

Dozens of Israeli Citizens and Residents Left Gaza During the War, Under the Radar

Friday 5 January 2024, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 17 December 2023).

On foot, in a car fueled by cooking gas and in special shuttles, 71 women, men and children have left the Strip in the past month for Israel. They told Haaretz about what they went through and their concerns for those left behind

Palestinians enter the Rafah Border Crossing, this month.Credit: AFP

Before going to sleep, 4-year-old Nour (a pseudonym, like all the names in this article) was always careful to cover her ears to muffle the frightening sounds of Israeli airstrikes. She still holds her hands to her ears before going to sleep, even after she left the Gaza Strip with her mother and 2-year-old brother, Uday. They were able to move to safety in the home of their uncles in an Arab village in Israel.

For the first two weeks after their arrival, the sound of an engine revving outside the house would make Nour jump. As for Uday, he thinks a light flashing in the street is a sign of an imminent bombing, so he clings to his 30-year-old mother, Sireen.

He's astonished that his uncle's house has light pouring down from the ceiling (from a light bulb). But the most incredible discovery was water running from the tap, which was even drinkable. Both children have also been asking why their father isn't with them.

Hind, a 65-year-old staying at her sister's house in East Jerusalem, still wasn't eating or drinking much last week, as if she still had to ration her food. Or it's because she's burdened by thoughts of her husband, daughters, son and grandchildren, [who remain in Gaza and have to calculate every glass of water they drink and every can of food they open.](#)

Palestinians flee Khan Yunis for Rafah, last week.Credit: MAHMUD HAMS - AFP<

She also still forgets to take her phone with her when she goes on errands or visits relatives. "[There in Gaza, weeks went by without \[cellphone\] reception or the internet](#), which meant the phone became useless," she said.

The departure from Gaza of several hundred people with foreign citizenship was permitted over the past two months. Among them were 71 people with Israeli citizenship or residency status, including 31 under age 18. The first group arrived in Israel on November 16, followed by a second group on December 6.

[They traveled south through the Sinai Desert to the Egyptian town of Taba](#), then crossed the border to Eilat. Their relatives waited for them in cars all night until they gradually began to arrive in small groups - whether alone or with children, who sobbed in exhaustion.

"On the way north [in Israel] there was a siren," said Hind, who arrived on December 6. "Everybody

got out and lay on the ground. I stayed in the car.” Maybe two months of nearly incessant bombing with nowhere to shelter had extinguished her survival instincts – or raised her fear threshold.

The ordeal began in the middle of October when [the family hurriedly left their home in Gaza City’s Rimal neighborhood](#) following the Israeli military’s orders to move south and the accompanying airstrikes. “About 10 members of the family crowded into a small car. Don’t ask me how,” Hind said. “We didn’t take anything with us.”

They went to her son’s house, which had been built in a relatively uncrowded area south of the Gaza River. Although they had little food – a few cans and lentils heated on a small fire – and water that became saltier by the day, they still felt lucky they didn’t have to seek shelter in an UNRWA school. “I know people who look for bread all day,” Hind said. “Those who had money now have none.”

The house is by the sea, and Israeli warships are constantly shelling right over their heads. The house was designed for six to eight people at most, but 52 extended family members are now crowded into it. “Mattress to mattress,” Hind said as she described the situation, now sitting in the large living room of her sister’s house in Jerusalem. She only hinted at the challenges of living in such close quarters with different people with different habits, and to wait in line to use the bathroom.

“We suffered terribly from the stench of the garbage piling up in the streets, and from the sewage flowing outside,” she said.

Gazan children wait line for water at Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, last week.Credit: MOHAMMED ABED - AFP

Divided families

[Some 30 percent of Gazans have Palestinian relatives](#) in the rest of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea: the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel. This was the finding of a 2013 survey by the Israeli nonprofit the Gisha Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, which focuses on Gaza. A decade ago, this was about half a million people. Some 15 percent of Gazans have family ties with Israeli citizens and residents of East Jerusalem.

This shouldn’t surprise anyone, as before Gaza was cut off from the rest of the world, it was a natural part of the space where the Palestinians lived, worked, traveled, formed friendships and raised families. The artificial borders set up in 1948 made it difficult to continue these organic ties, but didn’t eliminate them.

After the occupation of 1967, when those borders were removed, social, family and economic ties were reestablished, and new connections formed between Gaza’s residents and the rest of the Palestinians. This is how Hind met her husband, who arrived in East Jerusalem on business in the ’70s. She moved to Gaza, but, as her brother-in-law says, “the journey from there to here was an hour, an hour and a half,” and there was no border.

Trucks are seen on the Egyptian side of the Rafah Crossing, this week.Credit: GIUSEPPE CACACE - AFP

In the post-1967 situation, students from Gaza who studied in the West Bank remained living there. On weekends, they made short visits home to Gaza or one of its refugee camps, going back to school with some homemade food. (Since 2007, Israel has forbidden Gaza residents to move to and live in the West Bank.)

