

In Egypt, Gazans endure ‘unbearable’ life with little support

Friday 29 November 2024, by [RAMI Hadi](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2024).

Over 100,000 Palestinians have fled to Egypt during the war. Feeling stranded by the state and the PA, they describe a precarious existence in legal limbo.

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Palestinians who fled their homes wait at the Rafah border crossing to Egypt in the southern Gaza Strip, on October 14, 2023. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

A year ago, Khaled’s life came crashing down. It was only a few weeks after Israel’s onslaught on Gaza had begun, and the 33-year-old was having dinner with his wife and two children in their home in Al-Bureij refugee camp, in the center of the Strip. Suddenly, an airstrike hit their neighbor’s house, killing 10 people. Khaled and his family survived, but their home was severely damaged, forcing them to evacuate to the nearby city of Deir Al-Balah.

Like thousands of other families in Gaza, Khaled was desperate to get his loved ones out of the line of fire. But with Israel attacking every part of the Strip, he realized real safety would require evacuating from Gaza. To do so, he needed to raise thousands of dollars to pay their way through the Egyptian-controlled Rafah Crossing — Gazans’ sole route to the outside world.

These permits came at a significant cost: around \$5,000 for each adult and \$2,500 for children under 16, paid to a private company called Hala Consulting and Tourism Services. Owned by Egyptian businessman Ibrahim Alarjani, an ally of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Hala holds a monopoly on Gazans’ travel to Egypt and has hiked up prices accordingly, raking in [around \\$2 million](#) per day until Israel invaded Rafah and seized control of the crossing in May. Since then, travel out of Gaza has been virtually impossible, at any cost.

Khaled managed to gather together \$10,000 — enough to secure passage for only one adult and two children. His family had a decision to make. “We decided that I’d travel with my children to get them out of the war, and raise the \$5,000 for my wife’s permit fee later,” Khaled — who, like several others interviewed for this article, gave only his first name due to fear of persecution by the Egyptian authorities — told +972 Magazine.

Khaled and his kids crossed into Egypt in April. But since Israel took over the crossing the following month, causing Hala to halt its services, Khaled’s wife has remained cut off from their family — a situation that has taken a serious toll on his children, and one that has now become terribly common for many Palestinian families.

Palestinians with foreign passports leave Gaza to Egypt via the Rafah Crossing, southern Gaza Strip,

February 6, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

“[Since we left,] my wife has been displaced along with her family in Gaza,” Khaled said. “She rarely has access to the internet, and my children are constantly stressed and bad-tempered as they can’t talk to her on a regular basis. They are traumatized children who need their mother.”

Since the outbreak of the war, some 105,000 Palestinians have fled Gaza to Egypt, [according to](#) the Palestinian ambassador to Egypt, Diab Al-Louh. However, even those who successfully cross the border continue to face severe hardships. Upon arriving, Egyptian authorities grant them 45-day residency permits; once these expire, they are left without the ability to access legal work or basic services.

Egypt is obligated to support refugees under the 1951 International Refugee Convention, but Palestinian refugees, who are supposed to receive social services and assistance from the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), [are not normally covered](#) under that convention. However, Egypt has never granted UNRWA a mandate to operate within the country, arguing that the agency’s presence could undermine Palestinian refugees’ right of return. This has opened up what humanitarian agencies call “serious protection gaps” for the tens of thousands of Palestinians now residing in Egypt.

Khaled, who was a professional barber in Gaza, found a job in a local barbershop in Cairo which barely earned enough to keep him going. “I got paid 100 Egyptian pounds daily [about \$2] for 8 to 10 hours [of work], but I had to quit because I couldn’t leave my children alone. I now rely on assistance from my friends in Europe.

“Our lives as Palestinians in Egypt are extremely difficult,” he continued. “We can’t work without residency. Available job opportunities offer salaries that are too low to cover basic living costs, and rent and daily expenses are incredibly high.”

For Khaled and many others like him, returning to Gaza will not be feasible for the foreseeable future, so he plans to seek asylum with his children in Europe, via Turkey. “I’ve approached dozens of travel agencies for a visa to Turkey, but they refused as I don’t have legal residency in Egypt,” he explained. “I’m now in touch with a smuggler who helped many Gazans get to Turkey. From there, we’ll travel by sea to Greece and apply for asylum, in hopes of reuniting with my wife.”

