

Palestinians abused, forced to chant anti-Hamas slogans in ‘safe corridor’

Thursday 8 February 2024, by [AMER Ruwaida Kamal](#), [MAHDI Ibtisam](#) (Date first published: 6 February 2024).

Tens of thousands of people — including one of this article’s authors — have fled the city of Khan Younis in recent days. Their testimonies reveal the harrowing ordeal of crossing Israel’s checkpoints in Gaza.

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Israeli forces watch on as Palestinians flee Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, January 30, 2024. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)
Israeli forces watch on as Palestinians flee Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, January 30, 2024. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

For several weeks, the city of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip has witnessed intense Israeli bombardment by ground and air, as well as fierce clashes between Israeli forces and Hamas fighters. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [announced](#) last week that the army had successfully dismantled Hamas’ capabilities in the city — a claim Israel [made earlier](#) about Gaza City in the north, only to be [proven wrong](#). But in Khan Younis, as in the rest of Gaza, it is we civilians who are bearing the brunt of the violence.

Israeli tanks have besieged two of the most important hospitals still partially functioning in southern Gaza: Nasser and Al-Amal. Both are located in the western part of Khan Younis, and have been overwhelmed since the war began not only with the influx of patients but also with families seeking shelter after having [been displaced](#) from the northern parts of the Strip. Israeli forces [opened fire](#) at the more than 8,000 displaced people sheltering in the vicinity of Nasser Hospital, and bulldozed graves in the adjacent cemetery — one of at least 16 cemeteries that Israel has desecrated during its operation in Gaza.

Israeli tanks also penetrated the vicinity of Al-Aqsa University at the western edge of the city, near the previously designated “safe zone” of [Al-Mawasi](#); targeted the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Training Center, one of the largest shelters in all of Gaza which had been accommodating [up to 40,000](#) displaced people; and completely surrounded the western part of Khan Younis refugee camp.

The Israeli army dropped leaflets ordering residents to evacuate Khan Younis, and in recent days some 120,000 Palestinians have [fled the city](#) through a supposedly “safe corridor” spanning from the west of the refugee camp to the area of Al-Mawasi near Al-Aqsa University. The passage through this corridor, however, which is made up of three Israeli military checkpoints, has for many Palestinians

been one of the most harrowing ordeals since the war began.

According to testimonies from Palestinians who have made the journey, including one of the authors, those passing through the corridor were forced to chant slogans against Hamas; many had their belongings confiscated; and men were separated from their families, stripped, and subjected to hours of physical abuse and deprivation. All the while, thousands remain trapped inside Khan Younis, unable to leave their shelters out of fear of being shot on the streets.

Palestinians flee Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, January 26, 2024. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

Ibtisam's testimony

I was not intending to leave Khan Younis. Having fled Gaza City at the start of the war with my husband and two children upon the orders of the occupation army, we sought refuge first in Al-Shati refugee camp before being forced to flee again to Khan Younis, which was [considered a safe area](#). We moved around between different residences in the city before finding a room to rent. As the ground invasion of the city commenced, we decided we weren't going to flee again.

But we were soon forced to change our minds. In the early hours of Jan. 26, the apartment behind ours was bombed, causing debris to fall onto our residence. This incident instilled panic and fear in us. That same night, two more apartments on our street and over 20 apartments in the whole neighborhood of Al-Amal were targeted, while tanks positioned near Al-Amal Hospital intermittently launched shells in our direction and unmanned quadcopter drones repeatedly fired at people on the streets.

Faced with this situation, we decided we had to leave — especially after the army dropped leaflets over the schools near Nasser Hospital, ordering the thousands of displaced people seeking refuge there to evacuate. At around 10:15 a.m., a Red Cross vehicle arrived to announce the opening of a “safe corridor,” and we joined thousands of people seeking to pass through it.

The passage involved crossing three Israeli military checkpoints. The whole time, we were subjected to a great deal of insults, curses, and humiliation — directed toward ourselves and our mothers — by an army officer who was fluent in Arabic. For me and my children it took over an hour and a half; for my husband it took nearly nine.

