

Burning Footsteps

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'Burning Footsteps' provides a detailed and powerfully personal account of the events immediately surrounding the attack on the Bani Suheila neighbourhood of Khan Younis on 22 July 2024. Following the narrator as they navigate the intense chaos and destruction, the piece reveals the devastating human cost that the attack created, yet also the remarkable resilience of those dealing with its fallout. 'Burning Footsteps' ends with a powerful call to readers, questioning how such an attack could happen and what constitutes an effective or ineffective response to such violence.

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Burning Footsteps

Alaa Ashraf El-Qarra

The bread was left unbaked. The past was left behind. We scattered like shattered glass underfoot, barefoot and broken, still clothed in garments once meant for rest, now bearing the weight of flight. In the Bani Suheila neighbourhood of Khan Younis,¹ where summer once brought warmth and laughter, 22 July 2024 became a day of suffocating horror. The sun above did not shine; it scorched, pressing against our backs as if to chase us from the earth. The sea, once a place of joy, now mirrored our anguish. Its shores echoing hunger, thirst, and the ache of exile.

We fled not knowing where to go, nor what awaited us. Only that we had to escape the inferno devouring everything behind us. There was no map for such exile, no compass to guide us to safety. Every road twisted into danger; every horizon brimmed with despair. The skies, once open, had become leaden with smoke and hatred. We were fugitives of fate, haunted by the memories of those left behind and accompanied only by the silence of the dead. I write these words not from safety, but as a displaced soul, exiled from home, wandering through ruin beneath the relentless thunder of bombardment.

Just hours earlier, the air had been still. Now, it quivered with dread.

On the morning of 22 July 2024, around 11:00 a.m., the sun had barely touched the rooftops of our tents in eastern Khan Younis when everything was torn asunder. My mother, the unwavering pillar of our home, was baking bread. Her hands were dusted with flour, and the warm scent of comfort drifted through our shelter.

Then, without warning, the silence shattered.

Explosions split the air like cracks in the sky. Israeli military vehicles surged forward, unleashing a storm of shells and gunfire. Overhead, Apache helicopters and drones swarmed like shadows, casting a dark veil over our neighbourhood.

¹ Bani Suheila, Khan Younis: A densely populated neighbourhood in southern Gaza that faced intense shelling during the Israeli ground incursion on 22 July 2024 (See 'Dozens Killed'; 'Humanitarian Situation Update').

My brother rushed into the tent, his face carved with panic. His breath came in shallow gasps, and his eyes held a terror I had never seen before.

Within moments, what had felt like a distant nightmare became our inescapable reality.

The tanks were upon us. Death loomed close, a shadow impossible to escape. Dressed in our simple clothes, hearts pounding like war drums, we fled through a world engulfed in fire and dust. Clutching onto fragile hope amid the merciless assault, we faced the storm with trembling resolve.

Chaos swallowed us whole. We lost contact with some of my siblings and our grandfather – their figures swallowed by choking smoke and collapsing rubble, as if the unforgiving earth had claimed them without warning or mercy. My father's voice cut sharply through the bedlam, steady, commanding: 'Whoever hears me, get in!'

Those able scrambled into the vehicle, while others ran barefoot across trembling ground, their footsteps faltering. Toddlers stumbled beside us, their cries piercing the thick, suffocating air. The smell of gunpowder and dust filled my nostrils; my lungs burned with every desperate breath.

Suddenly, trapped on the path of the advancing tanks, panic surged like a tidal wave. My father slammed the car to a halt and stepped out, shouting for my grandfather. His desperate cries were swallowed by the thunder of battle. Bullets and shrapnel rained down relentlessly, a cruel tempest tearing through the shattered streets.

For a moment, my legs refused to move; terror froze my very being. All I could hold onto was the will to survive.

As we moved forward blindly, the violence intensified with every step. I grasped my ten-year-old brother's hand tightly, our desperate flight fuelled by a need for shelter from the relentless assault. Suddenly, a blast threw us violently to the ground, agony scorching through our bodies. My mother's strained voice pierced the chaos, urging us back to the vehicle. In a fleeting glance, I saw my cousin, burdened with her three children, fleeing with fierce determination; a will to survive stronger than any strength.

With each step, chaos multiplied around us, engulfing shattered streets and echoing with fear.

Then came the moment that would haunt me forever.

