

Displacement, Destruction, and Determination: Gazans Experience of Returning Home During the Truce

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Abstract

The experience of Palestinians in Gaza returning to their homes after prolonged displacement reveals profound psychological, social, and economic challenges. This study examines the trauma and resilience of individuals who, after enduring 18 months of conflict and displacement, returned to find their homes, neighbourhoods, and livelihoods obliterated. Drawing on firsthand field reports and cases narrated by the second author, a displaced Gazan, this paper presents ten case studies that illustrate the emotional and practical struggles faced by returnees. These cases highlight the shock of discovering homes reduced to rubble, the loss of personal and cultural identity, and the intergenerational trauma affecting children. Despite the devastation, many Gazans demonstrate remarkable resilience, drawing strength from community solidarity, cultural traditions, and a deep connection to their land. However, the lack of mental health support, inadequate reconstruction efforts, and the ongoing blockade exacerbate the psychological toll, leaving many in prolonged uncertainty and despair. This study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions, including psychological first aid, livelihood restoration, and community rebuilding programs, to address the variety of challenges faced by Gazans after the truce. The findings emphasize the type of aid and international support priorities that would foster recovery and resilience in Gaza, while also highlighting the enduring spirit of a population determined to rebuild amidst adversity.

Keywords: *Gaza, Displacement, Trauma, Resilience, Psychological Impact, Reconstruction, Intergenerational Trauma, Community Rebuilding.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The experience of Palestinians in Gaza returning to find their homes destroyed is deeply traumatic and devastating. After periods of displacement due to conflict, many return to find their neighbourhoods reduced to rubble, with homes, schools, hospitals, and infrastructure destroyed. This shock is compounded by the emotional toll of losing not just physical structures, but also the memories, possessions, and sense of security tied to those homes. Migdad and Buheji (2024a)

For many, the loss of their home represents the loss of their entire way of life. Families often face the immediate challenge of finding shelter, food, water and basic necessities, while grappling with the emotional and psychological impact of displacement and destruction. The trauma of losing one's home is often intergenerational, affecting children who may struggle to understand why their lives have been uprooted. Al-Muhannadi and Buheji (2024b).

In the absence of adequate international aid or reconstruction efforts, many Palestinians in Gaza are forced to live in temporary shelters or with relatives, often in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. The lack of resources and the ongoing blockade of Gaza make rebuilding extremely difficult, leaving many families in a state of prolonged uncertainty and despair. Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024c)

The psychological impact of such experiences is profound, with many individuals suffering from anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The loss of homes and communities also erodes social cohesion and cultural identity, as people are displaced from their ancestral lands and neighbourhoods. Migdad and Buheji (2024a)

Despite these immense challenges, many Palestinians demonstrate remarkable resilience in facing all the types of social problems created by the occupation or the devastating war on Gaza. Al-Muhannadi and Buheji (2024a).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Realising the Psychological Impact on the Wellbeing of the Gazans after being Displaced for more than 18 months and go back to Nothing.

The psychological impact on Palestinians in Gaza after experiencing the devastation of war, prolonged displacement, and the shock of returning to destroyed homes is profound. The emotional rollercoaster of hope and despair—first feeling relief that the war has ended, only to return and find their homes and communities in ruins—can have severe and long-lasting effects on mental health. Buheji and Khunji (2023)

2.2 Loss of Hope and Crushed Expectations

After enduring the horrors of war and displacement, many Palestinians return to Gaza with the hope of a fresh start, only to find their homes, neighbourhoods, and livelihoods obliterated. This sudden loss can lead to hopelessness, despair, and a sense of betrayal. Homes are not just physical structures; they hold memories, family history, and a sense of identity. Losing them can feel like losing a part of oneself, leading to deep grief and mourning.

2.3 Re-traumatization or Mental Health Issues

For many Gazans, returning to destroyed homes in the north of the strip can trigger memories of the war and displacement, re-traumatizing individuals who have already endured significant psychological stress. Many may experience flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and severe anxiety, especially if the war involved direct exposure to violence, bombings, or the loss of loved ones. Buheji (2024a) mentioned that this type of exposure creates a toll on the Gazan human factor and increases their possibility of making wrong decisions.