At the first checkpoint, we were ordered to raise our identity cards for photographing by a soldier, while tanks moved menacingly toward us. We continued on to the second, where the army separated men from women and instructed us to kneel. Then, an officer began to lecture us, blaming Hamas for our displacement, the destruction of our homes, our need to seek refuge, and the fear we are experiencing.

Israeli forces watch on as Palestinians flee Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, January 26, 2024. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

He then told us that in order to be allowed to pass through the checkpoint unharmed, we had to chant slogans against the resistance: “The people want the overthrow of Hamas,” and “God is sufficient for us, and he is the best disposer of affairs against Hamas and the Qassam Brigades” (appropriating a line from the Qur'an). The officer insisted on the repetition of these slogans; only after more than 45 minutes did the soldiers permit women and children to pass, while men were kept behind.

At the third checkpoint, a soldier told me that in order to proceed I must leave my bag behind — which contained all of my belongings, including blankets and clothes for my whole family. The soldier then told me to part with my children so they could pass through before me. I refused, fearing that I would lose them in the crowd, and he eventually allowed me to cross with them. Others lost their children and faced great distress while searching for them.

I exited the corridor around noon, then faced the most difficult hours of my life as I waited for my husband to emerge. Seven hours later, he was permitted to pass through — following a journey filled with humiliation and infringements on his dignity, all in rainy and extremely cold conditions.

‘Our dignity was violated for over six hours’

The joy of 56-year-old Umm Mohammed Jakhlab was indescribable when her two sons emerged from the final checkpoint in the corridor out of Khan Younis. She had been sitting near the crossing for nearly six hours awaiting their arrival.

“My only sons, Mohammed and Ibrahim — I raised them after their father’s martyrdom until they became young men,” she told +972. “I wish to find joy in their lives and witness their marriages. They are my entire life. I felt my heart sinking the moment I left them at the checkpoint with the army and walked out alone.”

Palestinians flee Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, January 26, 2024. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

Hours passed for Jakhlab as if they were days, the tears not drying from her eyes as she waited at the end of the crossing. Despite the sound of Israeli soldiers firing machine guns from tanks nearby, she did not leave until her sons finally emerged.

Ibrahim was shivering when he arrived. The army had forced him to strip naked, including his underwear, despite the cold and rainy weather. He was then ordered to step into a pool of water, jump up and down multiple times, and then get out and stand for 10 minutes before being allowed to put on his clothes and cross the checkpoint.

“We were humiliated extensively after the soldiers scanned our eyes [with a biometric camera],” Ibrahim recounted. “The treatment we faced surpassed degradation. Our dignity was violated for over six hours as we sat on our knees, forbidden from sitting comfortably.” Throughout this ordeal, Ibrahim’s only concern was a quick exit, fearing for his mother who he knew would be agonizing to see them again.

Khaled Zaqout, 25, described this experience as one of the worst of his life. He had been sheltering at Qandila School, near Nasser Hospital, with his wife and son, and decided to leave the city after the army dropped leaflets overhead ordering them to evacuate immediately. “The targeting did not stop over the past three days, and a nearby school was hit, causing the death of some refugees and wounding others,” he told +972.

After entering the corridor to leave Khan Younis, Zaqout was first forced to abandon his backpack, which contained his work laptop, mobile phone, and clothes. “When I tried to talk to them about the bag, they insulted me and my mother,” he recounted. “They ordered me to leave without further complaints.”

Palestinians flee Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, January 26, 2024. (Abed Rahim

Khatib/Flash90)

While his wife and son were permitted to cross through the checkpoint, Zaqout was held there “with a large number of men, including young men.” Despite eventually being allowed through, he has not yet been able to find his family. “Since my exit, I have been searching for my wife and son,” he explained. “Forced to leave my mobile phone behind, I lost the means to communicate with them, and my wife does not know how to navigate the situation without me.”

