

'You Pack Your House on Your Back, and You Move': A Palestinian Speaks on Fleeing Rafah

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For their sixth displacement, the family of a retired public employee will split up - the women to an apartment in Deir al-Balah and he and his boys to a tent on the coast of Gaza. He calls the arrangement 'bourgeois,' saying others don't have money for travel, a tent or food

The tent of a family that fled their home, in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, on Monday. Credit: Mohammed Salem/Reuters

"The whole eviction from Rafah went too fast. Everyone is laughing at us - the U.S., which said for five months that it opposes a ground operation in Rafah; Egypt, which said it was unacceptable. In the end, Israel does as it pleases, and then we start to realize that neither the U.S. nor Egypt really mind and that they don't really object. They don't want to force anything on Israel. It's all talk." "We're now in Tel al-Sultan," he continued, referring to a refugees' neighborhood west of Rafah, near the Gaza Strip's coastline. "We're staying with my wife's sister, after having spent two days in the Shabura refugee camp. We're being warmly treated, but it's hard to live in such crowded conditions, 14 people in a not very big apartment, even if they're relatives.

"Now we're organizing for a sixth displacement. This time, we'll split up. Two of my brothers have moved to a different part of central Gaza, to an apartment they rented from someone. The women of the family will go to an apartment in Deir al-Balah that belongs to someone from my wife's family. I and the boys will go [live in a tent](#) on the coast.

"It's a bourgeois arrangement [he laughs]. We're bourgeois displaced people, didn't you know?" She's a teacher, and he's a retired public employee.

"We have the option of splitting up, of choosing between an apartment and a tent. Though there are people who prefer to have the whole family stay together, so there will always be someone in the tent, so no one will steal anything from it.

"I bought a tent for 3,500 shekels [\$950]. That's up from 1,500. There were times when all kinds of aid organizations were handing out tents. Even I helped people obtain tents, when we were still living in my brother's house and felt that our situation was relatively stable. Aside from the bombing and shelling and the sound of the drones, which drove us crazy, we could maintain some kind of emotional balance.

"The problem is that it's not clear how the tents are distributed. It's always a mess, and the criteria aren't clear. In the end, there are always tents that reach the market, and the prices rise and fall based on the moment - if there are a lot of displaced people that are being uprooted again, or fewer of them. And there are always people who don't manage to get a tent from the aid organizations.

"Don't take us as an example. There are people who don't have money for a donkey or a car to move to al-Mawasi," the coastal strip Israel terms a humanitarian safe zone. "They also don't have money for a tent, or money for food. So they stay where they were. From Rafah to Deir al-Balah to the town of Zawaida, the whole road is full of tents. There's no place to put your feet.

"My brother - you know how he is; he has golden hands - is now organizing things for our tent, like he organized his own tent and that of our friends, so that it will have electricity [through solar panels], water [a water tank and a pipe], a shower and toilet [outside the tent] and also a cesspit, like we used to have in the refugee camps before there was a sewage system. It's a pit that you cover. Some people put tires in the pit and line it with sand, so that the water will seep in. But there are also people - that is to say, those who aren't 'bourgeois' like us - for whom a tent is a piece of cloth to shelter in and obtain a bit of privacy, and nothing more.

"We even have a fan in our tent. I told you, we're bourgeois [he laughs]. From displacement to displacement, people take more things from home. We've learned something from every displacement.

"You pack your house on your back, and you move. Just like that. Now you'll find people who take the refrigerator and the water tank. Or who dismantle whatever they can from the house - partly so it won't be stolen, and partly so it won't be destroyed if Israel bombs it - or who take what they bought in previous displacements. Because clearly there's no money to buy a refrigerator every two months.

Palestinians prepare to evacuate, after Israel launched an operation in the eastern part of Rafah, in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, last week. Credit: Hatem Khaled/Reuters

"Anyone who has them takes solar panels and batteries. In recent months, solar energy systems have reached Gaza through several organizations. A solar system is installed in every neighborhood, and phones can be charged from it. Now, things are more organized than they were in the beginning. I don't write on my computer, only on my phone. I've gotten used to it.

"We could have moved to an empty apartment in Khan Yunis that belongs to people we know. But it turned out that it had no water and there are but ruins around it and only a few people, so that's also a bit frightening. Being without water is the biggest problem, especially since it's summer and the serious heat is starting. People are willing to sleep outside as long as they're someplace close to some kind of water supply and a toilet with water.

"The flies and mosquitoes have multiplied because of the heat, garbage and sewage in the streets, and they are here in swarms. Flies during the day, mosquitoes at night. There is nowhere to escape from them. Terribly annoying. On the other hand, here in Tel al-Sultan, the shelling is distant. We don't hear it, or only a faint sound from distance. That's a bit of a relief. You can even hear the birds.

"We organized a place for ourselves in al-Mawasi in Khan Yunis. We'll be together in a few tents of the family and Bureir (the village of origin, depopulated in 1948, now kibbutz Bror Hayil is situated on its lands - A.H.). In this round of displacement, people prefer to return and organize one place for relatives and neighbors from the refugee camp, who are usually from the same village of origin.

"I assume that people who originate from other 1948 villages organize in the same way. The experience of sharing a home with displaced people who are not your relatives or from your village of origin has been very difficult. Little is written about that or said publicly, but it caused a lot of tensions and fights. There were many complaints [in Rafah](#) about the displaced people who came from the north. It isn't that there are no tensions and fights within the family or village of origin, but

there are ways to resolve them logically.

"It's hard not to live in your home, at the home of others even if they are relatives, even if they are a father or brother. You lose something of your humanity. It's not possible to talk loudly, it's not possible to argue. No one behaves as they did before. Everyone somewhat fakes, and is calculated, unnatural. Sometimes there are selfish people who do what they want, and you have to stay silent.

"What adds to the nerves is that there are no cigarettes. You're pleased, I know. I'm trying to quit, but it's hard. Two or three days ago, we heard that they would bring in or brought in cigarettes with the other goods from the West Bank. This wasn't humanitarian aid, but goods that our traders buy from the West Bank.

"But from what I saw in the market, the goods that entered on Wednesday were Israeli products, such as the fruits that were brought in - grapes, avocados, peaches. Your extremists attacked these convoys and burned the food. What a State you are, what a State. But Israel allowed the convoys to come in the past two days only because of the [International Court of Justice](#) session in The Hague. Its game is clear, because there were no aid shipments lately.

Deputy Attorney General for International Law Gilad Noam and Principal Deputy Legal Adviser of the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Israel Tamar Kaplan Tourgeman at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in The Hague, Netherlands, on Thursday. Credit: Yves Herman/Reuters

"We don't know where we will be deported if the Israelis decide to invade Tel al-Sultan and al-Mawasi too. For almost eight months, we've lived with the terrible fear, with the inability to protect the children, the wife. With the knowledge that the house we left was destroyed and maybe my brother's house, which we left last week, will also be destroyed. Or my daughter's home in Gaza.

"I'm talking to you normally, you say. The material hardship is nothing compared with the mental hardship. The feelings inside are difficult to describe. This ongoing vengeance of the Israelis, we feel that they are not human. It's not us who have lost our humanity, but the Israelis who have lost all humanity. That is how the Chosen People, who only see themselves and no others, behaves."

Amira Hass

P.S.

• Haaretz. May 18, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2024-05-18/ty-article/.premium/you-pack-your-house-on-your-back-and-you-move-a-palestinian-speaks-on-fleeing-rafah/0000018f-8ac3-d353-afef-bbf787980000>