The inability to rebuild due to a lack of resources, ongoing blockades, or fear of future conflicts creates a pervasive sense of uncertainty for almost all of the population of Gaza. The problem is that this happens while Gaza's healthcare system is almost destroyed, and people don't have access to mental health services or psychiatric care.

This can lead to chronic anxiety and depression, Shorrab et al. (2024). Some Gazans may struggle with guilt for surviving or for not being able to protect their families or homes, further exacerbating mental health challenges. Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2023b)

2.4 Intergenerational Trauma

Children who experience displacement and the loss of their homes are particularly vulnerable. They may struggle with feelings of insecurity, fear, and confusion, which can affect their development and mental health well into adulthood while living in an unstable socioeconomic environment. Parents who are themselves traumatised may unintentionally pass on their stress and anxiety to their children, perpetuating a cycle of intergenerational trauma. Migdad et al. (2024c)

2.5 Disruption of Gaza Social Asset and Network

Displacement and the destruction of neighbourhoods disrupt every time the social networks and community support systems in almost all Gaza, leaving individuals feeling isolated and disconnected. Despite their hardiness, the loss of homes and ancestral lands can lead to a sense of rootlessness among the Gazans, as living in the tents creates a weakened connection to cultural and familial heritage. Buheji and Hasan (2024), Migdad et al. (2024b)

2.6 Resilience Amidst Adversity

Despite the immense psychological toll, many Palestinians demonstrate remarkable resilience. They draw strength from their cultural and religious traditions, community solidarity, and a deep sense of perseverance, Migdad and Buheji (2024c). However, resilience alone cannot compensate for inadequate mental health support, resources, and a stable environment. Buheji (2024b) mentioned that to avoid resilience fatigue, Palestinians are becoming more experienced in navigating their ‘collective pain’ and their ‘collective happiness’. Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2023a)

Without adequate intervention, the psychological scars of war, displacement, and loss can persist for years, affecting individuals’ ability to function, rebuild their lives, and contribute to their communities. This can have broader societal implications, hindering the recovery and development of Gaza as a whole.

2.7 What solutions can be done to absorb this psychological toll on the whole population?

The psychological toll of returning to destroyed homes after prolonged displacement is a stark reminder of the human cost of the war on Gaza. While resilience is a powerful force, it must be met with tangible support and resources to help individuals and communities heal and rebuild.

Addressing the psychological toll on Gaza's population—or any community recovering from prolonged conflict and displacement—requires a comprehensive, multi-layered approach. The solutions must be immediate, medium-term, and long-term, involving local, national, and international efforts. They should include stability variables that help bring main life services such as health, education, and life necessities trading. Migdad et al. (2024d)

Unfortunately this is happening while no psychological first aid services are available and no trauma-informed care to provide immediate support to those in distress. Even there are no safe spaces for people to share their experiences and emotions, or to foster a sense of solidarity and reducing feelings of isolation as every Gazan is busy again with where they would settle next.

2.7 How is the 'Faith of Acceptance' helping the Palestinians Cope with the Israeli occupation?

The concept of "faith of acceptance" can play a significant role in how Palestinians cope with the challenges of the Israeli occupation. This faith often stems from religious, cultural, and communal resilience, manifesting in various ways. For many Palestinians, faith in a higher power (usually rooted in Islam or Christianity) provides a sense of purpose and hope. Belief in divine justice and the idea that suffering has meaning can help individuals endure hardship. This spiritual resilience allows all the capacity of the internal front to find strength in the community identity, even in the face of adversity.

For Palestinians, acceptance does not mean surrender but acknowledging the current reality while maintaining a commitment to resistance and perseverance. Palestinians often use their rich history and cultural heritage to sustain their identity and dignity. This connection to their past and land helps them remain steadfast (*sumud*), a key concept in Palestinian resistance and resilience.

