

Narratives Under Siege (7): Abu Alkass Mini-Market, Gaza city



Anwar Abu Alkass displays one of the empty refrigerators in his central Gaza city store. Due to the closure, there are now chronic shortages of many foods, including fresh dairy products, across the Strip.

"There have been rapid price increases over the last few months because of the closure. Three months ago, for instance, a litre of corn oil cost 19 Shekels (the equivalent of \$4.5). Now it costs 29 Shekels (\$7). The price of flour has also doubled; three months ago a kilo of flour was 2 Shekels. Now our customers have to pay 4 Shekels."

The Abu-Alkass mini-market has been a popular feature of central Gaza city for more than thirty years. Anwar Abu-Alkass has worked here since he was a teenager, and now manages the mini-market with his brother. "We used to have a lot of fresh goods on sale, but now the majority of our goods are dry products" he explains, as we wander round the mini-market aisles. "Every business has been affected by the closure – we used to sell lots of fresh milk and different kinds of cheese – but now we are forced to depend on two Israeli companies for our dairy imports. Their products are expensive for us, but we have no choice."

After declaring the Gaza Strip "A hostile entity" on 19 September last year, Israel tightened its siege and closure of Gaza, adding additional restrictions on the movements of all civilians and goods, and limiting food imports to seven basic categories; flour, sugar, dairy products, rice, salt, oil and frozen foods, including frozen meat. Many foods and drinks are now only sporadically available, whilst others, such as Coca Cola and fresh fruit juice, completely disappeared off the shelves several months ago. Fresh meat is increasingly scarce in Gaza, as is imported chocolate and cheese. Alongside every other store, restaurant and food retailer in the

Gaza Strip, Anwar Abu-Alkass has had to adapt to these restrictions whilst also trying to keep his business going.

During the six months since the siege and closure were tightened, food prices have spiralled across the Gaza Strip, and increasing numbers of families are now facing chronic food insecurity. 73% of the population of the Gaza Strip is now at least partially dependent on humanitarian food aid, making Gaza once of the most aid dependent communities in the world. The World Food Programme (WFP) recently expanded the number of people it is assisting across Gaza by an additional fifty thousand people. It is now providing food assistance to 300,000 civilians in the Gaza Strip. All food donors are facing logistical problems in securing the volume of humanitarian aid rations they need to distribute, also due to the closure.

Anwar Abu-Alkass says local food prices have also been forced up because retailers now have to pay heavier costs to try and secure goods that used to be easily available. "I send a truck to Rafah every day to buy whatever is coming through the border" he says. Though the southern Rafah border with Egypt is now officially closed for business, goods are still being brought across into Gaza, and with the other seven crossings into Gaza effectively sealed, many retailers depend on the trade from Rafah to keep their shops stocked.

In addition to food and drinks shortages, other commodities are now also coming off the shelves in Gaza. "The price of washing-up liquid has gone up from 6 Shekels to 15 Shekels in the last three months" says Anwar, "and I have very few supplies left. We are also running short of shampoo, washing powder, cleaning liquids and tissues. Even the goods that we can buy now are not always good quality – sometimes we can only get hold of lower quality brands for our customers, and that is not good for business."

The shelves in Abu-Alkass are full, and the store looks well-stocked. But Anwar points out that, as well as relying on dry goods with a long shelf life, he has empty refrigerators. "People want fresh goods like milk and cheese" he says. "They also want frozen meat and vegetables. The problem is, even if we did receive these fresh and frozen goods that people are always asking for, we cannot store them securely, because we also face power cuts every day." The power cuts that recently grabbed the world's attention when the Gaza Strip's sole power plant was forced to temporarily shut down, continue in Gaza on a daily and totally unpredictable basis.

Anwar and his brother employ seven staff to help them serve the hundreds of customers a day who visit the Abu-Alkass mini-market, but have just off two workers to try and cut their costs. Staff salaries have also been reduced, and Anwar says he is now forced to fill his shelves with lower quality items in order to keep his store full. "Two years ago we had twice as many good for sale" he says. "Our customers are loyal, but they want vegetables like okra, and fresh milk, and varieties of cheese and fresh meat, and we can't obtain any of these any more. The closure is affecting our business badly – and our customers are being denied quality and choice every day."