

Want Out of Gaza? Pay Us \$10,000

Monday 29 January 2024, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2024).

In Gaza, a bribery industry is flourishing at the Rafah crossing into Egypt on the backs of displaced Gazans trying to skirt Israel's bombs. Egypt denies this, but 'the most senior officials in Cairo' are involved, an Egyptian researcher says

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Displaced Palestinian children look at Egyptian soldier through the Rafah crossing border fence, last week. Credit: Fatima Shbair/AP

A couple of weeks ago, the daughter of Palestinian friends who's studying abroad asked for my help to start a crowdfunding campaign to rescue her family, which has been displaced from Gaza City to Rafah in the south.

On Wednesday, Ahmed S. asked "merciful-hearted" Facebook users for help in getting his sister and her small children out of the Gaza Strip.

On the same page, Ismail A. wrote on Tuesday that he urgently needs to coordinate a departure within 48 hours for people who have residence visas for the United Arab Emirates. He can pay \$5,000, not the "astronomical fees" being demanded now.

Just 50 or 100 meters away over the Egyptian border, they can be safe from death. But in resistance to what are seen as Israel's plans to seize Gaza again, Egypt continues to ban Gazans from leaving as they wish.

Munzer S. also [reached out that day for urgent "coordination" to exit Rafah](#) for a woman and her son who already had a tourist visa to Turkey, and on Sunday, Rawan A. appealed to the same Facebook group. She pleaded: "Can anybody help a family displaced from the north to the south? They're currently in a tent, their situation is severe and their mother is sick. Who can donate? And do you know anybody who can get them out of Gaza, since the coordination fee is exorbitant?"

The Facebook group, called Rafah Inland Crossing Network, is full of similar posts, but also

advertisements for apartments for rent in Cairo, [and pleas for buying Egyptian pounds in exchange for shekels](#) (at 12 or 13 pounds per shekel, compared with the official rate of around 8.4). There are also phone numbers of people who promise to arrange departures.

[The desperation of people seeking to leave increases](#) as Israel continues to push Gazans to the very south of the enclave, including the hundreds of thousands of displaced people who have not yet fled the besieged and bombarded Khan Yunis. According to UN estimates, more than a million people are crammed in the Rafah district, whose population was around 300,000 before the war. They're horrified by every rumor or Israeli announcement that the ground offensive in Rafah is approaching.

Just 50 or 100 meters away over the Egyptian border, they can be safe from death. But in resistance to [what are seen as Israel's plans to seize Gaza again](#), Egypt continues to ban Gazans from leaving as they wish, and Egyptian spokespeople say they won't collaborate with Israeli ambitions/plans to empty Gaza of its people. A departure is only possible if foreign countries intervene on behalf of certain people for one reason or another, and for a few of the seriously wounded and ill, whose exit is made possible with great effort.

[On Tuesday, social media buzzed. Motaz Azaiza](#) had decided to leave. He is one of the courageous young independent journalists who have documented bombings, rescues and retrievals of bodies from the rubble, as well as the hospitals and schools overflowing with displaced people. In fact, on Instagram, where he has around 17 million followers, he posted a photo of himself taking leave of his protective vest as well as his colleagues.

Displaced Gazans walk past the border fence with Egypt in Rafah, in the south of the Gaza Strip. Credit: Fatima Shbair/AP

Writing in English, he said he was sorry; after more than 100 days of reporting, he had many reasons to leave, some known and some not, he said.

Maybe one reason to leave was the fact that 26 members of his family [in the city of Deir el-Balah were killed by an Israeli airstrike on October 12](#). The grief and bereavement can accumulate slowly and then strike without warning. Last week, an Egyptian news site reported that a Qatari military plane waited for Azaiza at Egypt's El Arish Airport in Sinai and flew him to the Qatari capital, Doha. But his departure - which appeared smooth - is the exception that proves the rule.

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The only way out

The people I mentioned in the first five paragraphs are referring to a route that the Egyptians deny exists but is known to everyone. It has been covered in many media outlets including this one. For a high price - which has risen to \$10,000 per person from \$4,000 at the beginning of the war - anonymous intermediaries promise [to get Gazans through the Rafah crossing into Egypt](#). The euphemism for this huge bribery enterprise is "coordination."

'This is corruption that the state allows; you don't need to understand nuclear physics to reach this conclusion.'

The Egyptians categorically denied a January 8 article by The Guardian on this phenomenon that started before the war. Daaa Rashwan, the head of Egypt's State Information Service, said customs duties are collected at Rafah in accordance with Egyptian law but that there is no basis to the reports of bribe-taking by any official for crossing the border.