Zaqout describes his mental and physical state as very bad — all the more so for having lost the work that he kept on his electronic devices. “I will never forget what I went through in the past few days,” he said. “We were deliberately humiliated, and forced to repeat slogans against the resistance and Hamas. All of this happened while soldiers filmed us on their mobile phones, so they can boast about it by publishing the footage on social media.”

Zohdiya Qdeih found herself unable to utter the slogans that the soldiers ordered Palestinians to chant. She questions the notion of a safe passage when it involves humiliating unarmed civilians, and pressuring them to say words that hurt a segment of the Palestinian people.

“The soldier asked me why I didn’t repeat the slogan,” she recounted to +972. “I remained silent and did not respond. He said, ‘I know your heart is with them, and you will not insult them, but they are the ones who brought you into this situation. They did not stand by you, and you will not find any place to shelter after leaving this checkpoint; all of [the population of] Gaza City is in Rafah.’”

Qdeih emphasizes that many of the people repeated the slogans merely to comply with the soldiers and safely cross the checkpoint. “Our hearts are with the resistance in all its actions, and with the steadfastness on the ground, despite being displaced from one place to another,” she added.

A Palestinian woman sits in front of the damaged entrance to Al-Aqsa University in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, January 26, 2024. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

‘A safe area is suddenly transformed into a war zone’

Bahaa Wadi, a 35-year-old from the western part of Khan Younis refugee camp, reluctantly fled through the corridor in recent days to the southern part of Al-Mawasi, near Rafah. “We felt that we were safe [in the camp],” he told +972. “We had more than 20 displaced people from Gaza City staying with us in our home for more than three months, and the whole camp is crowded with displaced people.

“Suddenly, two weeks ago, tanks penetrated behind Nasser Hospital and ordered the residents of the western camp next to the hospital to evacuate,” Wadi continued. “We heard the sounds of shells and fighting throughout the day and night.”

Despite some of his family fleeing the city to live in tents in Al-Mawasi, Wadi was intent on staying. “Living in tents is too difficult in the winter,” he said. But then the situation escalated: on Jan. 27, Israeli tanks suddenly appeared at the western entrance to the camp. “They were in the vicinity of Al-Aqsa University and Al-Khair Hospital, which means that we were besieged.”

At that point, Wadi and the relatives who were still with him joined those fleeing the city through the designated corridor. “Thousands were walking along Al-Bahr Street in the camp, and tanks were standing at its entrance,” he recounted. “People passed in front of the army, holding up their ID cards and trying to carry some of their belongings. The children were nervous at the sight of the

soldiers, tanks, and bulldozers.”

After experiencing several hours of “tension and fear of arrest,” they exited the corridor and rejoined their family in Al-Mawasi. “We still have concerns about being displaced again. That is why we chose to go to the Rafah side of Al-Mawasi instead of the Khan Younis side, because we do not trust the army and it may bombard the part near Khan Younis with missiles — as it did at the UNRWA Training College, which led to the killing and wounding of many displaced people there.”

Displaced Palestinians shelter at the European hospital in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, January 1, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

After being displaced from her home in Gaza City, 44-year-old Salwa Bakr and eight of her family members originally took up residence in a tent on the northern side of Al-Mawasi, just west of Khan Younis refugee camp, before deciding to flee further south. “We could hear the sounds of shells and missiles. It was never a completely safe area. We felt the hunger, high prices, and extreme cold in the area.

“Several days ago, tanks bombed the UNRWA Training College, which was very close to where we were staying,” Bakr continued. “We saw the tents of other displaced people burning, people screaming because of injuries, and people who were killed. It was a shock to us. A safe area is suddenly transformed into a war zone; they were not told to evacuate.

“Out of intense fear due to the continuous bombing and the incursion of tanks behind Al-Aqsa University, my family and I were displaced to the Al-Mawasi area in Rafah,” she went on. “We went on foot and saw citizens leaving the western part of Khan Younis refugee camp crying. We went to Rafah and searched for a tent, staying with another family for two nights before finding a tent of our own.

