

Homeless in Home

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These two poetry pieces and prose piece by English Language student Marwa Nasser Mostafa Dababish reflect on memories of university life, childhood dreams and her experience of displacement in Gaza. Her story brings to light the immense challenges and hardships that she and others have endured, painting a vivid picture of the struggles faced in Gaza due to the conflict and subsequent displacement. The scarcity of essential resources like flour, the reliance on food aid, and the resilience shown through sharing whatever basic sustenance is available reflect the strength and unity of the community in times of adversity.

Education for children in Gaza has never been easy, and with university campuses destroyed, forced displacement and hunger, learning has now become a battle in itself. Yet in this struggle for survival, dreams, hope and the possibility of a future for their homeland persist. Childhood dreams, in Gaza, are not just fleeting smiles or games – they are a shared cry for dignity, for education, and a free life.

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Homeless in Home

Marwa Nasser Mostafa Dababish

Between Knowledge and Battle: Our University Journey of Resilience

When studying turns into a battle!

In the alleys of our beautiful university, where we used to gather with college friends, rushing from one lecture to another, trying not to be late for a class for which the professor might punish tardy students.

We would run laughing.

The university alleys witnessed our laughter, our exhaustion, our sleepless nights, and the immense knowledge we absorbed directly from the lecturers.

But today, we add new memories to those beautiful days, a dream we never imagined – we now long for an 8 AM lecture!

Now the university has been destroyed, and many of our dreams shattered.

We didn't surrender to an enemy who loves ignorance. Everyone fights in their own way, and we fight with knowledge!

We continued despite the absence of everything.

We started online learning, which was very difficult – living in tents, internet cut off, walking long distances just to access a lecture or take an exam.

In the tent, there's nothing to help with studying – not even light or electricity. Even charging a phone wasn't enough for us to study.

But we tried nonetheless.

Have you ever felt like you're walking amid gunfire just because you have to get to a safe zone? Walking between death to survive, yet you might not survive.

I remember when I had to leave our tent carrying my son and only one bag. Beside me, about half a metre away, was an elderly woman carrying many belongings. Suddenly, gunfire erupted from the quads. The woman was hit; I survived! Just half a metre apart – it was mercy from God.

We are on the brink of graduation and will continue to learn and teach more. We will keep moving forward because the pen is the best form of jihad.

Childhood Dreams Under Siege

In the heart of Gaza, where war writes harsh chapters of life, the dream of childhood grows stronger, despite everything. There, in the narrow alleys of the city, children stand in long lines waiting for a drop of water to wipe off the dust of siege from their faces. While life moves in queues of daily hardships, the dream also stands in other lines, patiently waiting for education that seems far beyond reach.

Education for children in Gaza has never been easy. With constant electricity cuts and lack of internet, learning becomes a battle in itself. No books, no notebooks, and no suitable environment for studying – only a determined will to create a miracle amid the pain. Before their eyes, classrooms vanish, and the eternal dream of gaining knowledge becomes a distant mirage.

In the struggle for survival, little children armed with hope refuse to let war and destruction consume them. They insist on building a better future for themselves and their homeland. Childhood dreams in Gaza are not just fleeting smiles or games; they are a shared cry for dignity, education, and a free life.

Despite all the damage inflicted upon this dream, it still beats in the small hearts that have cherished success and achievement. Their dreams are bigger than the walls of the siege. They deserve to embrace life with all its hope and joy – far from the sound of rockets, far from the water lines – because every child in Gaza deserves a new beginning.

Homeless in Home: The war with me

This is my story before 7 October. Like any new pair, we lived a life full of love and calm. We were waiting for our first child, as I was five months pregnant. We were thinking about when to start preparing for our first child. As usual, my husband and I wake up in the morning when he goes to work and I go to my university, but today it wasn't the same as before. The war started and was very fierce, many were killed and many were injured, no one understood what was happening, but time stopped and we started living a nightmare. I was with my husband, fleeing from one death to another, and my health began to weaken because I was pregnant and my unborn child got tired more. We woke up in the morning to discover what sounded like the bombing of the mosque adjacent to our house. We went out running in the street, and when we settled in a place, I felt like I had lost my child and started crying. The mosque wasn't bombed, and though we went home on this day, we were displaced many times. Walking and sudden movement were a danger to my unborn child, who was holding on to this life.