"Is it true that the coordinations have stopped?" Sara M. asked Wednesday evening in the Facebook group. In fact, in the days after the denial, this is what people heard - that it's no longer possible to pay to get through the crossing. But a Rafah resident told Haaretz that day that this system had resumed, and one person on Facebook told Sara: "It was stopped only in the media."

Palestinians sit on the shore next to the border barrier with Egypt, at Rafah. Credit: Hatem Ali/AP

In his denial, Rashwan called on Palestinians to report to the Egyptian authorities any pressure they encounter from anyone trying to profit from Palestinians' desire to pass through the crossing. It's almost certain that no one would file a report. First of all, this payment - however unattainable for most Gazans - seems to be the only lifeline, a dream or a straw to grasp, especially as the end of the war recedes farther and farther into the future.

True, there's also a patriotic ethos of remaining in Gaza. Part of this is resistance to the declared aims of Israeli rightists seeking to settle there after expelling the Palestinians. There's also the traditional *sumud*, steadfastness, a conscious stance adopted with or without choice; it has become second nature due to the people's deep connection to their birthplace. But this ethos never conflicted so strongly with the desire to live, worries about the children and their future, and the very basic need to be spared the fear of death or serious injury every moment.

The second reason is that people are convinced that the paid exit "coordinators" are linked to the Egyptian security services; that is, to the heart of the establishment.

"The list of those leaving Rafah isn't just controlled by bureaucrats at the crossing but by the most senior officials in Cairo," an Egyptian researcher who requested anonymity told Haaretz. He said that every Egyptian who works in Rafah - even the janitors - goes through a strict vetting process by high-ranking people. All the Egyptian security services are represented in Rafah, and Egypt's General Intelligence Service is the central authority there. "This is corruption that the state allows; you don't need to understand nuclear physics to reach this conclusion," he said.

'The Egyptian terminal can process about 500 people per day, while every day at least 10,000 Gazans want and need to travel.'

The official denial is ridiculous, the Egyptian researcher said. He said the corruption began in 2005 with Israel's pullout from Gaza, the near hermetic sealing of Israel's Erez checkpoint with Gaza, and the beginning of the closure of the Rafah crossing for extended periods for security reasons.

"Anyone who is shocked is probably feigning surprise. Like anywhere else in the world, the war exacerbates the phenomenon. For years there was an alternative to the overground crossing: the tunnels. Even there, money made its way to Egyptian security people and officers," the official said.

"The names changed but the method remained the same. With one difference: Today the crossing is the sole bottleneck, the only way people from the Gaza Strip can get out and connect with the outside world."

A tent camp in Rafah for displaced Gazans, this month. Credit: AFP

A Gaza resident who before the war would regularly travel abroad for family reasons describes the bottleneck on ordinary days. "The Egyptian terminal can process about 500 people per day, while every day at least 10,000 Gazans want and need to travel," he says.

The high demand consists of students studying abroad, businesspeople, patients whose treatment isn't available in Gaza and who Israel doesn't let travel to hospitals in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, people who have family in other countries, and just people who want a rest from the prison called Gaza who managed to obtain a tourist visa to some country. Even the few hundreds who pass through each day suffer hours-long delays for unclear reasons.

"How is it that what's possible at the Cairo airport - passengers going through border control in a few minutes - takes 12 hours at Rafah? I don't understand," the man says.

Due to the gap between the limited capacity at the crossing and the number of people seeking to leave, a system of early registration of applicants was developed by the Hamas-controlled Interior Ministry. The target date would be submitted, but there was no guarantee that it would be met.

Usually, it took several weeks for the registered person's turn to arrive. In a text message to their phone, they would be told the day and the number of the bus they were assigned to.

In the past, Haaretz was told, the Hamas authorities would give priority to their people and associates when drawing up the lists of people leaving. Since 2014, and especially in the last three years, transparency has been introduced to ensure that the first to register will be the first to leave. In truly urgent cases, it had been possible to use "contacts" with senior Hamas officials, who coordinated directly with the Egyptians. But, as one Gazan assured me, these phone numbers were usually accessible to everyone.

Palestinians with dual citizenship cross the border to Egypt, in December 2023. Credit: AFP

For those not willing or able to wait a long time, there were Palestinian travel agents who for a few hundred dollars sped up the process. Some of the agencies were linked to a state-owned Egyptian tourism company called Ya Hala. The service included a shortening of the waiting period and an early inquiry to ensure that there was no security obstacle, whether by Israel or Egypt.

There was regular "coordination," which cost between \$100 and \$300 per person depending on the

season and political situation; you waited up to a week before departure. And there was “VIP coordination” for about \$700 to \$900: departure within three days. You sat in a separate room in the terminal – with a cup of coffee and air-conditioning – and your transportation to Cairo was prearranged by the company. This included not being harassed at the military checkpoints along the way.