Fear gripped us tightly as we navigated broken paths. Every move a dangerous gamble. Warnings echoed urgently: 'The tanks have encircled the street's entrance.' Israeli forces surrounded us, their firepower indiscriminate and merciless. We witnessed the unimaginable – friends and family collapsing before our eyes. The world transformed into a waking nightmare. Survival was no longer a hope; it had become the only law.

The panicked crowds clogged the narrow alleys while the deafening thunder of shells and drones carved terror into the sky. People ran chaotically, driven by screams of pure terror, desperate to outrun death's tightening grip from every direction. Yet the space grew smaller, suffocating beneath the crushing tide of bodies.

By midday, the sun turned against us. Our escape became a test of human limits. Our footsteps burned beneath its ruthless glare, as if the streets themselves branded us with the weight of survival. The air no longer merely scorched; it clung to our skin like punishment. This was no ordinary summer; it was a season soaked in bitterness, where time melted and hope evaporated.

I remember the elderly stumbling, their legs betraying them, and children screaming – small voices piercing the choking heat, as families fled aimlessly. Tragedy was no longer distant; it breathed beside us.

Voices pleaded for help, but no one answered. The silence was louder than any bomb. People fell repeatedly, worn down by exhaustion, struck by stray bullets, crushed by thirst. No medicine; no helping hands.

And then, I looked up. Midday light once signalled school bells, tea, and laughter. Now, it was a merciless glare over a world crumbling, closing in like fire from every direction.

Amid the stampede, my sister's path veered into new horror. Breath ragged and steps frantic, she searched for survival amid the relentless shelling. Through the chaos, she spotted our cousin pushing an infant's stroller, her husband gripping their daughters' hands tightly. Trembling, my sister hurried over, seeking news of our uncle's family.

Fear gripped her – would they be crushed by advancing tanks or obliterated by unyielding strikes? The grim reply was that everyone had fled; escaping this inferno was their only hope.

Our cousin's eyes lifted skyward, silently pleading for mercy as if foreseeing the coming disaster. Moments later, a missile's piercing wail shattered the air, followed by a devastating explosion nearby.

Our cousin was martyred instantly; her four-month-old son lost a leg. Her wounded husband cried out, 'My wife! My children!' despite his own injuries, clutching her lifeless body amid the assault and closing tanks.

Their eldest daughter, only seven, showed extraordinary courage, lifting her injured brother onto her shoulder, holding the trembling hand of their petrified five-year-old sister. By day's end, the infant succumbed to his injuries, leaving behind a tiny stroller and a milk bottle. A haunting testament to a world that spares neither innocence nor youth.

Just when I thought no pain could cut deeper, a child's whisper proved me wrong.

That day, I saw a resilience deeper than words. Amid the chaos, a small hand tugged at my sleeve. I looked down to find a little girl, no older than five, her eyes wide with fear and pain. Her name was Balsan.

Her shoulder was pierced by a shard of shrapnel, but she remained silent, her gaze fixed on me, searching for comfort in the midst of horror. Suddenly, she whispered, 'Are my eyes open or closed?' I was caught off guard. The weight of the question sank into the heavy air around us. I bent down gently and met her eyes. I said softly, 'They are open,' then added aloud with a faint smile, 'You are still here. Still fighting.' She studied my face for a moment, her small fingers clutching my sleeve tightly as if holding onto hope itself. In that fragile silence, her courage spoke louder than any scream or explosion.

Balsan's quiet strength was a profound reminder that even when the world shatters, the human spirit can burn fiercely, a beacon amid the darkest nights.

After exhausting and painful efforts, some of us managed to transfer our wounded and deceased to Nasser Hospital, either for urgent treatment or a final, heart-wrenching farewell.² There was no time to grieve. From there, we pressed on, fleeing toward Al-Mawasi where a fragile hope flickered amid the despair.³

We mourned our fallen in silence, and every attempt to find the missing was met with unbearable quiet. Nightfall offered no comfort. Beneath a cold, indifferent sky, we lay stripped of shelter, starved of food, and severed from the warmth of the homes we once knew.

The deafening explosions shook the ground beneath us. It became painfully clear that the entire eastern part of Khan Younis had been evacuated toward its western edge. Rumours swirled – some whispered that the invasion would end within hours, others feared it would drag on for days. Clinging desperately to hope, we dared to imagine returning for those left behind.

The following day offered a fragile glimmer of hope. A trembling phone call from my grandfather. His voice, weak yet unwavering, pierced through the silence like a fragile thread of life. He told us, his breath ragged, that shrapnel had torn into his back. Despite the searing pain, his words were calm, almost steady, as he pleaded for rescue. We scrambled to contact emergency services and the International Red Cross, sending precise coordinates with desperate urgency.