Faith in the collective struggle and community support can provide emotional and practical support. Palestinians often rely on each other for survival through shared resources, emotional comfort, or collective action. This sense of unity helps individuals feel less isolated in their struggles. Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2023b)

Many Palestinians channel their faith into nonviolent forms of resistance, such as protests, art, education, and advocacy. This approach reflects a belief in the possibility of change and a better future. Faith in the eventual triumph of justice, even if not immediate, sustains their efforts. Thus, acceptance, in this context, can also mean finding ways to live with the reality of occupation while striving for a better future. This might involve focusing on daily life, family, and community, as well as finding moments of joy and normalcy despite the circumstances.

Faith in the global community and the belief that their cause is can also bolster Palestinians' resilience. Many draw strength from international support and the hope that their struggle will eventually lead to justice and freedom.

2.8 Need for Livelihood in the New Displacement Episode

During the post-truce, Gazans need more employment opportunities, programs and vocational training to help people rebuild their lives and regain a sense of purpose and dignity. This should be accompanied by financial support initiatives for families who have lost their homes or livelihoods, reducing the stress of economic insecurity. Buheji (2024c)

Teachers and educators need to be trained to recognize signs of trauma in students and provide a supportive learning environment. Programs that teach coping skills, stress management, and emotional regulation to help individuals and communities build long-term resilience need to be implemented. Religious leaders need to be engaged in providing spiritual guidance and support, which can be a source of comfort and resilience for many.

3.0 Methodology

In this paper, the second author took the responsibility of reporting cases directly from the field as he is considered one of the Palestinians who is suffering from displacement and the situation of the demolishment of their houses as a result of more than 18 months of Israeli invasion on the strip.

The second author clearly focused on ten cases to illustrate the feelings of the Gazans who went back to the north and were dismay after finding that their homes were totally demolished. The geographical areas, time frames, and populations affected are all the same; however, each case carries a different reaction to what is experienced.

The cases are categorised based on relevant events experienced by the second author during the truce of February 2025. The cases are shared openly, but sensitive information is considered.

4. CASE STUDIES FROM NORTH OF GAZA

Case 1- Events beyond children's imagination

After the niece of the second author returned to Rafah, Layla returned home without her husband, who was martyred and left her with five children below the primary school. She was patient and accepted her fate and was in the displacement camps in the Mawasi area of Khan Yunis, suffering more than others as she had to raise her children while trying to survive the brutal bombing in these 18 months.

On the first night of Layla's return with her children, she visited the Al-Janina neighborhood and found it uninhabitable. It was bombed and burned, too. She found that the area is not secure, still dangerous and not prepared for life since there is no water, no energy, no roads, and no nearby residents. She was forced to rent the remains of an unfinished apartment in the Al-Zahzar neighbourhood in Rafah, about 700 meters away from her house, to gather her children and meet them with a little bit of safety and a roof over their heads. It was time to sleep. Nour prepared a place for her young children to sleep in the modest house. Nour insists on being close to her house. She struggles to prepare her home for habitation after the shock.

Since the events are beyond the children's imagination, their innocent minds can barely comprehend what is at home. Therefore, in motherhood, Layla builds a defiance not to feel more displaced and feels so lucky compared to the majority when they manage to find what looks like a roof over their heads.

Case 2- Where is our Tent?

Three-year-old Obaida asked his mother, "Where is our tent?" crying that he wanted to sleep in the tent. This is what he remembers about the family's residence. The mother replied, "Mama, we went to our house." The child asked, with the innocence of children, "Well, where is my bed? And where is my father? When will he come back from heaven?" They told him that his father went to heaven after being martyred in the bombing.

After her house is renovated, Obaida will return to ask again about his real home, where his bed, his father, and his toys.

Case 3- Back home to Gaza City

Hajj Abu Muhammad Shabana, the second author's sister's husband, as soon as the truce was concluded, said to dismantle the tent erected in the Mawasi area of Khan Yunis to go to their home in the Zeitoun area in Gaza City. Abu Muhammad worked for 35 years at the university and retired two years ago, took his dues, bought the house and completed it. He had barely settled in it for a few months when the war began, and the shelling of the Zeitoun neighbourhood began, causing his house to be hit by many shells, forcing him to move to Rafah

and not enjoy his new home. Abu Muhammad returned to Gaza as soon as the truce was concluded to spend 3 days and 2 nights on the road, a distance that would take an hour at most.