This is also how Marwa met her husband – a citizen of Israel who came to Gaza in the '80s for his job. Marwa, the daughter of a Palestinian refugee family from Jaffa, lived with him in Israel, where she gave birth to a daughter, Sireen, and two sons. Later, she returned to Gaza with them. As citizens, her children's right to live in Israel was not revoked even after the Palestinian Authority was established in 1994.

As teenagers, the two brothers realized that they weren't listed in the Palestinian population registry (which Israel controls) and that they were entitled to an Israeli ID card. The two brothers later made sure that their young sister was also registered as an Israeli citizen. A week before the war began, she also managed to register her children at the Interior Ministry.

In 1991, Israel instituted the policy of isolating and breaking off Gaza, and since then has escalated it gradually. On the eve of the current war with Hamas, only a minority of Gazans were allowed to leave, and few Palestinians who live in the West Bank were allowed to enter. Israel denies family unification and residency in Israel or East Jerusalem if one spouse is from Gaza or the West Bank.

Another rights group, the HaMoked Center for the Defense of the Individual, and later Gisha as well, took up the task of coordinating the entry and exit of Israeli citizens and residents into and out of Gaza. These are mainly women whose nuclear families are in Gaza, but there are also some men whose wives and children live there.

The destruction left by Israeli armed forces in Gaza, last week. Credit: Rami Shlush

The process is known as the "divided family procedure" – it grants the Israeli spouses permits to enter and stay in Gaza for six months, together with any children up to age 18. Once the children are older, they aren't allowed to enter Gaza, except in cases of terminal illness or the death of an immediate relative – or if there's a wedding. These are referred to as "humanitarian visits." If the father is simply old and misses his son who is in Israel, the Israeli authorities don't consider it sufficient reason for granting an entry permit into Gaza.

In the first week of October such a "humanitarian visit" was approved for a 20-year-old Israeli citizen whose sick grandmother lives in Gaza. On October 5, he parked his car at the Erez checkpoint, intending to reenter Israel on October 8. Something in the bureaucracy had gotten messed up, and the checkpoint officials claimed he didn't have a permit. The HaMoked staff handling his request for help advised him to remain there until his reentry was arranged.

"Don't move from the checkpoint," they told him. He finally did enter Gaza and got caught up in the war that began on October 7. The HaMoked people regretted their insistence. Eventually, he was among the 42 Israelis who left through the Rafah crossing in southern Gaza on November 16. It was hard for him to accept that his car was destroyed and that the Erez checkpoint no longer existed as a crossing point after Hamas attacked the military base attached to it on October 7.

A 70-year-old Israel citizen whose visit to her sick sister in Gaza was coordinated by Gisha is still stuck in Gaza City, caught between bombings and the army's displacement orders. She doesn't know Gaza or anyone there and can't figure out how to get to Rafah. The thought of walking between corpses and ruined houses while waving a white flag terrifies her. She told Gisha representatives that the people she's with didn't leave their houses because the whole area was targeted by IDF fire.

The Erez Crossing, last year. Israel denies family unification and residency in Israel or East Jerusalem if one spouse is from Gaza or the West Bank. Credit: Eliyahu HersHKovitz

Coming across a tank

Immediately after the war started, HaMoked and Gisha began to assess the situation of all the divided families they represented, clarifying who was still in Gaza and wished to leave. They were able to contact 81 Israeli women and 10 men in Gaza, who had a total of 131 children, some of whom were over 18.

There are dozens more Israeli citizens, mainly women, with whom no contact has been made. Both Gisha and HaMoked don't know if this is because all communication and telephone networks in Gaza are out of order or because these people were killed or wounded in IDF attacks.

Some Israeli men who visited their families in Gaza before the war started – and many women as well – refused to reenter Israel and leave their loved ones behind. One such woman, whose husband is begging her to leave Gaza and save herself, contacted HaMoked. She told its staff that if her husband calls to ask about the status of her reentry permit, they should say that “it doesn't seem to be working out.”

There are several women with Israeli citizenship who Israeli authorities do not allow to return to Israel with their young children. The women were born in Gaza to one Israeli parent and cannot pass their status on to their children.

A Palestinian man sits on top the remains of a home destroyed in Israeli airstrikes in Gaza, last week.Credit: STRINGER/□□□□□□

An Israeli tank near the city of Gaza, last month.Credit: IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/Reuters

Sireen, the mother of Nour and Uday, initially refused to leave Gaza after being told by Gisha that Israeli law doesn't permit non-Israeli Palestinians to join her, even her husband and mother. Her small family began to go back and forth between the village where they lived near the eastern border with Israel and her mother's house in western Gaza. There was shelling from the east, bombs in the west, shattering glass, plastic sheets that don't give protection against the cold, suffocating smoke, and less food and water every day.

Nour kept saying, “Let's go to another country, where there are no bombings.” And so, despite Sireen's initial reluctance, her husband managed to convince her; Sireen's two brothers also kept begging her to leave Gaza.

Three of the women whose exit had been arranged couldn't make it to the Rafah crossing in the end. The first was a woman whose northern Gaza house was shelled the night before her departure date. She was wounded, as apparently were several other members of her family. The second woman, who lives in a neighborhood in the eastern part of Gaza City, couldn't leave her house because an Israeli tank was moving nearby. She sent a voice message in which the tank's growls were audible. Another woman told her brother, who in turn told HaMoked, that she had left her house, walked through the streets and rode in donkey carts until reaching a section of Salah al-Din Road where tanks fired at the convoy. She had to turn back.