The bombing was very violent, towers destroyed in a second, an entire area erased, entire families vanished from the civil registry. We had lived a lot of wars, but they weren't like this one. This was like genocide. Houses destroyed on the heads of their owners, who remained under the rubble. Do you know the feeling that death is close to you while you are sitting, waiting for your time to leave? In November 2023 we had to forcibly move out of our house because of the enemy threat, and we took refuge in a UNRWA medical clinic. Even if I write a lot about the suffering of living inside a tent that lacks all the necessities for a human being, I cannot describe what we lived. Whoever comes out from under the rubble or sees that a house next to him is bombed becomes well aware of the meaning of life. We are a people who love life as much as we can. I used to visit my home every day despite the danger. But the invasion had forced me to leave my house. I did not accept this idea, neither me nor my husband. One day, a suspiciously large displacement movement began in the area we lived in, with people moving in droves from the north to the south. We later found out that the displacement of all of northern Gaza had begun, and quickly. My parents called me to take me with them to a friend's house in the south, but I chose to stay with my husband near my quiet little house.

I was told that night that my sister, her husband and her children had survived an inevitable death after the bombing of their tower without warning. Death was close to everyone. The bombing intensified on us, the weight of my unborn child increased, and the worries increased, but we were patient to increase our reward and enter heaven. My family went to the south and I went to visit them twice. The longing was great, but I was returning home – to my tent next to my house. Then the communications were cut off, which led to my family's anxiety, as the bombing in my area was very difficult. We lived hard nights, waiting for dawn, to see if another day would be written for us to

live. We were sitting in our tent – a few wooden poles and a little nylon that would not protect us from anything. We were deprived of the fundamental necessities of life, with neither food suitable for a pregnant woman like me, nor clean water to drink or to bathe in. I remember well the day when my father-in-law came with meat, the most delicious meal, and we heard those sitting in the tents around us calling out for the delicious smell of meat. The tanks advanced and the situation worsened, and the bombing and fear worsened. One day my husband came quickly, he took my hand and told me that I would go south. I would have to walk a great distance because the north was separated from the south and the area was dangerous.

Many were martyred at the barrier, and many were taken captive, while others were lost, their fate unknown. I did not know what happened to me, I walked with my husband for a long time. With a friend, we were able to take a car that reached the nearest point, and then I walked alone between the occupation soldiers.

I was in great pain because of the pregnancy, but I was unable to say this, and I walked all the way. When I arrived, I saw my father in his car, waiting for me. I ran towards him, he kissed my head and I went with him, and from here my life began to change, because I was far from my happiness, my husband and my home.

I only remember the image of my husband waving his hand to say goodbye to me.

The next day a sliver of a missile fell into our tent. If it wasn't for God's cover, everyone would have been killed. No fear, no bombing in the south, but my husband and his family, who were still in the north, were forced to leave too, as tanks had now surrounded the area.

A quiet life, but the heart is tiring for the owner of the heart, it is far from him, and there is still no news about him. I learned that our mosque was bombed and my house was damaged. I cried remembering my husband's effort, you know that it is difficult for a young man to own a house of his own, he had done his best to live his dreams of a wife, children and a quiet life. My house is still standing, and this is a miracle for the homes of Gaza, but it was damaged. I had only lived in it 6 months.

Then the situation reversed. We did not expect the war to move to the south, and yet the heavy bombardment began again. I feel dissatisfied with leaving my house in the north for safety in the south. Everywhere I went I found nothing but war, death was everywhere.

In December 2023 the towers that we lived in were threatened, and a group of towers nearby were bombed. We were in the city, an unnatural horror, screaming and crying. We went out running in the street and slept that night at school, me and all my family were in one classroom. True, I did not mention until now that the schools of education have become our shelters.

It was a difficult night before the enemy forces attacked. Most of what happened to me was unknown to my husband, due to the media blackout. Then the morning came and no one knew where to go. We went with my sister, her husband and his family to my university. The last thing I expected was to visit my university, but I was displaced, and I would live for a period of time in it. I didn't know when it would end.