Despite the destruction of Gaza, Abu Muhammad, similar to other Palestinians, did not hesitate to return to his home, even if the return was on foot with hundreds of thousands of returnees. However, also similar to others Abu Muhammad returned home to be shocked. His house, which was made of 3 floors, was not only bombed but also burned. All the neighbourhood was completely destroyed

That means the house is unfit to live in. This is an excellent shock after losing many loved ones and not finding a place to keep their memories. The Abu Muhammad family agreed to set up a tent around the rubble of the house, which showed an amazing connection to the land. This act is the correct response to Trump and his stinking protégé and all those who call for the emigration of Palestinians from Gaza. Abu Muhammad says this act is the accurate response to everyone who accuses the people of Palestine of leaving their homes and fleeing in 1948. Nothing brought the Palestinians out except death, killing and destruction in the hope of returning and the false promises of the Arab armies to expel Israel, as per Abu Muhammad.



Figure (1): Shows the amount of Destruction in Northern Gaza and How People are Searching for Anything from their Memories between the Rubbles of their Homes

Case 4- Not finding a Trace for Where was our Home

Ali was in a major shock beyond the many displaced people returning to Gaza. Ali and his family did not find a trace of their homes!

The rubble of our homes in the Netzarim axis made a 4-storey building on a 2.5-acre plot of land vanish and disappear, as Ali says. All his planted olives and all kinds of fruits could not be found in the piles of rubble.

Ali was unable to stay in the place and went back to a second home in Gaza. That was a beautiful and comfortable apartment in the Al-Katiba area in a seven-story building on the first floor. He believes that he was lucky this time, as only the top three floors were bombed and destroyed. He thanked God as the building next door was completely destroyed. However, he found that the rubbles from that building blocked the entrance to his remaining building.

Ali says, “We entered the building and climbed into the apartment from between the pillars to see the massive destruction with which we could not repair anything, not even the destroyed and stolen furniture in the apartment, I simply did not find anything to return to in Gaza.”

Ali, in dismay, decided to return with his son and what remained of his family to Khan Yunis. There, Ali went to re-establish his displaced area near his brothers' tent.

Case 5- Family Shahad Found a Place to Rent!

My son's daughter Shahd Asem, who is two and a half years old, believes they are lucky. Her mother says, 'We were displaced from Khan Yunis to Al-Zawaida.' From the first day, we managed to rent an apartment. My daughter did not want to sleep and prepared herself every night to return to the only house she knew, the mother of Shahid says. Now we cannot rent anymore as the owner is coming back, and we have to live in a tent in Khan Yunis.

Um Shahad finds it very difficult to explain to her daughter their new place, which is a tent instead of the home she dreamed of returning to.

Case 6- Many Houses but Still Living in the Tent

Dr Ziad Ibrahim and his four sons left the displacement site in Mawasi Khan Yunis. They went to Gaza directly after the truce to inspect the houses and see what was suitable for housing, returning, and residing.

Dr. Ziad found his original house completely burned and destroyed from the inside, with only the columns and the roof remaining. It was utterly unfit for habitation. They went hoping to find the other house for his son, an apartment in a tower, which was completely blown up. Two other apartments belonging to different family members were found to be half destroyed and not safe to live in. Thus, the Ziad family returned to Mawasi Khan Yunis carrying severe shock and dismay.

Later, Dr Ziad went to the 'Tel al-Hawa' area in Gaza to repair a small part of the remains of one of the houses and prepare what they could for the coming winter. Here, he found that he needed at least a few bags of cement. Each bag costs 900 shaikal, which is approximately 300 dollars, which prevents any possibility of any real restoration. Thus, Dr Ziad's family is still in tents in Mawasi Khan Yunis.

