

"We're going to bomb your house." Journalist describes the price he and his colleagues paid for reporting from Gaza

For months he has written tirelessly about what is happening on the streets of Gaza. Day after day, he described the suffering and loss he himself was experiencing, watching his home change beyond recognition and facing what he considered to be empty threats. But the Israeli attack on his home and family changed everything. Today, Mohammed Mhawish is one of the tens of thousands of Palestinians who managed to flee the Gaza Strip before the border crossing with Egypt closed. He spoke to Denik N in Cairo – about journalism, life in exile and his own version of nakba.

"I remember my wife making coffee and our son Rafik playing around. It was one of the few days I slept in the house with them. Most of the time, I stayed elsewhere for everyone's safety," says Mohammed while describing the morning his family's home was hit by an Israeli attack.

His father was sitting by the radio, hoping for positive news of a ceasefire, while his mother reassured the sleep-deprived family members that a peaceful day was surely ahead of them.

Shortly afterwards, the morning sunlight disappeared in a millisecond, the walls of the house began to crumble and choking dust, smoke and flames surrounded everything around. The last thing Mohammed remembers of that December morning is calling out the names of loved ones. No one answered. He thought they were all dead and soon he would be too. "Then I lost consciousness," the dark-haired man tells me in a Cairo café.

About two hours later, as neighbors pulled him from the rubble, he slowly began to come to. The family is fine, they assured him. "They told me not to move too much. My arms and legs were broken. Seven of my ten fingers, too," he says in a calm voice, recalling the stream of blood he noticed on his arm.

Back then, he could not fully understand what had happened – he only knew that an Israeli attack had flattened the house with more than thirty family members inside. The more he came to, the sharper the pain was. But even that didn't stop him from publishing a report just a few hours later about what had happened in northern Gaza, right in his own home.

Although the broken fingers were not able to move on the keyboard, voice dictation on his phone made it possible to get the message to the editors at Al Jazeera, for which Mohammed was working as a reporter in the north of the enclave at the time.

"As a journalist, you usually write about the suffering of others, but in this war, everyone is suffering, including me. I was going through the same thing as the people I was reporting on," he says, describing the reality of journalists in the ongoing war, where reporters from outside cannot come due to Israel's prohibition. For Mohammed, simply describing the

events around him became a personal experience. The line between professional and personal began to blur.

The hardest part of being a journalist in Gaza, he says, is not the reporting itself, but what accompanies it: the screams of people buried under the rubble, children and their relatives crying, people fleeing the bombs, but also the constant fear that his own family may be in danger because of the work he does.

In Israel's war with Hamas, journalists repeatedly become a target and thus a security risk to anyone in their vicinity. "A helmet or a journalist's vest won't protect you. On the contrary, they make you a target," stresses Mohammed, who soon discarded both for his own safety and that of his interviewees.

The Committee to Protect Journalists monitors numerous cases of physical and cyber attacks, threats, censorship and targeting of journalists' family members in the Gaza Strip. According to the organization, way over a hundred journalists have been killed and at least forty others injured during the more than year-long conflict. Mohamed is one of them.

Fifth war

Mohammed has long been writing about events in the Gaza Strip – where he was born a quarter of a century ago, where he grew up, graduated from the university, married his wife and welcomed their first son –, for global media such as MSNBC, the Nation, the Economist and Al Jazeera.

But supporting a family of three was not an easy task for a freelance journalist. In search of a better-paid job as a communication expert, together with his wife and son, they moved to Dubai less than a year before the war started. With the opportunity abroad, he could afford to support not only his loved ones in the UAE but also relatives in the Gaza Strip, including a younger sister in college.

His return home to Gaza on October 6 last year was supposed to be a brief visit. The plan was to get other family members out of the enclave as well – he finally had enough money to sponsor their departure too. The very next morning, those plans turned into an unrealistic dream from pre-war times. The opportunity to travel had disappeared, as did his visa and work contract in Dubai later on. As for hundreds of thousands of others, he was trapped in the Gaza Strip.

