

Palestine-Israel - After a Year of Silence, a Voice From the Dead: A Call From an Old Friend in Gaza

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Conversations with a friend in Gaza, now sheltering in the Muwasi DP camp. He's 62, eats once a day and gets life-saving medicine from the 'terrorist' UNRWA. At the camp, they're waiting for Trump: Either he'll kill us or he'll end the war, says the friend

The Muwasi camp. M. and his family fled from Beit Lahia in October of last year, and have been homeless since, occupied only with survival. They'll probably never return, if Israel's plans materialize. Credit: Abdel Kareem Hana / AP

Suddenly, a voice from the dead. M., my good friend from the Gaza Strip, whose name flickers on the cellphone screen, answers the phone. I have goosebumps all over. Over the past year I've tried calling him on and off, convinced he'd been killed. But suddenly, I hear a voice from the dead. M. is living in a tent in the Muwasi displaced-persons camp together with other surviving family members. It's the best news I've heard lately.

The bad news is that Sa'id was killed. Sa'id al-Halwat, our mutual friend, a taxi driver with a face of constant sorrow, was killed with his son and his grandson when the Israel Air Force bombed Jabalya as he was trying to take shelter in his daughter's home there. That was back in December 2023, about two months after the war started, M. related. Said was 67, a kindhearted man. I loved him very much.

Ghassan Kishawi was also killed, M. told me. We wandered around Israel with Kishawi, a hydraulic engineer, one day in the spring of 2015, years after Israel imposed a siege on Gaza. With the aid of the European NGO he worked for, he'd managed to obtain a one-time entry permit to Israel. Together we traveled to various places, including, at his request, the ruins of Al-Qubeiba, the village of his ancestors, next to the Kfar Gevirol neighborhood in Rehovot. He seemed thrilled at the sight of the arched structure that's still standing there. Since then I hadn't heard from him. Now he's among the myriads of dead - 43,000 killed is the number. Sa'id and Ghassan are the names of people I knew. I choked with emotion when I heard that Sa'id was dead.

In recent weeks, I spoke with M. a few more times on his phone, which can only receive incoming calls, him not being able to afford a phone card. Sometimes he answers in English, so as not to arouse unnecessary suspicions among his neighbors with Hebrew, and then I call him again later and he tells me about the routine of his life, the life of a displaced and homeless Palestinian with no home, from Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip, the region of the large-scale ethnic cleansing that is now underway. He fled from there on October 17 last year, and he'll probably never return, if Israel's plans materialize, Heaven forbid.

Beit Lahia last month. With Israel razing all that remained of Beit Lahia, it's unlikely that the M.'s

home is still standing. Credit: Abdul Karim Farid/Reuters

When he left, M. took all his savings with him - 14,000 shekels (about \$3,750) - on which he and his family have somehow lived since then. He is occupied solely with survival - the fate of his home in Beit Lahia no longer interests him, he says. His neighbors told him that the house had been hit with gunfire and bombs but somehow had remained intact until recently. Now, with Israel razing all that remained of Beit Lahia, it's unlikely that the building is still standing.

What hurts M. more is that his taxi was also hit in the bombing. The yellow Mercedes seven-seater, which racked up more than 2 million kilometers (about one and a quarter million miles) - part of that, in the years of shortages, with used cooking oil serving to power it, which produced an unbearable smell - will no longer serve him. The car was his source of livelihood, in which he drove Israeli and foreign correspondents during the period when entry into the Strip was still possible.

We traveled with him and Sa'id a lot over the years, from Erez Checkpoint on the Israeli border, to Rafah, between Shifa Hospital and Shati refugee camp, between Khan Younis and the Shabura neighborhood, sometimes in M.'s Mercedes, sometimes in Said's Skoda Octavia, which was once hit by an Israeli missile. Now Said is dead and M.'s taxi was bombed. But M. isn't looking back.

Now 62, he suffered a stroke three years ago that permanently altered his physical condition. He gets his medications from the [UNRWA](#) "terrorist" organization, without which he'd be dead. After leaving his home, he found shelter for half a year in a tent in Rafah, and for the past seven months he's pitched his tent in the Muwasi camp, which he calls "Atzmona" - it was exactly there that an Israeli settlement of that name was located - recalling our joint visits to the site after the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from the Strip. Only the synagogue building remains, in which Palestinian DPs are sheltering - another case of surrealism in Gaza these days. M., for his part, sleeps on a thin mattress on the sand in his tent. Most of his extended family lives in nearby tents; only one daughter remained behind in Beit Lahia, besieged in northern Gaza.

"It's started to get cold at night. And also shooting, explosions, artillery - don't ask - all day and all night." Credit: Hatem Khaled/Reuters

M.'s Hebrew is as fluent today as it was in the good old days when he worked in a butcher's shop in south Tel Aviv's Hatikva neighborhood. In his rare visits here (he came twice, the last time in 2015) during the siege years, we went together to Hatikva Market and met his former employers. From his time there, he remembers by heart the Kapparot (atonement) prayer, recited ahead of Yom Kippur. Here's what M., the taxi driver from Beit Lahia, related from his place of refugeedom in the Muwasi humanitarian zone:

"It's started to get cold at night. And also shooting, explosions, artillery - don't ask - all day and all night. What can I tell you, that's the situation in Atzmona. We're here - my daughter with her husband, the second daughter with three children and the husband, and my sister and her children from Rafah; also my niece and her mother and my eldest child with five children and my divorced nephew, and my niece who has three boys and a daughter. Everyone has a small tent. We sleep on the sand and we made a toilet. My son built it from interlocking stones, and we dug a pit and put in a container, and the shit goes there. We wash every 10 days or once a week. That's the way it goes." The children go every day and fill jerricans with water, and we have a large container that we fill with water. Like a well. Do you know how many quarrels there are in the line for water? People pounce on one another, and 'I was here first' and 'I got here at 3 A.M.' Every day quarrels and people call in their families, and don't ask, a big story.

