

[Transcript] The Daily / Voices from Gaza

From the New York Times, I'm Sabrina Tavernisi, and this is The Daily.

Last week, we told the story of Golan, a father of four, whose kibbutz was attacked by Hamas terrorists.

It was an attack that killed 1,300 Israelis and prompted Israel's government to say it will now destroy Hamas, which governs Gaza and its 2 million residents.

Now we turn to what's happened inside Gaza in the days since that attack.

Israel has prohibited food, water, and electricity from entering the territory and has bombarded it with airstrikes that have killed more than 2,600 Palestinians.

But last week, the situation grew more dire when Israel ordered people in the north of Gaza, nearly half the population, to evacuate to the south ahead of an expected Israeli ground invasion.

Many in Gaza now fear that this mass expulsion will become permanent, reopening the trauma of Israel's creation in 1948, which displaced more than 700,000 Palestinians.

Today, conversations with two people in Gaza about what they've experienced so far and what they expect comes next.

It's Monday, October 16th.

Hi, is this Abdullah?

Yeah.

Hi, Abdullah.

My name is Sabrina Tavernisi.

I spoke to Abdullah Hassanin on Thursday.

He's 23 years old and lives in southern Gaza, in a town called Rafa.

At that point, people there had endured six straight days of airstrikes.

Basically, I don't know if I'm going to be alive for the next hours or no.

My neighbors, who are living just two blocks away from my house, are evacuating at this moment as they have received a threat that their whole building is going to be bombed within the few minutes.

So basically, it's a three-story building or four-story building.

When one building is threatened to be bombed, the whole block has to evacuate because it's a mass destruction to the whole area.

So the whole block that is next to my home is evacuating at this moment, as I'm talking to you.

The whole block next to your home is being evacuated right now.

Are you seeing that out your window?

I'm just seeing people running.

Actually, there's no light as the electricity is cut off since yesterday.

I have already been facing difficulty just connecting to a stable internet connection to make this call with you.

Where in the house am I reaching you right now?

Where is Safest?

I don't know where Safest.

There's no Safest.

I'm just standing here and the balcony just to make this call.

No place is safe enough in Gaza.

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You're just seeing the options and which is somehow safer for you.
Just the whole street is in darkness.
And I'm just seeing people running everywhere to seek shelter at this moment.
Abdullah, how are you feeling right now?
Just feeling terrified about my family.
Most of them are children, actually.
And I am the biggest one of them, the biggest brother.
And that said, I feel the responsibility to make them safe,
despite the fact that there is no safe area in the Gaza Strip.
I'm sure you can hear the noise from the neighbors just running.
I don't know if you can hear that.
I hear the voices.
What is, what's happening downstairs?
Actually, you're just seeing people running at this moment seeking shelter in other safer place
that's just away from the building that is threatened to be bombed.
Whole people are just seeking shelter.
I hear them.
Yeah, that's what's happening at this moment.
Yeah, don't worry, man.
Don't worry.
Okay, okay.
Okay, Yassin.
So actually, my neighbor is telling me to open all the windows
and to stay away from them as they are going to bomb soon.
I don't know if, if you can hear him calling my name or not.
And why was he saying that to you?
Because when the air strike happens, if the windows are not open,
they will break into your heads.
So you have to open the windows because the strength of the bombing can break the windows.
And you have to stay from them not to be injured from the class.
Do you need to go open the windows right now?
Actually, we have already done that since the beginning of this escalation against Gaza
because we know what would happen.
Abdullah, do you have plans to evacuate with your family?
What are you thinking right now in terms of what you want to try to do?
So, evacuate where?
Where should we go?
Because Gaza, because the Gaza Strip, okay.
So let me tell you, in Gaza, we have no shelters.
We have no, no safer places.
Can you hear this?
I can hear it.
I can hear it.
What are you seeing?

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What is that?

It's a rocket.

It's a damn air strike that happens out of nowhere.

Did it hit something?

Yeah, but it's not that close.

I've just seen the red light.

And the sound of aircrafts is all over the place, the same as the sound of the drones that never stop.