It was a difficult period for me to get sick because of my pregnancy and I went to the hospital several times and could not communicate with my husband. There was no network at home, so he was walking a long distance. The hardest thing for my heart is that I am approaching my birth and my husband is far from me, and the most difficult thing is that there are no newborn clothes available.

Do you know the feeling of looking among the second hand clothes for something that you can give to your child, who will come into such an unjust world? It's hard to plan the most beautiful clothes and a beautiful room for my son, and I can only find a few things, none of which are enough to warm him.

All my family were looking for clothes for my child, my aunt found clothes from her grandson, and when she brought them to me I was so happy, I was so happy to have found a treasure like this.

It was still difficult to find food during this period. We used to eat canned food, of course, unhealthy for a pregnant woman like me, but my father did not leave me. He always brought me fruits and almonds, and though he rarely brought meat because it was so hard to find; despite its high price, he brought it to me when he could.

The situation was psychologically uncomfortable, like a desert that we never expected to visit, let alone the blazing rays of the sun and the tent that you could not sit in during the day.

We were sitting on a hill watching the sunset and hoping that the sun would rise on us, but the sun is changing. Winter has come upon us, and we cannot not find anything to shelter us from the rain falling on our heads while we sleep – waking up at night to the raindrops.

One day, in December 2023, one of my family members came and told me that he found a new and unused baby kit, but it was a little expensive. My mom and I quickly went and bought it, but then I collapsed and went to the hospital. I don't know if it was the heat of the sun, or the excitement of finding something new for my child, or a nervous breakdown?

The situation in the north was still very difficult, and I didn't know where my husband was as he travelled from place to place. They fled from tanks and enemy bullets. This is the simplest thing. They were even running away as the houses were demolished around them. I'm called to hear his voice. Is he alive? It is very difficult to feel, I very much expect

to hear the news of his martyrdom. I was afraid of any call I received, as I dreamt every day of a message that would reach my phone, telling me of his death.

In the south, the situation was calm, but the tanks came forward, and on a very difficult night, it turned out to be just an operation, and then it ended. No one knows what we live. Do you know the feeling of being asleep and quietly, a few metres away from you, death is very close to you, yet you no longer care what is happening around you? Just to sleep that night.

The next night, the artillery shelling increased and we thought it was just an operation and it would be over, but the quadcopters started shooting at everyone who walked. We fled from our tent and headed, again, towards the university buildings. We thought it would be safer. I was growing because had I started my eighth month. Despite the weight of my unborn child and the exhaustion that accompanies that stage, I carried heavy bags on my back. It was a tough night, I couldn't raise my head or move from my place for fear of the quad's bullets. We went out at dawn, hoping to return to our tent to gather our things. We were shot at by bullets and returned to the university. We continued to wait all morning. The university buildings were bombed, and everyone was fleeing like the Day of Resurrection. We carried our things and ran quickly, we set off on a bus towards Rafah without any specific destination. We left the university under the bombing, we saw martyrs lying on the ground. The bus drove away very quickly, and when we arrived many things – including boxes containing our food – had fallen from the bus. Despite the famine we didn't dare stop to bring them in, as tanks were surrounding us. Whoever escapes will survive this death.

We reached my uncle's tent and set up our own tent beside his, and then we had more than thirty hours without a bite to eat. I contacted my husband and told him what happened to us. My fatigue persisted. We sat for a period full of calm and comfort. I started my last month's journey of pregnancy, the fatigue increased. I never imagined that my first son would arrive when I was away from my husband, something too painful to think about. There is no one to pat my shoulder and relieve me of this pain. I know that God has other measures that I do not understand. We can only say, "Praise be to God."

In my mind, I go back to the north. It's true that I did not experience what happened there, but I felt everything. The world has narrowed them down, fear, hunger, and a lack of money, souls and fruits. As our God said, after all this, give good tidings to the patient, here they are waiting for relief.

They did not find any kind of food, not even water. Now they wait for the rain and drink from the rainwater. There is no bread, the price of flour has reached 3000 shekels, before this, it was never more than 50 shekels.

Who is tired more than he who has children? Old and young people can bear it, but when you hear your child cry because he is hungry and you have nothing to feed him, what will

you do? Tell me? It is not enough to say they lost weight. They disappeared. They grind corn, barley, animals' food, other scraps of food, anything to make bread. They knew very well that it tasted disgusting, but what else could they do to stay alive, so they have strength to escape when they are bombed?