Recalling the morning of October 7, he describes how the sky over Gaza suddenly caught fire. "I remember mostly the terror," he tells me, with a heaviness in his voice. From the window of his house, he watched rockets flying toward southern Israel. The silent morning began to echo with loud explosions, which were soon accompanied by continuous gunfire. At that moment, no one knew what was happening – the internet was down in Gaza, the electricity was cut off and the only way to communicate with the outside world was by phone.

Mohammed received calls from relatives, friends, and fellow journalists checking that he was okay and trying to find out exactly what was happening on the ground amidst the informational chaos. It was only through them that he began to realize what he was

witnessing and what was likely to follow. "With just a few things, we went to a relative who lived further away from the border. During the afternoon, Benjamin Netanyahu declared war," he recalls. At that very moment, he sensed that the Israeli reaction would surpass all the expectations and experiences he had had with war so far.

At 25 years old, this is the fifth war he has lived through. Until last October, however, military operations had taken place mainly along the border and Mohammed's family had never had to leave their home. None of the conflicts he has experienced up to that point came close to the scale of destruction, the loss of life or the number of internally displaced Palestinians as in the war taking place today.

From the beginning, there was a complicated mix of feelings within him: he firmly believed in the Palestinian right to resist the Israeli occupation, but at the same time, he was skeptical of the attacks Hamas has conducted and how they might contribute to their struggle for freedom; he sympathized with the Israeli civilians who were killed and wounded that day, but at the same time, he feared the uncontrollable violence that would be unleashed in the Gaza Strip as a result of the attacks.

However, there was not much time for reflections. Just a few hours after the Hamas attacks, Mohammed was already reading a message from Al Jazeera news desk that is still saved in his phone. As he recalls the events, goosebumps appear on his arms. In the chaos that he was experiencing externally and internally, he decided to do what he knew best: writing, documenting, photographing, recording interviews and offering testimony from the Gaza Strip to the rest of the world.

"Keep going. Whatever you can get, we're here. Send messages whenever you can. And take care," reads another message from his then-editors.

"We're going to bomb your house"

Mohammed was initially offered to report for Al Jazeera TV, but he turned the opportunity down – mainly out of concern for his safety. He knew from previous conflicts that journalists who appeared regularly on screen faced greater risk.

"I believed that online reporting would be less dangerous, but it was stupid of me. I became a target anyway. It was bad enough that I was doing my job," he says in retrospect.

In addition to his new reporting work, he tried to stay close by his family and grapple with the fear he felt - for them and for himself. "Every once in a while, I would visit the house where they were staying to check in, to bring them water and to make sure they were okay. That was my daily routine," he says of his first days in the field.

But nothing in his career could have prepared him for the days, weeks and months that followed. Everything that is taught about risk management and safety practices at journalism schools is an unfulfillable theory on paper when compared to the reality of journalists in the Gaza Strip.

"Every day was marked by heartbreak, each time in a different form," he says. As examples, he mentions the destruction of Al Jazeera's office, the news that a friend's arm had been amputated, or the death of his mentor, friend and Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer, who, along with his brother, sister and nephews, was killed by an Israeli attack on the same day Mohammed's home was targeted.

Loss is experienced by everyone in the Gaza Strip, including Palestinian journalists, who are the only ones reporting from the ground and have become the most important source of information for the media across the globe. It is impossible to capture the reality of life in the Gaza Strip from afar. And according to Mohammed, perhaps it is a good thing that Western media does not try too hard to do so. "In most cases, we are seen as numbers, people without souls. But when local journalists write about Gaza, it's the opposite - rather than numbers and statistics, they show defiance, resilience, and the life that goes on here despite the omnipresent death," he explains, critical of his foreign colleagues.

Threats and hate messages began filling Mohammed's email inbox and private messages on the X network just minutes after the first messages went out with his name in place of the author. "But I didn't take any of this too seriously until I started getting messages from the Israeli army itself, which was around November," the young man says.