Heavy bribes ab absurdum

With the outbreak of the war, the Rafah crossing was closed to exits by Gazans for almost a month. Once it was opened – and this too, first to holders of foreign passports – Ya Hala stopped providing its coordination services, based on Cairo’s decision not to enable a mass flight of Gazans into Egypt. For about \$650, Ya Hala now brokers only for Palestinians who are Egyptian citizens, whose departure, for whatever reason, hadn’t been immediately authorized by Cairo.

The price jumped from a few hundred dollars to the \$10,000 per person, which means that only a few people – the wealthiest and best-connected Gazans, or those with rich relatives abroad – can flee the unending nightmare that over 2 million Gazans are living.

The middlemen aren’t known by name, and their link to entities at the crossing is also unclear. Their phone numbers are obtained by word of mouth or from ads on social media. “Real” brokers ask to receive half the amount up front and half on the other side. If the departure isn’t possible, the money is refunded. Scammers make off with the money when the payer finds out that his or her name isn’t on the list.

The people not required to pay these exorbitant fees are:

Palestinians with dual citizenship, or first-degree relatives of foreign citizens in countries that allow their entry, or those with special ties to embassies of various countries, which submitted special requests to the Egyptian and Israeli security services to allow their exit. According to the website of Israel’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, from the beginning of the war until January 22, around 14,300 people holding citizenship of 69 countries have left through Rafah after undergoing a “security evaluation.”

A shot from a drone of a displaced Palestinians tent camp in Rafah. Credit: AFP

When the exit is coordinated, the border-crossing authority, which is controlled by Hamas, publishes a full list of the people who leave, with their full names and ID numbers and sometimes their year of birth and telephone number. It’s a list received from the Egyptian border authority, after it was coordinated with the Israeli authorities. The minority are sick or wounded people, and the people accompanying them. All the others usually appear under the name of the country that arranged the departure. Gazans say that the people paying for the “coordination” appear on the list of the Egyptians.

Haaretz was unable to ascertain the total number of people who have left Gaza, but it was told by COGAT that “the process of the departure of Palestinians from Gaza to Egypt is coordinated between Israel and Egypt.” Some of the Palestinians who are citizens of foreign countries, or first-degree relatives of foreign citizens, have been told by the embassies that it was Israel that banned their exit. Some embassies don’t tell their citizens which party denied their departure.

But Palestinians suspect that there are cases in which the Egyptians ban the exit – so that bribes will be paid. According to one source, Palestinian officials – dressed in Palestinian Authority police

uniforms but subordinate to Hamas - are also inspecting people who leave through Rafah. According to a person who left recently, these officials play no role in the process of approving or denying the departure.

On the Egyptian side of Rafah, a visa is awarded for three days. On the seal it says that \$25 has been paid (as at the airport), but, as one woman who left Gaza recently said, "we pay \$35, and we don't know who this \$10 is going to."

Those who seek to stay in Egypt are allowed to extend the permit by a month at the Interior Ministry. Anyone who overstays pays a fine when they leave the country or return to Gaza. Many of those who pay the high "coordination" prices also take into account that they will have to pay the fine for violating the terms of the visa.

The Egyptian researcher says that, theoretically, the bribery enterprise at the border contradicts Egypt's decision not to let Gazans flee the Strip during Israeli bombardments of Gaza.

But, he says, "in fact, one encourages the other. The fact that the crossing is closed enables the giving and taking of heavy bribes ad absurdum." He adds: "Even Egyptian citizens in Gaza weren't allowed to leave immediately" - and they now also have to pay for the "coordination."

"The [Egyptian] state - which is in a state of bankruptcy - enables this corruption, and at the highest levels, so that its officials and officers will be content and retain their loyalty."

"We are, in short, Egypt's cash cows," adds a Gazan who lost money to an intermediary, even though he eventually crossed without this help.

A member of the Facebook group named Marie warns against a veteran scammer of Turkish origin who cheated families of the wounded and deceased out of their money. He now pretends to be Jordanian, she wrote.

"May Allah cut off your hand and freeze your tongue," she wrote. In response to one post, someone commented: "One of the conditions for ending the war must be opening a sea passage to Cyprus, because the Rafah crossing, under the shadow of the current Egyptian regime, involves the humiliation and degradation of everyone who passes through it."

Amira Hass

P.S.

• Haaretz. Jan 29, 2024 1:46 pm IST:
<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2024-01-29/ty-article-magazine/premium/want-out-of-gaza-pay-us-10-000/0000018d-54ee-df5c-a1ad-54ff690e0000>