In the south, the pain of the ninth month started, I grew tired and it hurt a lot. I am supposed to walk on the sand of the sea, holding my husband's hand, as it is known that walking facilitates the birth process.

All this is an unattainable dream. We go back to reality. I was walking among the tents of the displaced in Rafah, with fear that anything might be bombed next to me, a house, a car, the surrounding tents. Everything is subject to bombing and destruction. When I am able to speak with my husband, I cry for him and tell him that I am unable to give birth alone. I want him by my side, but of course he is unable to come. His coming with me will cost him his life. It was very difficult to contact my husband, he had to walk away from the house to call me and there had to be a specific time for the calls.

The awaited pain came to me at night and I stayed awake and cried because of my pain. My family woke up to my crying before dawn, but in Gaza it is forbidden for us to move before sunrise or we will die.

My child's pulse was very weak, which scared the doctors and scared me. I needed a solution, but it didn't work. They had to try a stronger solution, and then my unborn child moved and the birth journey began.

I am in pain and my husband does not know that he is about to become a father. I am aching, my mother is trying to calm me down and relieve my pain, and she tries to call my husband to tell him that I am giving birth.

Severe pain, but it's all easy when I see the face of my beloved Muhammad.

I went out of the delivery room to the rest room, the first time I sat down, I called my husband and told him myself that he had become the father of the most beautiful child in the world. It was very difficult for me to tell him this news.

Muhammad came to the world and he lights it. I sat for a while in the rest room. His father was supposed to carry him, but he is far from him.

At night I went back to my tent with my little boy, my parents tried to provide comfort, despite the lack of it. I and my child slept on one mattress.

We woke up in the middle of the night to scary successive explosions, it turned out to be just an operation and it ended.

I laughed and said to my child, this world is celebrating your coming, my little one, what can I do?

This is my husband, he couldn't rejoice in his child; his wedding was cancelled, and he lost his house, which he worked hard to build—so many dreams destroyed.

Ramadan has come, after six months of war, but our hearts were not ready to receive it. When we heard Ramadan came, we remembered the family, the joy, the mosques that are topped with the Qur'an, and delicious food, but this Ramadan, the family was scattered, all mosques were demolished, and we were deprived of food.

We spent Ramadan like any normal month, crying over those we lost. My child started to grow up, away from his father. We were communicating on the internet, I sent him pictures of our first child, and he was patient with his picture. This is what was written for us.

The days passed, we were now in the middle of Ramadan. We missed chicken and meat, but my heart was squeezing for my husband and his family in the north, they couldn't even find flour; their daily breakfast was canned food.

The night of Eid came, I cried a lot about a past we lived, how it happened like this: routine, preparations, sweets and receiving family, all of this. Today we just dream that we will pass the day and move on to the next.

This is how Eid has passed like a dark black day.

The days go by at a slow speed, yes, this is the term that the people of Gaza understand.

A routine that does not change: my brothers wake up in the morning to go to the saltwater queue, then the drinking water. We arrange our tent, prepare the bread, and eat our meal. We sit outside our tent, because the weather is very hot, and we burn inside the tent.

In the north, they were being killed by the occupation when they went to collect flour, but they were forced to go because they had nothing to eat. My husband told me that he went and offered himself to death, past the occupation's snipers and the possibilities of being trampled under the trucks and brought home a bag of flour.

My husband sat down, sad for his family, thinking about how to save food for his family when there is no flour in the country, and he is the only young man in his family.

He is caring for his father who is old, his younger brother who is 14 years old, his sister and his mother. He fell asleep not knowing how to determine his feelings. The occupation is only a few metres away from them, and at three in the morning, he woke up to the sound of the trucks, and they blare out their horns to the world, so that people know that there is flour. He woke up in shock that there was flour, he got up and woke up his little brother, then his mother and all the family listened to the trucks. He decided to go, but his parents warned him because of the severity of the occupation tanks only a few metres away from them. They were afraid that whoever went out would be killed, but he insisted, because his family were starving to death.