Texts and voice messages asking him to stop reporting or face the consequences, came repeatedly. "At first it was pre-recorded calls to evacuate, but on 6 December I got a direct call," Mohammed remember the evening phone call that preceded the attack. The man on the other end of the line reportedly addressed him by his full name and introduced himself as an Israeli army officer. He gave Mohammed's family, which at the time numbered about 30 members, 20 minutes to evacuate the house. "We are warning you, we will bomb your house," he paraphrases the words he heard at the time.

The journalist, who had not slept in the house most nights because of fears for his family, hoped this was just another attempt to silence and intimidate him. In the end, he and his family members decided to stay in the house – it was a half-hour walk to the nearest shelter, and moving a large group through the empty streets of evening Gaza would have attracted even more attention. When, half an hour later, nothing happened, terrified Mohammed was slightly relieved. False alarm.

In the morning, as the house slowly awoke to a new day, the nightmare came true. "That we survived the fall of a two-story building is still a miracle to me," he reflects to this day.

Between survival and journalism

The December attack injured everyone close to Mohammed – with horror, he still recalls the screams of his two-year-old son Rafik and remembers his face covered with dust and blood. The airstrike took away the roof over their heads and the last vestiges of 'normality' they had in Gaza. The trauma that opened up in each and every one of them, regardless of age, will never go away, he says.

The family devoted the following months to their own recovery, mainly. Along with thousands of other internally displaced people, they found refuge at the UNRWA headquarters in the

center of the city. Due to the bombing of hospitals and medical facilities, only first aid was available to them. So they had to cope with burns and fractures on their own – mostly without pain meds, which, like other basic necessities, has long been in short supply.

Mohammed's injuries prevented him from sleeping through many nights, moving to a hospital in another part of the Gaza Strip, however, was not an option due to the frequent attacks. Even more distressing was the fact that his little son was experiencing all this, falling asleep for weeks while crying from hunger, dehydration and cold, and Mohammed was unable to help him.

Quitting his journalistic work was not an option. The profession became a form of defiance and revenge, despite the risks it entailed. He still recalls the words of his late friend Refaat Alareer which he told him a few days before his death. "Our cause is worth dying for, but what bothers our enemy the most is our insistence on living. Remember that, Mohammed." And he did. That's also why the way he worked following the attack changed.

The reporter became much more concerned about his own safety – survival became a conscious priority. "I wanted to continue to cover what was happening in Gaza, but I knew I had to stay alive first," he explains. Part of his new strategy included showing up online much less – he cut back on interviews and social media posts. But the threats soon resurfaced.

"I realised I had to choose between surviving and continuing to do this job. Either I would write or I would be written about, there was no other option," he says of the difficult decision to leave the Gaza Strip. The fact that his home was already a very different place from what he remembered, made things a little easier. His position at Al Jazeera, despite good salary, has not been filled by anyone else to this day.

Survivor's guilt

"I feel guilty that I survived," he tells me in a Palestinian café in the middle of Cairo, where he and his family – thanks to a considerable amount of money they were able to raise through online fundraising, and despite all the obstacles along the way from the northern Gaza Strip, through the border crossing in the south of the enclave – fled to this spring.

The kerosene-painted walls and the taste of coffee reminds him of the famous coffee place that was destroyed by Israeli attacks in his native Gaza. The café moved to Egypt together with its owners, as did tens of thousands of Palestinians fleeing the war. As have Mohammed and his loved ones.

He never stops being grateful for his newfound sense of security, but he also never stops asking himself why they were the lucky ones while many relatives and colleagues did not get the chance to leave and save themselves.

If he could go back, he says, he would not hesitate for a second. Indeed, with every news of an air strike or bombing, he thinks of all those who remain in the enclave. He calls the feelings survivor's guilt.

