanes. A situation of loss of context is created.

"Everything has been lost: the home, social ties, people who build a future and remember the dead. Now there is also no one to tell the story of the exile. Palestine exists in an imagined space, and when so many people disappear, so does the imagined space."

Amira Hass

P.S.

• Haaretz. Jan 1, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2024-01-01/ty-article-magazine/premium/israels-bombs-are-wiping-out-entire-palestinian-families-in-gaza/0000018c-c081-d3e0-abac-d8a9d4300000>