

Israel-Hamas war

Gazans return home...to nothing



Following the Israel-Hamas ceasefire, many Palestinians find only sand, twisted metal and shredded concrete where they used to live

Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper in Beirut and **Mai Khaled** in London 6 HOURS AGO

The morning the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas took hold in Gaza, 22-year-old Ahmed Alyan got into a car and drove south to his hometown of Rafah, from which he had been displaced eight months earlier.

As he got closer, the piles of rubble grew, closing in on him, until the road disappeared. He parked the car and continued on foot.

He walked through his old haunts — neighbourhoods such as Tal al-Sultan, al-Balad and Al-Jeneine — before reaching his own district, Brazil. There was no trace of the park that once was on the corner of the street. Only two houses still stood in the whole neighbourhood; his was not among them.

Alyan knew it would be bad but did not expect to find what he did: a wasteland. “All we saw were ruins,” he said. “The city is demolished.”

PLAY | 00:51

Ahmed Alyan's home in Rafah before and after it was destroyed © Ahmed Alyan

Through months of war, the nearly 2mn displaced Palestinians such as Alyan yearned desperately for home. Donkey cart drivers, the main taxi service since the besieged enclave has been deprived of fuel, in recent months would call out the names of places all Gazans knew could not be reached — such as Beit Hanoun in the north, engulfed in fighting — as an expression of the longing to return.

The ceasefire, which went into effect on Sunday, meant some finally could. But from Rafah in the south to Jabalia in the north, the relief was marred by the vastness of their loss. Where roads, shops and gardens once stood, people found only sand, twisted metal and shredded concrete.

For all of the days and nights of bombing they had survived, people had not realised the places they knew could become so unrecognisable.

The five-storey apartment building where Alyan was raised with his grandmother, uncles and cousins had balconies with pale pink curtains, usually drawn back to let in the sun. All that is left is a pile of rubble, upon which Alyan was determined to somehow live.

“As a family, we’re going to return. We’re not going to leave our homes or our land,” Alyan said. “We want to go back, but right now there is no infrastructure, no sewers, no water.”





The ruins of a destroyed residential area in Rafah. 'All we saw were ruins,' said a man who lost his home in the war. 'The city is demolished' © Doaa Albaz/Anadolu/Getty Images





Palestinians continuing to return to their homes following the ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel © Ashraf Amra/Anadolu/Getty Images

The 15-month war has devastated Gaza more than any previous Israeli offensive. Palestinian health authorities say that about 47,000 people have been killed since Israel launched its onslaught in response to Hamas's October 7 2023 attack, which Israeli officials say killed 1,200 people.

About 1.9mn of Gaza's 2.3mn residents have been displaced. The UN says that 92 per cent of homes are destroyed or damaged, and estimates that there are more than 50,000,000 tonnes of rubble that could take up to 21 years to remove and cost about \$1bn.

Basma Mahdi, 45, who was forced to flee to Gaza City from Beit Lahia in the north, began to make her way back on the morning of the ceasefire, trailing behind her neighbours. It felt surreal, like a dream. "Buildings and whole streets have disappeared," she said. "I just wanted to close my eyes to avoid seeing anything."

For some, returning means yet another reckoning. Palestinians re-entering their abandoned neighbourhoods have found the bodies of loved ones crushed beneath the ruins of their homes. Gaza's Civil Defence has said there are 10,000 bodies still trapped below the rubble.

There is no clear plan for postwar reconstruction. The massive undertaking of simply clearing the rubble depends on the longevity of the ceasefire, which is in an initial six-week phase.

The second and third phases still need to be negotiated in order to bring the war to a permanent end — which is not guaranteed — before reconstruction begins. It is also unclear where the vast sums needed will come from. That has left Palestinians wondering how long they will have to live in tents atop the fragments of their homes.

“Tonight we will sleep in the ruins of our home. It is a wreck but still our home,” Mahdi said. “I am very happy there is a truce . . . but nothing will be fine for us until a long time has passed.”

PLAY | 00:17

Displaced residents return to Jabalia in Gaza © Reuters

Gazans' right to return to their land was a critical tenet of the ceasefire agreement, with many fearing a repeat of the mass dispossession that followed the creation of Israel in 1948.

But many people still cannot even begin this process. Under the agreement, Palestinians must wait a week before they can cross the Israeli barrier, known as the Netzarim corridor, that divides the north from the south.

Khalil Al Madhoun, a 43-year-old displaced from Gaza City to Nuseirat camp south of the Netzarim, was stuck in limbo.

"I have known for months that my flat has been destroyed but I will go look in its ruins for any mementoes," he said.



Displaced Palestinians carry their possessions as they return home to a devastated city following the start of a ceasefire in Rafah © Ahmad Salem/Bloomberg



A Palestinian man sets up a makeshift shelter on the rubble of his house in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip © Omar Al-Qattaa/AFP/Getty Images

People sheltering in borrowed homes are rushing to make other arrangements before the owners return from across the dividing line.

Another group of people, who are from parts of Gaza still held by the Israeli military, have risked their lives to catch a glimpse of their homes, only to flee back to displacement camps.

One year before the war began, Abu al-Baraa, a police officer, bought a piece of land in the al-Balad neighbourhood of his hometown of Rafah and built a house for himself and his wife and children. He furnished it and planted a tree in the garden.

The day the war ended, he went back to the place where the new house had been. It was in the strip of the city along the Egyptian border that has been designated by Israel as a no-go zone, known as the Philadelphi corridor.

Before an Israeli quadcopter began shooting in his direction, he managed to get within 300 metres of his house, but the rubble from all the destroyed buildings was piled so high in front of him that he could not see what remained.

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