But yeah, the situation is getting worse by each hour passing.

So I don't know if I'm going to stay this night and my heart will leave.

Uh-huh.

That's the culture prayer.

That's the culture prayer.

Yeah.

Do you need to pray?

Are you going to pray?

I'm going to pray after we are done with this call.

What will you pray?

What is your prayer?

It's kind of a spiritual connection between us and God.

And actually, that's the only thing that helps us at this moment as we are left.

I believe that the people of Gaza are left alone.

I'll pray for my people to get what they want to live in peace because we deserve peace.

So Abdullah, I wanted to ask you, we've been talking about all of the air strikes that have been happening since last Saturday.

And of course, the thing that happened last Saturday as well was this very deadly attack by Hamas on Israel.

How do you understand that attack?

What did you think of that?

Okay.

So it did not start actually by Hamas attack because we've been under siege for more than 70 years.

And you cannot just put people into prison, deprive them from their fundamental rights and then see nothing in response.

You cannot dehumanize people and expect nothing.

What do you think about Hamas, Abdullah, what it is, what it does?

Like I am not Hamas and I was never a big fan of Hamas.

We both are different in the ideology, but what's happening here is not about Hamas at all.

What's it about?

It's about, it's about ethnically cleansing of Palestinian people.

It's about 2.3 million of Palestinian people.

That's why Israel, the first thing that it did was cutting off water and cutting off electricity and cutting off food.

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So this is not never about Hamas.

It's about our mistake to be foreign Palestinians.

That's it.

Thank you for talking to us, Abdullah.

And I wonder if I can call you back tomorrow.

I want to keep in touch and make sure you're okay.

And if you can, send me a voice memo, okay?

You hear something in the night, you send a voice memo.

Okay.

We start with breaking news on the Israel-Gaza war.

Last night Israel told more than a million Palestinians in northern Gaza to move south, signaling a ground assault is likely coming.

And even if those people are able to move south, there is currently no way out of Gaza because the border crossing into Egypt is blocked.

The order to evacuate the north of Gaza to the south of Gaza is just crazy and it's got to be a joke because Israel wants to expel more Palestinians from their homes within 24 hours than it did during the whole Nakba of 1948.

We are talking about more than 1.1 million of Palestinian people that have to evacuate within one day, within 24 hours.

Like are you serious?

It's got to be a joke.

Those are really human beings.

These are not just numbers.

We are talking about human beings.

This has to stop.

The collective banishment that we are facing every minute has to stop.

Abdullah, how are you doing?

Not good at all.

What's happening?

I'm just so devastated by the news I'm reading.

Abdullah, it's Friday night at about 9.30 p.m.

What are you going to be doing tonight?

What's the next couple of hours look like for you?

So actually we have my aunt and my cousins coming to our home because they are evacuating as well.

So I will be spending the night with them.

Actually during escalations, this is something that most of people in Gaza do.

They all gather in one room and they stay together all the night.

Or they sleep together in case that their building is the bomb that they will die together.

So that they die together.

Yeah.

So tonight you'll sleep with your family together.

Yeah, that's it.

That's what we do.

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Somehow it consoles you that you have some company.

It sounds very dark, Abdullah.

Yeah, that's it.

That's the situation here.

We'll be right back.

Hey everyone.

This is Sted Herndon, political reporter for The New York Times.

When I became a journalist, I made a promise to my readers, like the way the doctors take an oath to their patients.

I committed to bringing the truth to light, no matter which party, business, organization, or person I'm reporting on.

I have to be persistent, I have to do research, and I have to push back when someone tries to hide or spin the facts.

And I know I'm going to write stories that both Democrats and Republicans don't like.

But that's what The New York Times has been doing for more than a century.

And that's what we're going to keep doing.

We believe the public deserves the right to make up their mind based on the facts.

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Hello.

Hi.

My name is Sabrina Tavernisi.

I'm a reporter from The New York Times and a host of The Daily Podcast.

What's your name?

My name is Wafa Alsaka, and I'm from Florida.

I was a teacher until March of this year.