Case 7- Returning to Red-Zone 'Rafah'

According to what we saw and what was announced, about 90% of Rafah's buildings have been demolished, which means that most of its residents have not returned to their homes yet. No house, no water source, no energy source, and no provision of life's necessities. Therefore, my return to Rafah immediately after the truce was an adventure.

Most international organisations consider Rafah to still be a red zone, and most do not work there. This situation placed additional burdens on the returnees to the 'AlZahour neighbourhood' in Rafah.

In this new settlement, we had to coordinate to form a neighbourhood committee and try to organise the distribution of the small amount of aid that arrived to reach the maximum number of returnees to Rafah.

This neighbourhood committee worked to communicate with some water distribution agencies to try to provide it to the returning families. The second author led the committee, communicated with other agencies that distribute some food, and worked to distribute it fairly. We also communicated with a rice-cooking tekiya and brought hundreds of dishes to the returning families.

The second author asked his family to transfer Al-Muqdad Tekiyet from Mawasi Khan Yunis to Rafah, but they could not afford the space and capabilities needed for a cooking kitchen.



Figure (3): Shows the efforts to Service the Returned Displaced Gazans who returned back from the North to Rafah again

The committee led by the second author also launched an initiative in Rafah to encourage families to return. We are waiting for contributions from those who can contribute and support the initiative. This initiative involves purchasing vouchers for families returning to Rafah.

In preparation for the holy months of Ramadan and Eid, the neighbourhood committee set up a project to purchase vouchers for the needy among the displaced, those returning to their destroyed homes, and those who need treatment. The committee divided the vouchers into food, clothes and shoes, carpets, Kitchen supplies, and necessary tools for keeping warm in the tents.

Case 8- Persistence to be Near Home

Ihab Abu Yousef is 40 years old and a father of four children. His house is in the Swedish village on the sea of Rafah in the Philadelphi axis on the Egyptian border. He lost the entire house. He lost his shops selling iron and wood. He lost everything he owned

Ihab was displaced to the Mawasi of Khan Yunis, and after the truce, he decided to return to Rafah. However, he could not return to his home because the area is a dangerous red zone that is not allowed to be returned. Also, his place of residence and place of work were completely destroyed.

Once he and his family returned to Rafah, the committee of the neighbourhood gave him a place close to his destroyed house despite being completely demolished.

With the shock and the determination to return without discussion or hesitation, Ihab began to return to work, where he set up a tent in the street to sell scrap and firewood until he could find his daily sustenance. He contacted institutions to provide some requirements for all the neighbourhood residents and succeeded in doing so.

Ihab's presence contributed to creating a participatory atmosphere among the returnees. The destruction of his home and workplace did not prevent him from being determined to

return. The sight of the rubble did not prevent him from setting up the tent in the closest place he could reach from his home and workplace.

Case 9- Case of the Second Author Family

After the truce, he took a trip to Northern Gaza directly. He saw the extent of the destruction and losses in his private properties. The first property was in the family house in Gaza, which has four floors and a floor area of 220 square meters. The land area is 2.5 dunams (2500 square meters). The property was planted with all types of fruits. None of it remained.

The second author then visited his 160-square-meter private apartment, which he found to be completely destroyed. He also visited the site of three shops that he used to own and found them to be completely demolished.

Then, the second author visited his Rafah property, where he had a carpentry shop of 1 dunam that was bombed and burned with all its equipment. Two shops of 200 square meters were also bombed and partially demolished. Since he could not go back to Gaza, he returned to Rafah. He was able to remove the rubble and restore a place to live and another to work, trying to start life again.

The second author confirms that despite the destruction and loss of his properties, it did not weaken his resolve to return, continue life, be patient and perseverant, and continue his social role in serving the displaced people in the neighbourhood.



Figure (4): Showing what is Left from the Farm of the Second Author in Northern Gaza

Case 10- Providing Services Despite Loss

Nabil Ibrahim and his sons were displaced from Rafah to Mawasi Khan Younis and stayed there for about 8 months. Their situation was similar to the people's in terms of poverty and need for all the necessities of life. Then came the truce. The family did not wait for the solution to the problem of the Philadelphia axis, which is only hundreds of meters away from their residence.

