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Israel Ordered Thousands to 'Safe' Areas in Gaza City — Then Bombed Them

After fleeing west at the Israeli army's instruction, Palestinians quickly found themselves encircled and under fire from tanks, drones, and snipers.

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On Sunday, July 7, the Israeli army [ordered](#) residents of three neighborhoods in eastern Gaza City to immediately evacuate toward the west, ahead of a new ground invasion. Thousands of displaced families abandoned their shelters and searched desperately for a place to stay the night in the city's western neighborhoods. Within hours, however, Israeli forces attacked those very areas.

The evacuation order came less than two weeks after Israeli forces reinvaded the [Shuja'iya neighborhood](#) in the east of Gaza City. Amid continuing displacement and ground incursions in the southern cities of Khan Younis and Rafah, and bombing throughout the Strip — including in [designated "safe zones"](#) — there is nowhere for Palestinians to find reprieve from Israel's onslaught.

Mahmoud Al-Shawa, 28, fled with his family from the eastern Al-Tuffah neighborhood after the army ordered them to leave on Sunday. He recounted how thousands of others displaced from Al-Tuffah, Al-Daraj, and the Old City sought refuge in what little space remained in university buildings and UN schools. After those quickly filled up, many were forced to sleep on the streets.

Al-Shawa's family were lucky to find temporary shelter at Al-Zeitoun Preparatory School in the western neighborhood of Al-Rimal, but it didn't provide any safety from what soon followed. "At approximately 2 a.m., the bombing began from every direction," he told +972. "The sky was ablaze. Everyone was screaming.

"We were in the schoolyard, and shrapnel was falling on us," Al-Shawa continued. "We tried

to hide in the classrooms, but quadcopter drones were shooting directly at us. Suddenly, my cousin fell to the floor — he'd been hit in his left arm by shrapnel. There were dozens of bodies on the ground. I'm sure people were killed. I was trying to escort my mother away from the chaos, but suddenly she stopped and vomited on the floor due to all the bodies. I covered her eyes so she wouldn't see them.

"We heard the sound of army tanks, and then someone screamed: the army had surrounded the headquarters of UNRWA [the UN Relief and Works Agency], only meters away from us," he went on. "Somehow, we escaped from the school with Israeli tanks behind us and quadcopters shooting at us from the sky. It was like an earthquake or a volcano erupting. There was complete darkness — only the color of blood and missiles illuminated the area."

Al-Shawa and his family eventually reached the Majda Wasila School, further away from the invading Israeli forces. But as they fled from their initial shelter, they saw two paralyzed girls in wheelchairs, who had likely taken shelter in the nearby UNRWA rehabilitation center and were now left to fend for themselves. Amid the crowds of those fleeing, Al-Shawa recounted, the girls were in danger of being trampled — but he was unable to help them.

According to the Gaza Civil Emergency Service, dozens of people were killed or wounded in Israeli attacks that night. Due to the [intensive](#) [military operations](#) in the area, however, emergency teams have not been able to reach the victims to verify the numbers, and Al-Rimal has become a [ghost town](#).

'If We Try to Evacuate, We Will be Shot; If We Stay, We Will be Killed'

Like Al-Rimal, the neighborhood of Al-Sabra in southwestern Gaza City was also attacked by the Israeli military Sunday night without prior warning. Many displaced families had sought refuge there from the eastern neighborhoods following the initial evacuation order. But at around 11 p.m., residents [began hearing explosions](#) and Israeli helicopters in the area. "What we witnessed was not a safe area but a battlefront," Alaa Sbaih, a 24-year-old resident of Al-Sabra, told +972.

Earlier that day, Sbaih had opened her home to relatives who had fled from the eastern neighborhood of Al-Daraj. But they soon became trapped: as the bombings [continued into](#) the [following day](#), they discovered that Israeli snipers had set up positions atop the nearby buildings of Al-Azhar University, the Islamic University, and Al-Sousi Tower, and were shooting at anyone who moved.

Sbaih is fearful of even approaching the windows to check what is happening outside — and for good reason. "Our neighbor from the Al-Qasas family tried to escape, but once he got to his car, a sniper shot him and left him bleeding in the street, with his children screaming for him," Sbaih recounted. Indeed, Israeli soldiers [have testified](#) to +972 and Local Call that Palestinian civilians throughout Gaza are routinely shot dead, simply for being outside in areas where Israeli forces operate or even for watching them from behind a window.

It was not until Monday afternoon that the Israeli army eventually issued a [second evacuation order](#), instructing people in the western neighborhoods of Al-Sabra, Al-Rimal, and Tal Al-Hawa to evacuate southward to the city of Deir Al-Balah. But as Israeli forces remain in the area, Sbaih and her relatives face an impossible decision. "We have no option except death: if we try to evacuate, we will be shot, and if we stay, we will be killed."

Maher Mamdooh, 21, told +972 that after being forced to relocate with more than 30 of his relatives just two weeks ago from Shuja'iya, he was then displaced three times between Sunday afternoon and Monday morning: from Al-Daraj to the border of Al-Rimal, then into central Al-Rimal, and then eventually further north toward [Jabalia](#). During this ordeal, he lost all of his belongings, and was separated from some of his relatives.

"We fled from the house in the middle of the night — we were running in all directions and no one knew where to go," he recounted. "There were explosions everywhere, and we were surrounded by helicopters, quadcopters, and tanks. My relatives were with us, but now we do not know where they went. It was a night from hell."

On Wednesday, the Israeli army issued a [third new evacuation order](#), instructing Palestinians to flee the entire Gaza City area. The renewed offensive has also forced Gaza City's two remaining hospitals to [close their doors](#): Al-Ahli — which was [hit by missiles](#) — and the Patient's Friends Benevolent Society. Al-Shifa, Gaza's largest hospital, remains in ruins following the Israeli siege of the area in March.

After nine months of endless displacement, killing, and starvation, Mamdooh said life long ago became unbearable. "How many times do we have to die? There are no ways left for Israel to kill us. No one in the world can feel what I feel now."

In a comment to +972, a spokesperson for the Israeli army spokesperson denied that it had bombed the areas described, and said that "all of northern Gaza is defined by the IDF as an evacuated combat zone, and Hamas operates in the heart of civilian areas."

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Featured image: Palestinians flee the neighborhood of Al-Rimal in response to Israeli evacuation orders, Gaza City, July 8, 2024. (Ferial Abdu)

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