I was an art teacher at Hartfield Elementary School, and I live in Tallahassee, Florida.

I spoke with Wafa Alsaka on Saturday.

She's a Palestinian American, and she's one of the hundreds of thousands of people who have evacuated from the north of Gaza to the south over the last two days.

I came to visit my family because I have my mother-in-law who's really old.

She's a 97-year-old, founded Tibet, came to visit her and take care of her, and I have a father who is really ill and sick on oxygen 24-7, and I just wanted to spend some time with them before, you know, don't know when I'll see them again.

And this has happened, and now I don't know.

I was almost struck by a missile yesterday morning.

I promised my sister-in-law I'll take care of her mom, and while I was giving her the medicine on the bed, I saw a missile just passing by next to the room, hit the land right across from their house.

Everything was collapsing, like, you know, the windows, the glass everywhere, so I threw myself on my mother-in-law to cover her from the debris because I was scared that she'd hit the light, you know.

Where were you, Wafa?

In the Gaza city, the heart of the Gaza city, El-Remal, El-Remal is in the north, right

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across from the Saraya.

Wafa, on Friday night, the Israeli military gave the order for everybody in northern Gaza to evacuate to the south.

Did you get that order?

No, I didn't.

I heard it from my niece, and I'm like, no, this is just lying, this is propaganda.

So in my mind, I kept trying to convince my sister-in-law and her daughter, no, this is not true, and then she gets on her phone that whatever the general of defense from Israel saying, clear it or else.

And she's from previous wars that she's seen, she said, if he says something, he'll do it.

So they start frantically picking up stuff out of nowhere, water, food, this, that, and it's like, we have to evacuate, we have to go, we have to go, everybody, it went like at six o'clock.

It went like, no, even 5.30, they start picking up all the water because we bought a lot of water because there is no water in the city.

Like when you open the faucets, there is no water.

And then we got food, like cheese, and we got tons of bread from the bakery.

And they said, wait until the daytime comes, because if the Israelis see that there is movement down the stairs and near the cars, they might hit us with a metal.

I'm like, this is bullshit.

No, don't say that.

No, I'm going to go take the stuff and load them in the car for you guys.

And she goes, no, no, no.

And she held me back and it's like, please, please don't go down, they will kill you, they will hit a missile on you.

So your sister-in-law was worried that if you went downstairs and brought the food and supplies to the car, you could get hit with something from the Israeli side.

Yes, because they will see movement.

And then I was panicking and I said, I can't do panic because I need to wait and think

I'm not going to go with them.

The embassy already assured me evacuation very soon.

And then they said, no, you have to come with us.

I said, no, I'm not going to go.

This is not safe.

What are you guys doing?

So Wafa, then what happened?

Did you go with your relatives?

What did you do?

No, they already left.

So after about two hours, that missile hit and it was just right across the street.

It was just within a couple of feet of the house.

It was like a huge sound with a fire coming next to the window.

The sound is unbearable.

Like if you ever heard the worst thunder ever, but it's multiplied by hundreds of times of

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that sound, like it will make you deaf.

And then all debris is all around me and like dust and gas.

There was a smelly smell.

I can't describe the smell yet, but it burned the throat and my nose and my eyes.

I never ever smelled something like it.

And then my brother-in-law called the neighbor next to us and we took my mother-in-law downstairs.

And we got my nephew to come back with the car and evacuate us.

And we came to Hanyun.

And it was like cars, after cars with people hanging from the side of the car, they holding to the window, but from the outside kids, like 10 years old and eight years old, their parents, their mother, like holding their hands inside the car and they hanging from outside the car because the car is loaded with 10, 15 and stuff in there.

Ten people in a car?

More.

There is some of them with more.

I'm telling you, people were hanging out.

Some people opening the trunk of the car and having kids inside the trunk with the trunk open.

Kids inside the trunk?

I even saw those construction, I lost the, in English, you know, the one moves the rubble.

Like a bulldozer?

Like a digger?

Yes.

And having mattresses in there and they having people sitting on the mattress in the bulldozer, holding them.

