

review



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With reconstruction painfully slow, thanks to political infighting, corruption and spite, Antony Loewenstein visits the Gaza Strip to report on daily life amid the rubble

During the 2014 conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Yosrah Kafarnah feared for her family's life. Situated in Beit Hanoun, a town close to the Israeli border that was the site of fierce fighting throughout the seven-week war, they fled to a nearby school for protection. Run by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), Kafarnah was with her husband, Imad, and their two children. Israel attacked the school so they went to another one. "Gazans thought that UNRWA spaces were safe," she tells me.

"I was scared when I saw fighting between Israel and Hamas," she says, now sitting in her caravan, a temporary home made of tin that became semi-permanent. An Israeli surveillance blimp hovers in the sky as Imad explains how he carried injured people to hospital during the bombardment. "I thought I was going to die," he says.

A 2015 UN report found that Israel struck seven sites designated as civilian shelters in the 2014 Gaza war, killing 44 Palestinians and injuring 227. No Israelis have been charged for these incidents, or any attacks, during the war.

Beit Hanoun was particularly badly hit in the 2014 conflict and 70 per cent of its housing became uninhabitable. Today, sand, rubbish and discarded clothes remain strewn across the ground but the UAE, Qatar and the Maldives have funded some reconstruction. The Kafarnah family, like many I meet, live in shoddy caravans that are bitterly cold in the winter and extremely hot in summer.

The UN provides the bare minimum of oil, milk and wheat flour every three months, while the ruling Hamas government distributes a small amount of cash every quarter.

It is a desperate existence. Imad is unable to work due to a decade-old injury and he doesn't want his wife to work because of the potential gossip in the community if she talks to unrelated men. It is a deeply conservative and religious area where men and women, who are not family, rarely mix. The couple have decided not to have another child because of their financial situation.

The precariousness of their existence deepened after Hamas recently ordered them to leave the caravan by the end of last month, because they want to build a market at the location. "I refused to sign the eviction papers," Yosrah says. "Our caravan is in good shape and we are not told where to go. We cannot pay rent [at another place]."

Families in Beit Hanoun, many with up to 10 children, were told by the UN and Hamas after 2014 that they would have their houses rebuilt, but Israel and Egypt's crushing siege of almost 10 years of the Gaza Strip ruined those plans. Furthermore, political infighting between Hamas and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA), corruption within Hamas and the UN, and a reconstruction plan that was arguably designed to fail from the beginning, have all contributed to today's parlous state of affairs.

Gaza, continued on 6 →

Lives in ruins

