

'We're Still Breathing, and We Don't Want to Die': Testimonies From the Inferno in Northern Gaza

Saturday 4 January 2025, by [MAJADLI Hanin](#) (Date first published: 2 January 2025).

The IDF is completing its expulsion of Palestinians from northern Gaza - an area that once housed a population the size of Tel Aviv's. Residents who fled describe an unprecedented, brutal operation

"People were being starved and kept thirsty so they would be forced to evacuate," Mohammed says. Credit: Reuters

"At first drones scattered leaflets calling for immediate evacuation. Jabalya was a very crowded camp at this stage because thousands of DPs had come there from other places and were living in local schools, which had been converted to absorption centers. The open areas in the camp filled up with tents, and it was so crowded that it was hard to walk in the street.

"When the ground operation started [this past October], it was accompanied by heavy bombing. People were afraid for their children's lives, and were [forced to flee](#). We were forced to leave on the fourth day of the operation, after a night of terror. A drone, or some sort of Israeli aircraft that had been fired at the roof of our house, hit the solar panels up there. Tanks fired shells and hit the upper floors. It was dark, we were scared and didn't know where to go, but we realized that we had to get out of there.

"In the days that followed, the Israel Defense Forces attacked a water-distribution point near us a few times. People were being starved and were kept thirsty so they would be forced to evacuate. In the end, we found ourselves walking in total darkness, with tanks moving to the right and to the left, scattering sand and dust on us. The whole way was filled with destruction."

- Mohammed, 31, Jabalya

The army forced us to march between dozens of tanks along a narrow route full of dead bodies and body parts. There were hundreds of children with us. They walked next to us and saw everything.

Rania

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"For 15 days we were besieged in the Khalifa bin Zayed School in Beit Lahia. On the first day of the siege, we evacuated the top floors of the school. All the DPs gathered on the ground floor, in order to escape the shelling. We baked saj bread, a kind of lafa [flatbread], and divided it among us. Other than that, we didn't eat anything. At one stage there was no water. Everyone found a way to moisten their lips and tongue a little, but there was already no drinking water.

"As the days went by, the distress became more acute. The sick suffered, especially because the medications had run out and the supply had stopped. Mothers of babies couldn't get diapers so they ripped up their clothes to make diapers out of them. It was impossible to move, it was impossible to go out. We put pails in the middle of the room for toilets.

"In the end we had no choice and we left. The army forced us to march between dozens of tanks along a narrow route full of dead bodies and body parts. There were hundreds of children with us. They walked next to us and saw everything."

- Rania, 26, Beit Lahiya

Destruction in the Gaza Strip, last week. The IDF is destroying entire neighborhoods. Credit: Amir Cohen / REUTERS

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"We stayed in the northern Strip even after the military siege started, because there wasn't a moment when I felt that it was safe to leave. I stayed in spaces between buildings, found cover where possible, because my home doesn't exist any longer. I was saved from death a few times - the last time was today: The place where I had been was hit a minute after I left. A minute separated me from death.

"In terms of food, the situation has been the same for a year - bread and canned items. We eat ful, hummus, white beans. It's been the same since the army started the siege. Our diet is based on food that we stored in advance and on humanitarian aid, which we're forced to buy at exorbitant prices. Water is a huge problem. The desalination facilities aren't working, most of the wells have been destroyed, the pumping stations have been damaged. The truth is that we are forced to drink water that is not fit for drinking.

"I've already become used to life without electricity. From the moment the sun sets in the afternoon, I live in total darkness. I feel like a bat. In truth, I have no idea how I'll cope with the first light [we see] after the war. It will hurt my eyes for sure.

"If there is one thing I would like the world to know, it's that we do not love death. We love life. We are still breathing, and we don't want to die."

Omar, 29, Beit Lahia

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Omar

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"People don't understand why we didn't move to the south, why we stayed on in a danger zone, but it's not so simple. Every family that stayed here has its reasons. There are families where someone is disabled, or has with a serious disease. How are they supposed to move on foot to the southern part of the Strip? They would rather die at home.

"Besides that, there are people who wanted to leave but the rest of their family decided to stay, so they had to stay too. I stayed in Jabalya with my husband and his family - 30 people altogether. His mother is in a wheelchair, where are we going to go with her? We don't have a vehicle, we don't even have a donkey.

"Another thing is that the southern Strip is completely packed with people. Here the people who went left behind empty buildings, and you can settle in the buildings that are still standing. It's better than being in tents where you sink in muddy water. It's better to have a roof above you, even if it could collapse on you.

"And there is also the matter of hunger, but that changes all the time. It's not that we didn't have anything to eat over a long period of time - there just wasn't enough, and there was no variety. On the worst days, we lived off bread that was baked from animal fodder, but at other times there were oranges, guavas, spinach, hubeiza [wild mallow], beetroot and all kinds of other things. We made do with that."