Palestinian at an UNRWA camp in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, November 4, 2023. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

‘We were treated like animals’

Shatha, a 30-year-old English teacher from Gaza City, was forced to evacuate to Rafah and shelter with relatives when her family’s home was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike in December 2023. Shortly after arriving, she and her family members were wounded when a nearby building was bombed. They were treated at the European Hospital near Khan Younis, and remained sheltering there for a few months.

But as living conditions in the hospital became unbearable, Shatha decided to launch a crowdfunding campaign, raising \$33,000 over several months to cover the cost of travel permits for her and her family. They left Gaza in February, but found little relief upon arriving in Cairo.

“I applied for many jobs [when we arrived] in Egypt, but they refused my application because of the [lack of] residency status,” Shatha told +972. “I am currently working illegally for an Egyptian

private school for \$50 a month, without any rights — something I had to accept to make ends meet. I decided to switch to online work [for the school] to save the costs of commuting.

Without long-term legal status, Palestinians in Egypt cannot access health services or enter the formal labor market. “Life here is unbearable,” Shatha said. “We can’t receive international money transfers or get a phone number or even internet in our names due to the residency issue.”

Gazans are also unable to enroll their children in public schools. As a result, after already losing several months of education due to the war in Gaza, Shatha’s younger brother, Mohammed, 13, has now been set back even further. “We approached several public middle schools, but they all asked about residency,” she said. “Even private schools refused to register him, although we offered to pay the tuition fees.”

In September, the West Bank-based Palestinian Education Ministry launched an online platform to help Palestinian students from Gaza to continue their education both inside and outside the Strip. However, the lack of available internet and electricity due to Israel’s war means that this is not a viable option for most [students who remain in Gaza](#), while Palestinians in Egypt also view it as a less-than-ideal solution.

Displaced Palestinian children study at a school that was bombed by Israeli warplanes in recent war in Khan Yunis, October 9, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

“Mohammed has to study online, but he hasn’t adapted to it,” Shatha explained. “He needs on-campus learning and the experience of studying with classmates. It has badly affected him psychologically, and hurt his social skills.”

The lack of legal status for Palestinians is also complicating their relations with Egyptian citizens. Rania, a 30-year-old Gazan, fled to Egypt after her sister was killed in an Israeli attack in Rafah on Oct. 20 last year. Shortly after crossing into Egypt, she met an Egyptian man and they decided to marry. In June, they went to an Egyptian court in Cairo to approve the marriage agreement, but the court refused to sign because of Rania’s residency status.

The couple then approached the Palestinian Embassy in Egypt, where they were told they had to get two adults in the West Bank to sign off on the marriage agreement in court on Rania’s behalf and send it back to Egypt. “How can I find a person I don’t know to sign my marriage agreement on my behalf?” she asked incredulously. “We asked many Egyptian courts, but they all refused. Even if we signed a religious marriage agreement at a mosque, it wouldn’t be legal. We were treated like animals.”

The couple soon understood that the only way for them to get married legally was to do so in another country. Since Rania’s Egyptian partner normally lives in Austria, and Rania received a scholarship to get a master’s degree in Ireland, they decided to meet in Dublin, where they will soon reunite. “I survived the war [in Gaza] for five months but went through another war in Egypt. It’s hell there for Palestinians. We were deprived of all basic rights.”

Given the absence of any long-term recognition or assistance from the Egyptian state, various NGOs and activists in Egypt have launched campaigns to support Gazans arriving in the country. One activist, a Palestinian who fled the war and spoke to +972 on the condition of anonymity, is part of a group that started a humanitarian campaign in January, gathering food, clothing, and other in-kind assistance from donors — primarily Egyptians. “We collect all the donated clothing at a charity shop in Cairo, where Palestinians in need can take what they need,” he explained.

The team, made up of 40 Palestinian and foreign volunteers, has also collaborated with numerous

Egyptian employers who have offered over 100 jobs to Palestinians from Gaza, and with psychologists to help those in need of mental health support. They have also launched a sponsorship program to allow individual donors to directly support Palestinian families. “We connect families in need with Egyptian, Palestinian, and foreign donors,” the activist said. “The minimum donation is between \$200 and \$300 per family, with support continuing for at least six months. So far, more than 300 families have received sponsorship.”