He took his brother, and they were afraid for their lives. Then they heard the trucks' sound and went to the place of the sound and saw some young men carrying flour bags, and they jogged for 6 km. When they arrived, the tanks started shooting at them and they were forced to hide behind a wall.

At 4:30, the first truck – carrying more than 15 wooden pallets of flour entered and my husband saw the first bag of flour attached to it. He let the first three trucks go because he could not face the huge number of people who had started trying to get to the flour. He headed for the fourth truck and grabbed the first bag of flour his hand could reach, and remained clinging to it even as the truck moved on. His leg was on the iron of the trailer and the other was walking with the trailer wheel, using all his strength, in spite of his hunger and weakened body, remembering his starving family. As he carried the bag away, he was shocked. Did he really get a bag of flour, or was it just a dream? He had not seen flour in six months. He went looking for his brother, and when he saw him holding the bag, he started dancing with joy. An old man saw them and told him to go and carry a second bag. His brother went to carry a bag, even though he weighed only 35 kg because of starvation – that is, his weight was equal to two-thirds of the bag's weight, but hunger does more than this. My husband watched him from afar, and he was able to retrieve a bag, too. They carried them back to their house, a distance of 6 km, despite the hardship and the hungry people who were trying to steal bags and expose them to death. He succeeded in returning home with two bags of flour, as if they were carrying life to their house. Here, they forgot all the difficulties they faced and repeated this story a lot, not believing that they actually got flour. This is northern Gaza and its hunger.

He was talking to me while he was very excited. In Gaza, the feeling of getting a bag of flour is known to be a feeling like no other. I was very upset, I couldn't lose someone I loved, but he insisted and told me that if another chance came, he would go again.

The next day I read on the news that there was a massacre at "the site of receiving flour" and there were more than 100 martyrs. I lost my breath, I tried to call him, no answer, I communicate with his family members, but no answer, I felt like I lost my soul, but an hour later he contacted me and told me he didn't go.

This is how our life is, in one moment we lose our loved ones and friends.

My husband told me that a restaurant was bombed, so people collected the rice from the debris and purified it from sand and rubble and prepared the most delicious meal for them. What is this feeling!

Food aid started, but in a difficult way. For the first time, parachutes fell in the north sky, containing food, but it was like death. Sometimes it loses control, it falls on a group of people, many of whom have been hurt, but still it has helped a lot.

This is our situation, north and south, exposure everywhere to fear and destruction.

We were asleep in our tent at 1 pm, we woke up to a big explosion, followed by the sound of the debris, as if it was raining sand and stones at us. We found out that the house opposite our tent was bombed.

My child grew up away from his father and longing burns us.

We all dream of returning to our homes for our families, until the day came, in April 2024, when Iran fired its missiles at Israel. The army withdrew and a few were able to return to Gaza. It happened at 12 at night, I knew the next morning and started crying, preparing myself and my son, to go back to our house. I prepare my son and I cry and I say, "you will see your father, my dear, you will hug your father". I tried to call my husband, but the calls were cut off, I cried hard and got ready, and I almost got out, but they said that the army had come back and killed everyone who tried to return.

I sat with my son on my lap and I cried hard, how moments ago I was about to go to my husband, and now everything has changed, parting for a long time, we don't know when I will next contact my husband. He said to me, "where are you?" I cried a lot. He was waiting for me, walking like a wanderer at sea, and waiting to see my face. When he calmed down a little, I asked him: "Did you expect me to come today?" He told me that he expected that I would open the door and sit next to him.

It passed like an ordinary memory and we lived our lives away from loved ones and the house. The days pass us by and we don't know where the end is. We had news of a ceasefire, and all the camp started whistling and screaming, but then nothing. It suggested something wasn't right.

The threat to Rafah, the indiscriminate bombing and the forced evacuation of Rafah began.

Everyone started escaping from Rafah, displaced again, all asking the same question: where will we go, all our lives are wars. If we went to a region that is not far away, it costs more than 500 shekels – the displacement was humiliation; oppression has so many costs.

We could not find a car to take us to the place of our new displacement. We stayed the night in Rafah. There was no tent in the area except for ours. It was scary and the sound of the bombing was strong. The morning came, we carried our things, and we went to a new displacement and another new life to start.