- *Mona, 31, Jabalya*

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"This time wasn't like times before. The army advanced deeply and operated in a very broad way. They worked in an orderly fashion and blew up whole areas. The entire quarter where we lived was destroyed. Even before that, we had had to leave our home, but when the army arrived we had to leave our present house, too. It became too dangerous there.

"We arranged a place for ourselves in a third house, with relatives, near Kamal Adwan Hospital [in Beit Lahia]. Being close to the hospital didn't guarantee that we would be protected. The army attacked [Kamal Adwan](#) during this operation and also before that. I have quite a few relatives working on the hospital's medical teams, and some of them were killed.

"In the meantime, the army is continuing to destroy more and more houses, and also farming areas.

They're creating a buffer between Gaza City and the towns in the northern Strip. And, of course, there are casualties all the time. The army is also launching attacks on DP absorption centers, and it's now impossible for me to count how many people that I know who have been killed. Women, children. And it's also impossible to know what has happened to other people: Either they have been arrested by the army or they are buried under the rubble."

- Basel, 27, Beit Lahia

Destruction in northern Gaza last month. "The tank began firing at our house. We were sitting in the living room on the sofas, and in a second we were all lying on the floor, paralyzed with fear." Credit: Reuters

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"Our house was hit before, but remained standing. Until now. Now we have nothing. The house was destroyed completely, and not only our house: The whole neighborhood is gone. I left for the western part of Gaza, because the situation in the south is very bad. If it were good, I would go there. We are moving here between schools and destroyed homes whose owners have left to go further south.

"The only source of food, from what I see, comes from the [humanitarian] aid, and it actually enters regularly but isn't properly distributed. Hamas oversees the distribution, and there are robbers and thieves. Merchandise also comes in, but it's very expensive - totally unreal prices. A kilo of potatoes costs 60 shekels [about \$16]. And sometimes the problem isn't a shortage of food, but the shortage of fuel and wood. There are days when the bakeries cannot operate even though they have flour, because they have no way to turn on the ovens.

"We can hardly get hold of drinking water. There are trucks distributing water that comes from humanitarian initiatives. They drive between the absorption centers and people fill gallons of it, but the trucks don't always show up and that's the only source of water.

"And there are arrests, a lot of arrests. No one knows what the army's criteria are, what determines who they're going to take. I know people who were arrested, some are in Hamas and some have no connection to Hamas. There's no way to know the reasons and the considerations."

- Yazan, 28, Jabalya

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Yazan

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"First of all, there is no electricity, almost none at all. We rely on the solar panels, and lately it's been cloudy. We live in constant fear and are forced to move from place to place, to look for a safe place, or food. The feeling at the moment is that the next bombing raid is about to happen, that you don't know whether you will survive the day or not. Every minute it feels like your life could end right now. I work in the field [as part of community-oriented initiatives] and make the rounds between schools and absorption centers - and everything is exposed. Danger lurks around every corner. We are afraid of the Jews all the time, even though we barely see them.

"Why did we stay in the north? At first we left like everyone else and found a place in Nuseirat [a refugee camp in central Gaza]. We moved to a zone that was supposed to be safe, but two weeks later the house next door was bombed. My parents and my younger brother were wounded, and we understood that the leaflets of the occupation are spreading lies. They are a tool to get us to move us from one place to another - not a promise that the new place will be safe. The next day we decided to return home.

"I want to talk about two incidents. One, when the occupation took up a position not far away and started shelling the whole area heavily. My mother peeked out the window and saw a tank standing at the end of our street. We understood that we had a problem, and hadn't even managed to move when the tank began firing at our house. We were sitting in the living room on the sofas, and in a second we were all lying on the floor, paralyzed with fear. The firing was intense, and we decided to crawl, all of us, into the small space of the kitchen. We lay there without moving our heads, because the shooting went on and on. Until, fortunately for us, it stopped.

"The second case involved my neighbor, a member of the volunteer team. Most of my friends had fled south, but he and I remained in the north. We became closer during the war. When we heard shelling nearby, we would warn each other, escape together. One night, my room was completely lit up by powerful explosions that were very nearby. I shuddered in fear, my body folded into itself, I felt paralyzed. But as soon as I managed to calm down a little, and I understood that I was still alive, I went down to check the situation of the people I know.

"Within a short time I discovered that my friend had been killed, along with his mother. I have no words to describe the feeling that flooded me at that moment. A combination of total helplessness, profound grief and endless pain."

- Deena, 28, Beit Lahia

Hanin Majadli

P.S.

• Haaretz. Jan 2, 2025:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-01-02/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/were-still-breathing-we-dont-want-to-die-testimonies-from-the-inferno-in-north-gaza/00000194-2809-d05d-a1b7-286f49190000>