But the response was a hollow void. The occupying forces refused all coordination. An eighty-six-year-old man, unarmed and immobilised, was left to suffer in agonising isolation. Grief twisted into disbelief. How could the world remain silent? Where were the voices of justice, the guardians of humanity? How could such cruelty befall a man whose only crime was enduring?

After a seemingly endless wait, filled with silent prayers and fading hope, we finally saw from a high vantage point and watched dust trailing retreating tanks, the ground trembling beneath their weight. Then came the cruel truth: he was found. His body, mangled and crushed beneath the relentless tracks of a tank,

² Nasser Medical Complex: One of the last functioning hospitals in southern Gaza during the escalation (see Al-Mughrabi, Rabinovitch and Khaled; 'oPt Emergency Situation Update').

³ Al-Mawasi Area: A designated "humanitarian zone" in western Khan-Younis (see Michaelson; 'West urges restraint').

violated threefold: first by injury, then by death, and finally by desecration. No justice followed. No apology. Only an echoing silence that swallowed everything.

We returned to bury what remained of him, but the land we came back to was unrecognisable: tents flattened under rubble, personal belongings scattered like shadows of stolen memories. The earth itself bore deep scars from relentless bombardment, and the thick, acrid scent of burning filled the air, choking hope with every breath. The silence was deafening, broken only by distant echoes of explosions and the crackle of smouldering ruins.

Desolation had claimed what little normalcy we had fought to regain.

Yet, driven by fragile hope, we gathered what little strength we had to rebuild. But this hope was short-lived. Within days, new evacuation orders thundered through the night, followed by another relentless wave of missiles that shattered our fragile sanctuary. In moments, all our painstaking efforts crumbled once more. We became wanderers in a broken world, trapped in an unending cycle of loss and rebuilding.

And the world? It remained deaf to our cries.

We never sought revenge or power, only the quiet dignity of peace, and the simple right to exist on the land that bore our name.

And yet, despite all we lost – homes, loved ones, the illusion of safety – we did not lose ourselves. Beneath the rubble and ruin, something unshakable endured: the will to live, to love.

For every voice silenced by war, another rises in its place – not in vengeance, but in defiance of erasure. Our story is not only one of suffering, but of survival, stitched together with threads of impossible hope.

We are not mere statistics. We are memory. We are meaning.

We are a people who still dare to plant seeds in scorched earth, still sing lullabies beneath shattered ceilings, and still believe, despite everything, that tomorrow holds light.

So, if you've heard our story, carry it with you.

Let it echo.

Let it remind you that resilience is not rare.

It lives quietly in those forced to start again, in those who bury their dead and still choose to stand. Because even in the darkest hours, we did not disappear.

We endured.

And we will continue to endure.

If you had felt the tremble in my brother's small hand as he clung to mine through smoke and fire, his eyes wide with a mix of fear and unspoken hope, you would know this is not just a war story.

It is a heartbeat.

A memory.

A cry for dignity the world must never ignore.



Bani Suheila, Khan Younis – November 2025. Photo courtesy of local activists, showing the author's neighbourhood.

Biography

Alaa Ashraf El-Qarra is a 25-year-old educator and English language specialist from Gaza. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Teaching Methodologies from Al-Aqsa University (2022), with a GPA of 86.4%. Over the past three years, she has worked at a private learning centre and taught for one year at Al-Hekma Private School.

During the ongoing war, she has served as a volunteer teacher in partnership with UNICEF, providing psychosocial and educational support to displaced children in government schools and tent classrooms.

Alaa's journey as an educator under siege has shaped her academic and personal mission: to reclaim education as an act of resistance, resilience, and voice. She has completed over ten advanced training courses focused on English pedagogy, phonetics, assessment, advanced phonology, and classroom management. Additionally, she participated in a six-month intensive course, "Teaching for Success," organized by the British Council in cooperation with UNRWA in 2022.

Her lived experience, teaching amidst displacement, scarcity, and bombardment, deeply aligns with the vision of *Brief Encounters*. This vision highlights under-represented narratives, challenges dominant discourses, and foregrounds the everyday struggles of marginalised communities. Through her submission, she aims to contribute not only to research but a human testimony to the transformative power of language, even in the most shattered of places.



Image of the author, courtesy of the author.

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