



## **Testimony by Rana Al-Madhoun: What it is like to be pregnant and about to give birth during the war on Gaza**

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My name is Rana Al-Madhoun, I am 34, and I live with my family in Al-Jalaa, a neighborhood in central Gaza City. I am a third-generation Palestinian refugee: my family was forcibly expelled and ethnically cleansed from our ancestral home in al-Majdal in 1948.

I am a human rights defender and lawyer. I currently work at Al Mezan's Training and Mass Communication Unit, where I organize and hold trainings and workshops on international human rights and humanitarian law for different groups of beneficiaries and affected communities here in Gaza—including law students, law graduates, doctors, farmers, fishermen and women.

I have two children—Alhasan, 8, and Mira, 6—and I am pregnant with the third one, a boy we named Aws. As I write this, I am in my eighth month of pregnancy. As the due date approaches, rather than being overjoyed, I am terrified. ***I keep thinking about what it will be like to give birth under the current circumstances in Gaza.***

The births of my first two children were complicated experiences. Both Alhasan and Mira were born by two emergency C-sections. My baby girl, Mira, was also diagnosed with pulmonary stenosis a week after delivery and was transferred urgently to Jerusalem for surgery. What will happen if I need another emergency C-section? What will happen to Aws if he needs to be admitted to the NICU or if he needs treatment not available in Gaza, just like this sister?

### **The First Escape**

In the first week of the war, a neighboring house to the building I live in was bombed without prior warning. My parents and my brother's family were in my house, as they had to evacuate their home in Al-Maqousi area, northern Gaza City, after it was heavily bombed. We all then decided to leave my apartment, fearing another targeting of the house. We went to my husband's family apartment in Tal Al-

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Hawa. Three days later, we received news that some residential apartments in our building were targeted, and that my neighbors were killed, and my house suffered severe damage and became uninhabitable. That news affected me so badly, and I kept imagining what would have happened to us if we stayed in the apartment, would I, my children, and my family make it or not, and would I have been able to protect my children and my unborn baby. I tried to regain my strength because the challenges ahead were even tougher and harsher.

In Tal Al-Hawa- the only remaining refuge for us after the destruction of my apartment and my family's home, and given the difficulty to move to the south, based on the occupation's evacuation orders to all residents of the northern Gaza- we endured the deadliest, most challenging, and most difficult two weeks. The area has been hit relentlessly by indescribable carpet bombing, with at least 50 missiles raining down continuously in an hour. We could feel the ground shaking beneath us, hear the crash of stones and shattered glass, while the apartment's windows lit with flames burning around the building. This horrifying scene repeated for three consecutive days. I was holding my children close, seeking the safest area within the house, ***and saying that if we died, we would all die together, and if we ended up under the rubble, we might still be able to help each other.***

In those moments, I realized that the baby could feel my emotions. I was very scared, and the baby started moving rapidly and strongly, a movement that was both intense and exhausting, but it reassured me that he was okay.

Every morning, I wonder how we're still alive. The night was too scary, but that does not mean it was calm during the day, as the bombing has never stopped. We just get busy during the day trying to provide our basic needs of water, food, and our children's needs despite the scarcity of everything. I was very happy to find a pharmacy operating nearby, at least I can bring the necessary medications, vitamins, anticoagulants, and iron.

With everyday passing, the bombing was becoming more intense. Al-Quds Hospital, which was very close to the building we evacuated to, received evacuation orders, and its vicinity was being hit intensely all day long. One day, while we were having lunch, we heard our neighbor calling us to evacuate the building urgently, following an evacuation call for bombardment. Despite each of us having prepared an emergency bag, the difficulty of the situation and fear made us forget most of our belongings, including my medications and our clothes.

We left the apartment and went to a school opposite to our building in order to be safe and to later decide where to go. Few minutes after we arrived at the school, the building was hit, and this scene was one of the toughest for my children and the most painful physically and emotionally for me. I cried with my kids

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Mira and Hassoun (Alhassan). I couldn't hold my tears this time and neither could I be strong. We lost our only remaining shelter, and everything was gone with it, our belongings and our beautiful and even bad memories. Despite the fear we experienced during our stay in the apartment, losing it was the hardest part. By losing it, we lost the final safety spot.

### **A New Page of Suffering**

My sister's fiancé offered to accommodate us in his house located in the center of Gaza City. We moved there, and each day was becoming harsher than the previous one. Here, I need to take a deep breath; perhaps the words I'm about to share may be hard to believe. During this period, all means of living have been cut off—potable water, necessary cooking gas, vegetables, milk, and flour. Everything is extremely challenging to obtain, and if we managed to provide anything, it's in very limited quantities. During this time, my children were living in extreme fear and hunger. Both, my husband and I felt helpless. ***I often cry myself to sleep out of hunger***, and I feel embarrassed to tell anyone that I'm hungry, because my children were more in need of the food that we hardly managed to secure.

I had to drink salty water for three days and it caused me a gastrointestinal infection. For that, I stopped drinking water for a whole day, because ***I can bear being thirsty but I cannot bear the stomach pain***, especially with limited access to treatment and pharmacies. Also, during this period, I couldn't buy my medication and vitamins, which I forgot to bring from the apartment in Tal Al-Hawa.

Those painful days were coupled with great fear because of the intense and continuous bombardment in the area. I no longer was able to control my and my children's fear. After living ten days in the apartment of my sister's fiancé, we were shocked that Israeli tanks became very close to our location. We started to hear intense clashes in the area, and the residents and displaced people in the nearby school started to call the Red Cross (ICRC) to assist their evacuation of the area, but to no avail. ***We miraculously survived death.***

### **The Road of Humiliation and Death**

We decided to head to the south despite our significant fear. The narratives of those who evacuated to the south about the road were terrifying, and the supposedly "safe route" announced by the occupation turned out to be a death trap.

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We walked for two hours, carrying our personal belongings and children, filled with fear and loaded with humiliation and oppression. In the middle of the rugged road, ***I became extremely exhausted, wishing I could sit for a couple of minutes or have a drop of water.***

However, any movement could endanger your life – looking back, sitting, or picking up anything that fell from you was forbidden. We passed through an Israeli checkpoint set up on Salah Al-Din Street equipped with cameras, with soldiers on either side, and two tanks positioned behind sand dunes that I glimpsed. We had to raise one hand holding our ID, and the other to show surrender.

At that moment, Israeli soldiers called out to three people through the loudspeaker to approach them, and to another to throw away his personal belongings. Minutes later, we heard gunfire. I panicked, but I couldn't turn back to check on Hassoun, who was with his grandmother.

We passed through the checkpoint, and that was ***the first time in my life to wish death to be closer to me than life*** due to the extreme physical and psychological fatigue I was feeling, and the fear of any complications affecting the pregnancy.

### **The Unknown Fate**

In the south, the situation isn't any better or safer, but I managed to secure my medications and found vegetables to compensate for some nutritional deficiencies from the previous period. However, the bombing persists, and fear remains the harshest emotion, especially as my due date approaches. I fear giving birth in these challenging conditions, I fear undergoing a C-section without anesthesia or with unsterilized tools, I fear losing my unborn child or any of my children, and I fear not finding a safe home or a suitable environment for the baby's life.

If the war ended and we managed to survive, I hope to be able to rebuild my home or find a suitable one before my due date.