The Nabil family lost their place of work entirely as it was bombed, destroyed and burned. They lost their work, but fortunately, they found their house still standing. The family left their place of displacement in Mawasi Khan Younis to return to Rafah, the first people, with no shelter or any of the necessities of life. Despite all of this, the family started an income-generating project that targeted to stabilise the Gaza residents and provide them with services. They established a clay oven for baking, which alleviates people's living expenses and provides a limited income for one of Nabil's sons.

Nabil and his family also followed a project to open a small supermarket containing specific food requirements. Since the family noticed that many of the displaced families were looking for carpentry services, they opened a furniture maintenance headquarters so that people would multiply on them, as they might need furniture maintenance, and to provide them with another source of income. Yes, they worked and provided income, but most importantly, they contributed to stabilising people near the Philadelphi axis, as people were afraid to return to Rafah in this area. They provided the returnees with food supplies such as rice, flour, legumes, eggs, meat, kitchen utensils, and others, which contributed to the stability of the people. This family sacrificed and struggled to support itself and contribute to the stability of the people. Despite the pain of losing the entire workplace, God inspired this family to participate in the livelihood of Gaza again, showing another story of resilience and the anti-fragility of the Palestinians. Migdad et al. (2024a)



Figure (5): Shows the Small Supermarket Established again in Rafah to serve the needs of people coming back again from the North of Gaza

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 The Necessity of Addressing Psychological Shocks

The cases in this paper show that Gazans need immediate community-based interventions. These programs can focus on resilience-building, coping mechanisms, and emotional healing. These programs can start immediately with art therapy, storytelling, and group activities.

The community also need specialised support for children and adolescents through displacement classrooms or schools, recreational activities, and child-friendly spaces to help them process trauma in a safe environment.

Since Palestinian women often bear the brunt of caregiving in crises, providing them with mental health support and resources can have a ripple effect on families and communities,

Buheji and Migdad (2024). Community events, cultural activities, and collective rebuilding projects must be organised during this new displacement after the truce to foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose. This means local leaders, including religious and community figures, can play a role in promoting mental health and resilience.

5.2 Maintaining the Gaza Resilience Tree

The Gaza Resilience Tree is a symbolic concept developed by the authors to represent the strength, endurance, and perseverance needed by the people of Gaza in the face of ongoing adversity, conflict, and hardship created by the Israeli occupation. It is often used metaphorically to describe the resilience of Gaza's population, who continue to survive and rebuild despite the immense challenges they face, including blockades, wars, and economic struggles.

The authors see that the 'Gaza Resilience Tree', even with the circumstances of coping with a war that is full of atrocities by Israelis that lasted approximately 1.5 years, can be developed to show and emphasise the deep roots of the unwavering connection of Gazans to their land, culture, and history, despite decades of occupation and conflict.

The branches of the tree show the continuous efforts of Gazans to rebuild their lives, communities, and infrastructure, even after repeated destruction. The more branches show the striving of the Palestinians in Gaza to continue their life through having education, art, and cycle of life necessities delivered even during the displacement of limited resources.

Figure (6) shows that the tree symbolises life, growth, and resilience until Palestine is Freed. It reflects the Palestinians' ability to remain rooted in their identity and to continue growing despite the harsh conditions imposed on them. Thus, one could say that this Gaza Resilience Tree is developing more than a road map for survival but also a call for justice, peace, and the right to live with dignity. It reminds the world of the humanity of the people of Gaza, who continue to resist and rebuild against all odds.



Figure (6): Represents a Visualisation of Gaza Resilience

5.3 Implications of the Study

This study suggests the importance of community-led initiatives that absorb the shocks after the wars, such as the neighbourhood committee established in the Rafah area, which could help to foster social cohesion. The paper highlights the need for long-term research to track the psychological and social recovery of Gazans over time, particularly the intergenerational effects of trauma. Thus, future research can compare the experiences of Gazans with those of other populations affected by conflict and displacement to identify common challenges and effective interventions. The study also contributes to the growing body of research on resilience, offering insights into how communities can rebuild and thrive despite adversity.

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