Oh my God.

So kids were actually hanging on from the outside of cars, hanging on to people from the inside of the car.

The trunks were open.

People were stuffed into the trunks.

I promise you, yes.

I didn't have the heart to take pictures.

I wish I did, but I couldn't.

I couldn't because I was in disbelief.

My heart was aching.

I felt like my heart is broken to see my city.

This is unreal.

Oh my God.

I'm not so wet.

Wafa.

There was a red light on top of that.

We didn't know where it hit.

It went like a sunshine and then it dropped.

What does that mean?

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There was a missile hit close by, but it felt like it was in here, but I could see like a sun coming over and then went down.

Wafa, you were on the road.

What happened once you got to Han Yunus?

Did you know anybody there to go into their house?

What happened?

No.

I never been to this house before, but my husband niece, it's her, the uncle of her husband.

You know?

So it's like a far away relationship.

I never met them before.

So we called.

That's another sunshine came over.

What are you doing?

And there is another one.

And the smell, I can't describe the smell.

It's like, you know, like matches, like matches, but very strong, like very strong comes to your throat.

Yeah.

It's like it burns the back of your throat.

That sulfur taste and your eyes and the nose.

Does the house shake?

What does it feel like?

Yes, like it's a little earthquakey, a little earthquake.

Yes.

Wafa, so you came to this house where you've never been before.

Have you met the owners?

Are they feeding you what's happening in the house?

We brought in lots of food and they have some too.

But then you don't feel like eating when you're seeing all this pain, you know?

But we have kids and we have to feed them and they're still crying all day long.

They're crying.

They've been asking their parents, they want to go home.

They are tired of this.

How many kids are you with?

We have about 10, 10 little kids.

We have about 70 people on here.

70, 70.

Don't hear me, oh my God.

Another one, another one.

So what happened?

You arrived to the house.

You're staying with?

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Yes.

I came in here.

I stayed and then I felt uncomfortable since I don't know them.

So I called a friend of mine and she has her cousin live in Hanyunis.

So I went there with them, which was yesterday, Friday.

We ate little sandwiches of cheese and zatar and a cup of tea.

Then I said, I haven't slept for a week.

So they gave me a mattress on one of the rooms when I slept.

I actually went into a deep sleep in 5.15 almost.

A huge, orific, wakey sound with things coming through the window and then screams of these young little girls coming out of their mattresses like popcorn, freaking out.

What the hell is this?

Did I go to hell or something?

I jumped out and started grabbing those girls who are 15 and 13, freaking out, shaking.

And I'm like, we're okay, we're okay, we're okay.

What happened is they hit a missile, three houses away from the house I stayed at in the middle of the town of Hanyunis, but they hit it with no warning with people inside.

So the men who were staying with us, they rushed to him with the people because they said there were tons of people, over 30 plus people in there.

They found the older lady, they picked her up, she came in so dusty, full of dust everywhere she can't breathe.

So they start washing her face.

They were describing that there were little girls dead everywhere and there was next to the house like a store for weddings.

So they start grabbing from those wedding dresses and party dresses and covering their bodies.

Oh my God, another one.

It feels like the sun comes so fast and goes down, but with the noise and the smell.

Like a super fast sunrise and sunset.

But that's how you could hear it, right?

Yeah, I could hear it, I could hear it, I hear it.

In this attack you're describing, you said they were grabbing wedding dresses and party dresses.

To cover the girls, to cover the girls who are dead because their bodies are showing.

They went and they found body parts, the legs of kids and arms and body parts all over the place.

But Wafa, just remind me here, you're in the south at the south of the line, right?

This was the place you were told to evacuate and you're getting hit.

And this is a safer place, supposedly for us.

How is your mother-in-law?

Is she still there with you?

She's with us right here, but she's not doing well.

Every movement, like you just try to touch her hair, she screams.

You move her arms, she screams.

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We're all scared that we're going to lose her at any time.

And we don't have hospitals to take her to.

We don't have any place to, we're just trying to make her comfortable and we don't even have the enough medication to do so.

Where is your father and where is your husband?

