

Narratives Under Siege (2): Beit Hanoun, Northern Gaza Strip



Jamal Swailem lives in the northern Gaza Strip, just 400 metres from Erez Crossing, in the background.

Whenever he stands at his front door, or looks out of an upstairs window, Jamal Swailem can clearly see Erez Crossing. His house lies just 400 metres from Erez, close enough for him to see pedestrians walking through the crossing into Gaza; and also close enough for the Israeli Occupying Forces (IOF) to see every move the Swailem family make.

Jamal Swailem has lived in the same house all his life. He's now forty nine, and has 6 children, who are all at home with him and his wife. His father, Abu Jamal, who is ninety years old, has lived next door all his life. Another two brothers and their families live just metres away. Altogether, there are forty members of the Swailem family living in a row of four houses, almost adjacent to Erez Crossing. They own a small amount of land, around 17 donums, between them, and farm it together.

"We used to have citrus trees" says Jamal Swailem. "We had groves of orange and lemon and grapefruit trees, and guava as well, because the land here is very rich. Some of the trees were fifty years old. The first time the Israelis bulldozed our trees, we immediately re-planted all of them. When they bulldozed the trees again, we replanted them all again. They [the Israelis] damage and destroy, and we rebuild. This is our life. But the third time they bulldozed our trees, we decided to grow vegetables instead."

The destruction of civilian property, including agricultural land, is illegal under international human rights and humanitarian law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) investigates and

documents human rights violations across the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), including IOF destruction of agricultural land in the Gaza Strip. Since 2000, the IOF have destroyed more than 38,000 donums of agricultural land in Gaza, deliberately depriving thousands of Palestinians families from earning a sustainable living.

The Swailem family now earn a subsistence living growing tomatoes, potatoes and other vegetables. Jamal's home is scarred with bullet holes inside and out. He says the IOF indiscriminately shoot at their house whenever they invade the area. His family has survived numerous IOF incursions, and Jamal says they live with the constant threat of yet another incursion.

"They [the IOF] come in tanks" he says. "Sometimes they just come to this area, sometimes they're on their way to Beit Hanoun town, but they always pass here. At times my family has to stay in one room for more than 2 days, to try to be safe. It's extremely dangerous." Jamal's 15 year old son, Imad, sits at his father's side. "Our life here is tension, fear and total instability" he says. "At any moment I expect death."

Imad says the family cannot go outside after 5pm because the incursions are mainly at night. "We lock the door and stay in" he says. "We don't have visitors, because people are afraid to come here." Two years ago, the IOF shot and killed a neighbour living opposite their house. But the Swailem family remain adamant they not be driven from their land. "I have lived here almost fifty years, and my father has been here for almost a hundred years" says Jamal. "This is our land and we are going to stay."

Just a few small fields away from the Swailem family, a woman called Samara is at home, nursing a small miracle. Samara, who also lives dangerously close to Erez Crossing, was eight months pregnant when she became sick and breathless. Her husband called an ambulance, but the paramedics refused to come to the house. According to Samara, they were afraid of being shot by the IOF, who had warned them not to approach the border area after dark. They said they would wait for her 800 metres away. Samara's family bundled her onto a donkey cart, and slowly wheeled her towards the ambulance. "I started to bleed, and lost a lot of blood before I got to the ambulance" she says. "I was in a very serious condition, and lost consciousness. But, Thank God, my baby survived and he's fine." Her son, Nahed, is now 2 weeks old.

International human rights and humanitarian law stipulates that medical personnel should under no circumstances be the object of military attack. However, in spite of their protected status under international law, PCHR has documented numerous attacks against Palestinian medical personnel.

The experiences of these two families reflect the dangers and violations facing dozens of Palestinian families and small communities living in the northern Gaza Strip. But, despite living in one of the most dangerous places in Gaza, Samara and her family are, like Jamal Swailem and his, adamant they will not leave. PCHR continues to document human rights violations across the OPT, and to demand that civilians be granted their basic human right to live in safety and security on their own land.