'The same with food. Everyone takes a pot and goes to the place where they give out food and

sometimes they come back empty-handed. All done. The big pot is finished. Once, twice a week you manage to fill your pot and on the other days you come back empty. I send my grandchildren every day. Yesterday they didn't bring anything. We had a bag of macaroni in the tent, so my wife cooked. Before, we cooked over a fire, we collected trees and papers - until we began the actual cooking, my wife would go crazy, so I bought a small gas canister, five kilos. I looked until I found one. A small canister, I bought it for 400 shekels [currently \$107], and every 50 days, I refill it.

"I haven't eaten meat for over a year. I ate chicken once, around two months ago. There are no dairy products at all, at all. A kilo of lemons goes for 40 shekels, tomatoes were 50 shekels a kilo, now they're 35. Onions were 70, they dropped to 25. Cucumbers were 22, now they're 15. There is no fruit at all. Hey, are we in America? There's also hardly any flour. A large sack costs 350 shekels, and can't be had.

Palestinians wait in line for food, in Khan Yonis this week. Credit: Hatem Khaled/Reuters

"There's a market next to Neve Dekalim [site of a former Israeli settlement], where you can buy everything. People go by foot or by cart and donkey.... and sometimes come back with nothing, because of the prices. And there's a market in Deir al-Balah. And there are pita bakeries, but there are arguments and shouting and hitting. In the end you manage to get a package for 4 shekels and then you sell it outside the line for 20 shekels, in order to earn a little money. Gaza has turned into chaos."

"There are people who work for the Palestinian Authority or for Hamas or for UNRWA who get salaries, and there are lots of jobless like me. The restaurant that distributes food - that's free. Twice a week majadara, twice a week yellow lentils and twice a week rice. Today there was majadara. Forget about meat." In another hour I'll go into the tent to sleep. Around 9 o'clock. At 11 I wake up, and can't get back to sleep until morning. There's terrible noise above the tent. First the drone. The drone goes, the shooting starts. The army is shooting at the fishermen at sea. Sometimes close explosions, maybe some guy who is wanted. In the morning you get up and look for a cup of tea with duga, which is like zaatar, and you heat up a pita if there's one on the gas. That's breakfast. At lunch the food from the restaurant, and in the evening, I don't eat.

"Today I ate macaroni at 1:30, a small plate, and I said to my wife, 'Halas,' enough. The children eat the same thing. There's no pampering. I came down hard on them. No pampering. We're not at home and no one will be pampered here. Anyone who doesn't like the food can leave. I came down hard on them from the start. Don't eat - and you will die." It was harder in Rafah. I could wander around all day looking for pitot and still not find anything, six or seven hours of standing in line. I'm not young and I can't stand in line for six or seven hours for pita. I'm in my seventh month here in Atzmona, and I don't know for how much longer. Another year? Another two years? Who will be left? And who will die? Only Allah knows.

Displaced Gazans leaving Khan Yonis. "As soon as Trump takes over - either they'll kill us or expel us, or he will end this war." Credit: Hatem Khaled/Reuters

"I've started to forget what there was in our life before. As soon as Trump takes over - either they'll kill us or expel us, or he will end this war. People here say: Why doesn't Netanyahu finish us off? Some hope that that Netanyahu will remain healthy and eliminate all the Hamasniks. I hope not one of them will remain. What they did to us. Why did they do that on October 7? We are waiting for Trump and we say: Either he will end the war and return us to our homes, or they don't want us at all and he will tell Netanyahu to dump deadly material on us and finish us off." That's because most people have had it. People are crying. We don't know until when. Until when. Why am I living in a tent? Why am I paying the price? Because of people who want to get back Jerusalem? What

Jerusalem? And I'm paying the price.

"You can't see me. I'm like a stick. I was 95 kilos and now I'm 73. From UNRWA, I get insulin and pills for blood pressure and to strengthen my nerves because of the stroke. Soldiers we don't see here. We only hear the tanks and the shooting and the explosions. We see the Apache [helicopters], yesterday it fired at a camp next to us. And also the F-15." "We were together in all those places before and after the disengagement. And I also worked with [journalist] Ron Ben Yishai after the disengagement. I know he's older now. Be healthy, Ron Ben Yishai, may you live to 120. I would like to hear his voice. And what's with Yigal [journalist and writer Yigal Sarna]? Is he in Portugal? It's good that I still have my memory. It's good that my memory didn't leave me. Inshallah, we'll meet again, Gideon. Good night."

Gideon Levy

P.S.

• Haaretz. Nov 23, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/twilight-zone/2024-11-23/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/after-a-year-of-silence-a-voice-from-the-dead-a-call-from-an-old-friend-in-gaza/00000193-5782-ddc8-aff7-5797893b0000>