However, return is not an option: the border crossing that allowed Palestinians from the Gaza Strip to flee to Egypt, closed in May. Mohammed, along with his pregnant wife, two-year-old son, sister and parents, was lucky to get across the border in time. But even from Cairo, the war in Gaza doesn't seem much further away than when he was reporting from its streets. The sound of drones and bombing had died down though and food such as fresh fruit, vegetables, dairy products and many other things they hadn't seen or tasted in the past six months is again available to them.

Mohammed's reporting from the ground ended with the moment he crossed the border, but he has not stopped writing about the Gaza Strip. Today, he is once again working as a freelance journalist for the media around the world. For now though, he decided to stop writing for Al Jazeera – aware of the media's tense relations with the Egyptian government, not wanting to cause any trouble to his family.

The neighboring country has offered him and other Palestinians a sense of security, but it cannot give them the sense of belonging that they lost when they left. The customs and memories that Palestinians keep alive behind the closed doors of their new homes in the loud Egyptian capital, or the businesses they know intimately from Gaza, are an exception.

The case in point is the café where we meet. It feels like home and offers a space where people with a similar fate in a new environment can meet. "You feel like you have something in common – identity, hopes, ambitions, struggles, pain. You've experienced similar tragedies, you've survived, and now you're here together again," says Mohammed, describing what he feels when he encounters Gazans in Cairo. He may not know them, but he knows they share more than words can express.

"They are trying to write their next chapter of life just like you. But it kills me that we have to do it so far from home," he sighs.

The stories of displacement he knew growing up were mostly from movies and the stories of his grandmother, who was forced to leave her home in Jaffa, now part of Tel Aviv, in the 1940s. He never imagined that something similar would happen to him. "This is the third generation in our family to experience displacement, my father repeatedly," he tells me of his father, a 65-year-old retired Arabic teacher whose first experience with displacement dates back to the Six-Day War when he was nine years old. His mother's side of the family has had a similar fate.

It has been 76 years since the Nakba, the Palestinian exodus that followed the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, which for many Palestinians marks the beginning of their modern history as a succession of catastrophes and suffering that irrevocably changed the lives of them all. "And we are still on the move, still trying to find a home, a belonging, somewhere to put down roots," Mohammed reflects.

"I think the nakba of our family and the Palestinian people has never ended. It continues on, and now I'm living my own version of it," he adds. Leaving and building a life in exile is a necessity, he says: "We have no choice."

Perceived as a human being

Mohammed has no idea what exactly will happen next. But he wants for his family to settle somewhere where they can live in a safe, respectful environment and at least in basic comfort. Where they will have enough to eat without humanitarian aid and where they can sleep peacefully at night without fear of bombing.

However, as a journalist, he also dreams of continuing his work, which is not possible in Egypt at the moment – due to the unclear status of the incoming Palestinians as well as the political atmosphere in the country. Therefore, he is thinking about the option of going to Europe or even the United States. But in the end, it all depends on whether the authorities allow him to do so.

The dark blue Palestinian Authority passport he holds in his hands ranks on the Henley Passport Index – in terms of freedom of travel – 99th position, just behind North Korea's documents. And Mohammed has had his visa application rejected before.

When asked what the ideal future scenario would be, he answers without hesitation: freedom. "I wish I could live to see the day when I can return home without being stopped at a checkpoint, just because I want to live in peace in Palestine, in the Gaza Strip," he says with a smile.

Yet he almost never writes about freedom in his articles. As he never fully experienced it, he says it was never a priority or something he felt he had lost. "I'm looking for security, stability and a place where I will be seen as a human being, not as a Palestinian, as someone from a war zone. And that's what I want for the millions of people around me," he stresses, adding that he wants the same for his Jewish friends and colleagues in Israel.

"I have experienced loss and heartbreak. I remember what it means to go to sleep at night when your heart is pounding from cold, hunger or illness. I don't wish that on anyone," he says quietly.

"I know what it means to survive. It's a full-time job," the journalist concludes.