Donated clothes for Palestinians at a charity shop in Cairo. (Courtesy)

'I reached out to the PA, but they did not help me'

Of the more than 105,000 Gazans who have fled to Egypt, there are an estimated [10,000 wounded and sick civilians](#) who left the Strip to seek medical care. Currently 1,800 injured Palestinians, along with 3,000 accompanying individuals, are receiving medical care in Egyptian hospitals under the supervision of the Palestinian Embassy.

Khaled Rajab, a Palestinian freelance journalist and university lecturer, was seriously injured in January when Israel targeted the press car he was traveling in, [killing](#) Al Jazeera journalist Hamza Al-Dahdouh and his colleague Mustafa Al-Thuraya — two of the [129 Palestinian journalists](#) and media workers killed in Gaza since October 7.

“My right hand, eye, and ear were all injured,” he told +972. “I underwent around 20 surgeries on my hand at the European Hospital, but then decided to travel to Egypt to continue my treatment, as I could not receive care for my eye and ear in Gaza due to a lack of resources.”

The hospital applied on his behalf to get a medical referral covered by the Palestinian Authority (PA), but it was rejected — forcing him to pay \$5,000 to travel to Egypt and cover the additional costs of treatment in private hospitals. “I had to undergo most of the surgeries on my hand again because they weren’t done properly in Gaza,” he recounted. “I still need multiple surgeries on my hand and ear, and I may need a cornea transplant soon. I reached out to the Palestinian Embassy in Egypt to cover my treatment costs, but unfortunately they did not help me.”

Rawan Abu Safia, a 30-year-old Palestinian, also sought treatment in Egypt after an Israeli tank shell struck her room in Gaza City last November. She bled for hours before an ambulance could reach her, as her home was surrounded by tanks. Abu Safia survived, but her body was riddled with shrapnel, and damage to the retina in her right eye resulted in a partial loss of vision.

She spent three months in northern Gaza, first in a hospital and later at a relative’s house, as her body slowly healed. However, her eye remained untreated due to a lack of specialized ophthalmologists, and in April, she received a medical referral funded by the PA to travel to Egypt.

Once they arrived, Abu Safia was admitted to Al-Azhar University Hospital in New Damietta. However, the news she received from doctors there was devastating: there was no treatment for her damaged right eye, and most of her sight was permanently lost. “I consulted countless

ophthalmologists in Egypt, but they all confirmed that my right eye would not heal," she said. "It was overwhelming and heartbreaking, but I had to accept it."

View of the Rafah Border Crossing, on July 15, 2024. (Oren Cohen/Flash90)

Abu Safia is now undergoing laser treatments to remove scars on her body. But her ordeal is far from over. Sharing a cramped hospital room with two other Gazan patients for many months, she and her mother face significant financial strain. With limited funds and a reliance on hospital food, they are struggling to make ends meet.

"The medical referral covers only the treatment fees, not living expenses," she explained. "The Palestinian Embassy gave us only \$100 a few months ago, but [now] we mostly rely on the three daily meals provided by the hospital and the small amount of money we managed to bring from Gaza."

In addition, Abu Safia has barely been allowed to leave the hospital — a measure, she was told, requested by the Palestinian Embassy — and many Gazan patients seeking treatment in Egypt told +972 they are experiencing similar restrictions on their mobility. "Initially, we weren't allowed to leave the hospital without security accompaniment, not even for basic necessities like groceries," she said. "Visits were prohibited. Recently, the hospital security granted us two hours to walk around the grounds, but only after obtaining permission."

The world has gone dim for Abu Safia, who remains stuck in the hospital and faces an uncertain future. Despite the war, she still desperately clings to a glimmer of hope of returning to Gaza one day.

+972 reached out to the Palestinian Embassy in Egypt and the Egyptian state authorities for comment. Their responses will be added here if and when they are received.

Hadi Rami

P.S.

- +972, November 22, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/gazans-egypt-legal-limbo-exile/>

- Hadi Rami is a Palestinian journalist from Gaza.

- **Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.**

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 14 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, entrenched occupation and apartheid, and a 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 a leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists, activists, and thinkers can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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