My husband is in Tallahassee, Florida, with my other son.

I have two boys.

My grandson is crying every day, telling me, please, grandma, come back, and I keep a promise in him, I'll be there, breaking my heart that I came in here and left the line.

So my father is in his house, used to evacuate, because he said with the oxygen and his health and with the dust and the bombing, he said, I can't, and if I die, then that's the end of it.

So my two brothers would not leave him alone and stayed with him.

And my mom left with my sister-in-law somewhere here in the Hanunah that I don't know even the address or I don't even know where she is.

Is he in the north, your father, or is he in the south with the Hanunahs?

No, he's still in the north side.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, another one.

No, I lived in the state for a long time, for over 35 years, and now I retired.

So I kind of try to come back and spend some time with him, because I lost a lot of time with him.

So I'm trying to make up for it, to kind of take care of him.

I don't know, I'm so tired of this, why we can't see our family calmly and kindly without being hurt.

My sister lost her house, and her two kids' house, all three houses lost, and she's somewhere with some people I don't even know where.

My mother evacuated with my sister-in-law into Hanunahs.

My dad cannot leave because he has the oxygen tank, and he's in our house in a little remel.

So I don't know, and we are in some people's house, I don't even know.

I have to stay with them, and my mother was crying, she wanted to go back to her bed, but we can't take her back, so I don't know, I don't know what else to do.

Everybody's everywhere, I don't know, I don't know.

Oh my goodness, oh my goodness, another one.

Wafa, what do you think will happen?

What I think will happen?

Yes.

I think a lot of killing, we lived in 1948, and all we're asking is to have a piece to raise our kids.

You already took our land, you already took our homes, you already took our grandparents and parents, and lots of killing happened.

Why we're repeating history again?

For what?

What do they want?

They want Gaza?

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What are they going to do with us?

What are they going to do with the people?

I want this question to be answered, so we know.

They want to throw us to the sea, go ahead, do it, don't keep us in pain.

Do it.

But they cut in the electricity, they're limiting the food that's coming in, they're limiting the gas, they're limiting medication, they're limiting everything, everything is controlled by them, they're limiting blood coming in for God's sake.

Before I used to say Gaza is an open prison, now I say Gaza is an open grave.

It's a grave.

You think people are alive?

They are zombies, they are not alive, they are not alive, not just because they walk and talking, that means they are alive, no they are not, they're all traumatized, they all traumatized, I'm traumatized, and I know how to heal myself trying to, but I can't heal my heart anymore after this war.

My heart is broken to the bone.

On Saturday, Wafa got word that foreign citizens were to go to the border crossing between Gaza and Egypt.

She said she went and waited for hours with hundreds of others, but that the crossing remained shut.

Yesterday, US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, arrived in Egypt to discuss efforts to get Americans out through the crossing.

Meanwhile, the Times reports that Israel's plan to invade Gaza with tens of thousands of troops could begin as early as today.

We'll be right back.

Here's what else you should know today.

The US House of Representatives entered its third week without a speaker, as Republicans engaged in a prolonged public fight over who should lead the chamber.

On Friday, Republicans nominated Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio following the withdrawal of their previous nominee, Representative Steve Scalise of Louisiana.

But it does not appear that Jordan, a hard-right conservative, has enough support to clinch the job in a vote on the House floor.

So over the weekend, Jordan's supporters tried to browbeat fellow Republicans into supporting him, posting the phone numbers of holdouts and encouraging conservative voters to flood their offices with calls demanding that they back Jordan.

Today's episode was produced by Lindsay Garrison, Jessica Chum, Rochelle Banja, Asta Chaturvedi, and Sidney Harper.

It was edited by Paige Cowatt, Lexi Diao, and Lisa Chow.

Fact-checked by Rochelle Banja, Susan Lee, and Jack Begg.

Contains original music by Dan Powell, Alicia Beytupe, and Marian Lozano, and was engineered by Chris Wood.

Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Lansverk of Wunderlea.

That's it for the Daily.

I'm Sabrina Tavernese.

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See you tomorrow.