“We are living in difficult circumstances after being displaced for the second time — and we do not know if this is the last time or not. I hope that the world will help us by stopping the war. Enough displacement and refugees. Our children need to live in dignity.”

‘They began firing shells toward the hospital’

Dr. Khaled Habib is a consultant in cardiovascular and vascular surgery at Nasser Hospital, the third largest hospital in the Gaza Strip. More than 90 percent of the staff — doctors, nurses, technicians, and administrative staff — have fled Khan Younis out of fear of arrest or to accompany family members. Nonetheless, the hospital’s emergency department is still receiving hundreds of patients every day, he told +972 in an interview last week, while the women and childbirth department is receiving numerous cases of miscarriage on a daily basis due to wounds or fear.

Palestinians mourn near the bodies of their relatives killed by Israeli airstrikes in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, December 25, 2023. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

Discussing the challenges the hospital is facing, Habib confirmed that the Israeli army was periodically targeting the hospital’s surrounding area with artillery fire. A quadcopter drone, he added, was also targeting anyone moving within the hospital complex, between the buildings of the different departments.

Habib described the severe shortage of medical supplies, which were already scarce within the hospital. Moreover, there is no food or drink for hospital staff, patients, their families, and the

displaced people who are still sheltering inside the hospital due to the siege imposed on its surroundings.

According to Habib, another problem the hospital is facing is the accumulation of medical and regular waste in its corridors and yards; there is no means to dispose of it, posing a serious threat of diseases spreading within the hospital — especially since dogs and cats have begun rummaging through it.

Habib reported that between Jan. 21-Feb. 1, the hospital received approximately 157 martyrs and 450 wounded people, while many more dead and wounded are lying on the streets out of the reach of ambulance crews who are being targeted by the Israeli army if they leave the hospital.

Despite Israel's tanks withdrawing for a couple of days, they have now returned, and the hospital's surroundings are still the target of gunfire by the quadcopter drone. This has further intensified the pressure on the hospital staff, impacting their mental well-being due to fear that also extends to their families, with whom they are unable to communicate due to current communication difficulties, according to Habib.

Palestinians at the site of an Israeli airstrike in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, December 6, 2023. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

Shatha Mahdi, a 30-year-old from the Tal al-Hawa neighborhood in Gaza City, is still sheltering inside Khan Younis' other major hospital, Al-Amal, with her husband and three children. "At the beginning of the war, we left our homes and went to the nearby Al-Quds Hospital in order to escape the intense bombing. But after the army surrounded the hospital and was very close to our homes, we felt extreme fear and fled south toward Khan Younis. We have no relatives or friends in this city, so we resorted to Al-Amal Hospital for shelter.

"We couldn't find a spot inside the hospital, but the staff told us we could stay in the back courtyard," Mahdi continued. "At first, we felt we were safe. We could hear the sounds of bombing in the city, but it did not resemble the intensity of the bombing that we used to feel and hear in Gaza City. But the situation changed dramatically after the tanks entered Khan Younis a few weeks ago.

"They began firing shells toward the hospital and into the surrounding homes," she went on. "The bombing was violent and frightening, and the drones were firing at civilians standing near the hospital gate. When my husband had to go out to get us food, I was scared he would be hit.

"Recently, the army has increased its targeting of the hospital and is preventing anyone from leaving. I saw people lying on the ground due to their wounds, either from bullets or shells. The sounds of the shells are frightening, and the movement of tanks worries us. We feel that they will attack the hospital at any moment.

"There are thousands of displaced people in the courtyard with us, and inside the hospital. People's voices get louder when the bombing suddenly intensifies. Children scream in fear and we try to reassure them a little. I hope this horror will end soon."

+972 approached the IDF Spokesperson for comment in response to the information contained in this article. The army wrote back: "The IDF cannot review the incident based only on testimonies."

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P.S.

• +972. February 6, 2024:

<https://www.972mag.com/khan-younis-safe-corridor-abuse/>

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• Our team [+972] has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly 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 the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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