We were cooking on gas, it came close to running out, so we agreed to use it for essential needs and to cook food for my child. One day I was in contact with my husband and I cooked my child dinner. I was alone in the tent. The gas was empty. My husband told me how to kindle a fire for the first time in my life. I burned my fingers when I tried this but I finally succeeded and then I saw my husband's voice angry and screaming – he told me that for the first time he felt unable to help me. I was the one who was crying because I didn't know how to light a fire, but now it was he who wanted someone to calm him down.

Our life at that time was quiet, our regular routine, we lit a fire to cook our daily meal, I spent my day with my beautiful child and communicated with my husband. My brother-in-law was next to our tent, when I saw him playing with his little girl my heart was burning for my child who had never seen his father, had never felt his father's hug. I was going out alone to get my baby's requirements, including diapers, clothes, and other things he needed. I had to do things beyond my power, because here my child and I are alone.

When I was in Gaza before the war, I did not go out alone, I always got lost, but today I go out from one governorate to another, as I went out from Khan Yunis to Deir al-Balah to give my child his scheduled vaccination.

The situation worsened, north and south, everyone suffers from death, but in different forms. I decided on my baby's vaccination date that we would all go to my sister's house and spend a day with her. We woke up to a call from my sister who was screaming and saying that they were threatening their towers and city with bombing. They had to go down under their towers, for they had warned them to get out of the city. Our tent is only 3 km away from them, and we heard the sound of the missile coming down and then its explosion was very strong, and it is scary that it went down to my sister's place. We were very scared to lose someone.

They started bombing one tower after another, and the people fled from one side to the other in the same city. Then I ordered them to get out of the city. She came to us, and now we were in one tent, more than 13 people.

We didn't expect things to get worse than this, but later we lived the so-called hell. The artillery bombardment is very close to us, and the tanks are approaching towards our area. Many have been displaced, but we have stayed. We remained steadfast in our camp, we held our homes and did not leave.

We were used to the explosions and we didn't care, and we were not afraid of the quads that fired at the camps, but many were martyred. The tanks got a lot closer, and we could hear the sound of their tracks moving. I and Muhammad used to sit and sleep on the sand when we heard the sound of the shots.

One night in August 2024 we all woke up to the sound of successive shots at our tents, and it increased and it didn't stop for a second. We had to run in the street at 1 am alone. I carried my child and one bag and left everything behind. The scene was terrifying, we were running alone in the darkness of the night, the only light from the moonlight and the fire that the shots caused in the tents. Everyone was on the street and we found a restaurant owner who decided to take us to his restaurant where we slept on wooden tables in the cold. Fortunately, I found in my bag a few winter clothes to warm Muhammad.

The morning came and my father told us that the tanks had advanced and the situation increased in danger. We carried our things on our shoulders and walked. We decided not to spend our night in the tent and instead go to the beach for the night, to return in the morning. The afternoon came, we carried our things and headed towards the sea, we had not reached the street, when the shots started on us, we sat on the ground. An old woman fell beside us, we thought it was from fear, but she was shot in the foot.

The next day, we decided to go and carried our things, walking back to our tent. We slept in our tent despite the danger, and we woke up to the sounds of the nearby explosions. We didn't find a suitable place, just our tent, which contained our 13 people. Then we heard a sound like the sound of a tank, close enough to crush all of us in a second without hesitation. We looked and found a helicopter directly above our heads, only 3 metres above the ground.

We finally decided to leave that place and go to the tent of a friend of my father's, relatively far from the place of danger. We carried all our things on the bus and started a new displacement journey. We saw the tanks stationed in a specific location, and we hurried to arrive. We lived three days in our friend's tent. Difficult days passed until we finally returned to our tent. Oh, the joy of returning home, you know how happy we were when we reached our tent? I don't know how our reaction will be when we return to our real home in the north. Oh, how beautiful imagination is, oh God, grant us this feeling, seeing the beloved and the house.

Despite all our circumstances, very far from life, we continued to achieve our university dream. A tent is very difficult, but I was only satisfied to be on top of my studies.

While in the north, the situation has not changed – it is getting worse. The situation was difficult: bombs, destruction, martyrs, shreds flying in our sad sky. The crossings were closed, and nothing entered Gaza. No flour and food entered Gaza. The flour that did enter was expensive, so we had to buy the flour by the kilo. We share bread and our simple food, which was only canned or legumes, which we have received through food aid.