Palestinian Muslims perform the Friday noon prayer along a street in the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Ras al-Amud, on December 15, 2023.Credit: AHMAD GHARABLI - AFP

Coordinating the entry and exit of Israelis to and from Gaza always involves tortuous bureaucracy, and in times of war, one must also navigate between bombs and unsafe areas and the Egyptian authorities. On October 16, Sireen informed Gisha that she was ready to get out. They told her that the coordination of the Israelis' reentry hadn't yet been arranged.

The coordination process dragged on and on. On October 27, Sireen was asked to send copies of her

young children's documents. At one point, she was told they'd be able to leave Gaza on November 5. Then, only hours before their departure, Gisha told her "not yet." On November 10, she was advised again to get ready. Again, something happened and the departure was postponed. In the meantime, the bombings continued, and no one knew if they would still be alive the next day. Gisha says the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories did all it could to ensure the Israelis' departure.

And indeed, on November 14, Gisha informed Sireen that she could leave the next day. "Be at the Rafah crossing at 9 A.M.," she was told. There was no more fuel for the car in which their neighbor was to drive them south. Only one gas canister remained, which, Sireen said, the men connected to the car's gas tank with a pipe. Her aunt, who was present at our meeting at the family home, was astounded. "Our car breaks down when you accidentally fill it with diesel instead of gasoline, while your car gets by with cooking gas?"

Her husband and mother accompanied them to Rafah. The next day, at 8 A.M., people in similar situations began to gather at the crossing. They all had Israeli citizenship and residency status. The passage from Gaza into Egypt was relatively quick, but since some were late, they left the terminal by bus about 12 hours later.

Israeli soldiers are seen on the Salah al-Din road in the Gaza Strip, last month. Credit: Hatem Moussa/AP

The bus drove south on a military road, escorted by an Egyptian military jeep in front and behind. To the Egyptians, the passengers were all considered Israelis, so they were probably worried that someone would harm them. The bus arrived at the closed Taba border terminal after midnight. The Egyptians refused the Israeli proposal for the passengers to stay in Taba overnight, forcing the Israeli officials at the terminal to resume activity in the middle of the night. Two soldiers and a civilian, to the best of Sireen's recollection, verified the identity of each passenger and took their luggage for inspection.

Since everyone's passports and ID cards were deposited at the Erez checkpoint when they last entered Gaza before the war, an officer from Israel's Gaza Coordination and Liaison Administration traveled to Taba specifically to deal with the matter and handed the documents to the border inspectors and then to their owners.

Interrogators from the Shin Bet security service were also waiting for the arrivals, whose phones were taken. The interrogations took place simultaneously in different rooms. Each person who came out of an interrogation was required to sit separately and not speak with the others. These interrogations are labeled "risk neutralization."

Several people reported shouts, verbal abuse and interrogators banging on tables. They said they weren't given any food or water for hours. The interrogators demanded that they provide information about neighbors and any Hamas members they might know of. They presented them with a detailed map and asked them to mark some location or another. The interrogators talked about October 7 and about the fact that Hamas had killed children and demanded to see the contact details and messages on their phones. The investigators also asked whether there really was no food in Gaza and how people got by.

A far way to go

When Gisha told Hind that she should arrive in Rafah on December 5, her son accompanied her in the car. They paid the driver 400 shekels (\$110) for a trip that lasted less than an hour. These are

the last sights she carried with her from Gaza: collapsed buildings, crowds of people wandering among the tents on the beach and in the Tel al-Sultan neighborhood, the ruins in Rafah between which the car maneuvered, the children with their eyes wide open with fear and hunger, walking around by themselves.

When Hind and the other travelers left the Taba terminal on December 6, they noticed that among the cars waiting for them was one with a siren. It also had a large Israeli flag on it. An armed man got out. He was waiting for a pregnant young woman with two children who were with them on the bus. She was born in Gaza after her Jewish mother had married a Gaza resident. While on the bus, they realized that the exit by her and her children was arranged by one of the Jewish organizations that “rescue” Jewish women married to Arabs. It was they who had reimbursed the other passengers for the money they lent her for the travel and transit fees and an Egyptian visa.

Hind traveled to Jerusalem in the family car of one of her travel companions – a Jerusalem resident whose children had not been allowed to join her by the Interior Ministry. She cried the whole way, Hind said. The church to which the woman belonged implored the Israeli authorities to allow the children to leave Gaza and stay in the West Bank, where several family members live. The Israeli authorities refused this, too. What convinced the young mother to leave Gaza was the fact that Australia accepts Christian Gazans, and she hopes that she will soon be reunited there with her husband and children.

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P.S.

• HAARETZ. Dec 17, 2023:

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2023-12-17/ty-article-magazine/.premium/dozens-of-israeli-citizens-and-residents-left-gaza-during-the-war-under-the-radar/0000018c-77e6-de9c-aded-7fee8d700000>