We did not follow the news because it was always repetitions of success, then failure, and then again the game was repeated. This is how the world is intensifying, then it is released, as our God promised us that ease is inevitably coming.

Throughout the negotiation period, our simple, optimistic people have always been screaming at the top of their voice, rejoicing at the ceasefire deal that has not yet taken place.

On the morning of 19 January 2025, the deal was finally announced and when it happened, a strange feeling that we could not believe: after a few days we would return to our beloved home, to our Gaza. We were allowed to return after a week by walking, and cars were allowed after a while. Of course, my decision was to go back alone on foot, and not wait another week.

Although we have been displaced for 15 months, we did not wait for another day away from home. I started arranging my things and prepared what I intended to carry on my back, and the rest of the things I left with my family.

I could not believe that it was days until I would be back to my husband, days when my child was going to sleep in his father's lap for the first time after a year.

I agreed with a family that was in my camp that we would start walking together at four in the morning, so that we could reach the large number of people.

I woke up before dawn and prepared myself and my child, carrying things with me, and we set out in the darkness of the night, the sun was not yet rising.

We have reached the gathering place for the returnees home after more than a year of absence.

We were waiting for the moment the enemy agreed to let us through, as the tanks were still present and death was also, we waited and the time passed.

We stayed for more than 16 hours without food, only some biscuits I gave to my child and one small bottle of water left, as the day ended and we were still waiting.

We just had to pass through one street a few metres away from my husband and my house, a few metres separated my child from his father's bosom.

And the heart began to return to its grief. How is it that after we have arrived, after travelling so far and now here we are close to our homes, we are not allowed and we must return to our tents?

Many decided to sleep on the street, hoping to be allowed to move within hours. I was in contact with my husband who came out at dawn to wait for me on the opposite side of the barrier.

He told me that his brother was coming to take me to his sister. My heart was torn apart, in front of my eyes. Our security increased, for how long I did not know.

From a lot of fatigue, my child and I slept quickly and woke up before dawn to a message telling me that the displaced people were allowed to return and that, finally, I would meet my husband, and my child would have the first hug from his father.

I called my husband and he was asleep, I told him it was time for the meeting. He hurriedly prayed Fajr prayer and set off to wait for me.

We walked a while until we found a ride. After getting off, we kept walking some more. Throughout this journey, I couldn't really grasp my feelings – longing mixed with tension about the meeting ahead. I was carrying Hamoud and a bag, feeling extremely tired as we walked a long distance with nothing to help lighten my load.

When we reached the hill and started walking again, we covered a large distance, but I could no longer carry Hamoud and the bag on my shoulders. My back ached a lot, and my legs hurt too. No one could help me carry them, so I ended up trudging on my own, with my heart breaking and tears falling as I struggled.

I was exhausted. Honestly, I just couldn't go on anymore, but we had to keep walking. Fatima, my husband's brother's wife, saw my husband first and said, "Ahmed". The whole world stopped for me when I saw him from afar. He stood still, then came over and hugged me with a few tears, and we continued walking more than eight kilometres. We rested a bit, then walked a little more.

We returned to our home, yet I don't quite know what to feel – only an overwhelming urge to cry for the house I haven't sat in for six long months. Slowly, we began to rebuild our lives piece by piece, sitting together, finding moments of joy, and repairing our abandoned home.

My husband made a swing for our child out of parachute cords. Yes, the aid planes were overhead, but we had a different plan: we crafted the most beautiful swing. Though we reunited and brought our family back together, the loss endures, and the war rages on.

Death returned. Hunger returned. The siege returned. But our hearts will never leave Gaza again. The wounded Gaza deserves that we never abandon its shattered soil.

Biography

Marwa Nasser Mostafa Dababish is a 23 year old student from Gaza, Palestine. She is a committed English Language student at Al-Aqsa University and dedicated mother of two, resiliently documenting her own and her family's life and struggles in Gaza, and aspiring to share their story with the world despite challenging living conditions. She is interested in article writing and documentation and the practice of storytelling about life during conflict.



Marwa Nasser Mostafa Dababish with her son. Image courtesy of the author