

## Let's Talk About Gaza

### A personal account by a Syrian refugee in Gaza

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**Being a Syrian refugee in the Gaza Strip means to leave a war to arrive to another one, says Eman Mahmoud Al-Kolak. She escaped the war in Syria with her family to come to the Gaza Strip in 2012. Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) Regional Office Palestine in the Gaza Strip talked to Eman about why her family chose to seek refuge in Gaza and how the family's experience has been since.**

I am a Palestinian Syrian and my husband is a Palestinian from Beit-Hanoon. His family still lives in Beit-Hanoon. We tried to leave Damascus several times, and we left everything behind because we thought we were going back in a couple of days. We first managed to go to Lebanon and live there for four months. My husband's family asked us then to come to Gaza offering us a house and everything. This is why we decided to come to Gaza. Yet, we did not know there was going to be a war. It was a war just like the one we had in Syria. We came to Gaza in 2012 during the last 3 hours of the war. We saw more within 3 hours than we had ever seen in Syria.

Sometimes, I feel that we were meant to come to Gaza. After all, it is our favorite place. We consider it home. When we entered Gaza, my husband and me cried. Being back in Gaza felt like a dream come true. My husband got a small job at Beit-Hanoon's hospital and we were offered a small house. Nevertheless, life was hard. We had to take a loan from the bank to open a tailor's shop. I am a clever dressmaker and I used to make good money. I tried to adapt to life in Gaza but it is very hard here for everyone. There is always a shortage in everything. I tried to work but I simply could not although I

believe that we should work and not depend on emergency help kits. At that time, I was also pregnant with my daughter and I went through a lot of complications at the hospital when I was in labor.

During the last aggression in 2014, we could not stay in Beit-Hanoon. My daughter was only one month and a half old. We had to leave after the aggression on the ground and to ask a Syrian family to host and offer us refuge. We were like one family. During one of the cease-fires, we went home to bring some things we needed, such as blankets and food. When we were getting ready to go, we were told not to go out. I still wanted to go and I eventually did: When I reached my house, I already expected it to be partially destroyed, but I found it totally in ruins. It was hit by a F-16. I found all our furniture, clothes and photographs shattered outside of the house. It was a rented house, so we did not receive compensation of any kind. They said only the landlord is to be considered as beneficiary of compensations though I paid for all the furniture.

I tried to live a lifestyle like I used to have back in Syria and everyone asked: Why do you pay so much money and care to build a good home? I did not understand why they wondered. But after the war ended, I finally understood what they meant. It was never safe. We were never safe in this country. Indeed, we had nothing but the clothes we were having on when we left.

After that, we looked for a new house and we found a small one in the North. It consisted of 2 bedrooms and it had bad lighting and bad service. We did not have any blankets or pillows. Some people offered us some things and I tried to make it as comfortable for us as I could, but my husband had a different opinion. He did not want me to buy new things for the house. He thought that we would only lose them again, so instead of metal forks for example, he thought plastic would do just fine. We lost hope in life. We were carrying so much weight on our shoulders.

My husband started to think about leaving, despite of everyone telling us not to. They did not think of it as a good idea. We all finally decided to agree with him and travel together. My father in law had to sell his shop in Beit-Hanoon to cover the travel expenses but it was still not sufficient. We finally decided to split into two groups and to travel separately in order to keep some money for living. So my mother in law, sister in law, brother in law, my husband and my daughter travelled. My father in law, my son and me stayed. We lived in a rented something-like-a-house in Beit-Hanoon.

In June 2015, my husband and daughter left to Turkey. They arrived safely, and started the journey to Europe through the sea. It was a frightening idea. We were crying all the time because we were so terrified. We saw it on the television but never thought that we would eventually experience it. After a while, they reached Greece. After that, we lost contact with them. I was afraid and desperate until my husband called me and said they were okay in Greece. I was very happy!

My brother in law supported me and I am very grateful for having him. When I received the papers from my husband, he helped me to certify birth certificates, university certificates, our marriage document and all the other papers we needed. It cost me a lot of money that I did not possess. In December, I received all my papers so I could finally apply for a gathering with my husband and daughter in Bremen, Germany. I was happy, but we could not get out of Gaza. The document we had to provide in order to be allowed to leave through Rafah cost a lot of money. My visa then expired in March. I had to apply for

a new one and I got in within a month. Then, I was excited and terrified at the same time because of the Rafah border: I was afraid it would open before I receive the visa.

When they finally opened Rafah, I prepared everything and said goodbye to everyone. We went there at 6AM. They did not allow my father in law to cross the border but let me get inside. It didn't go well: They rejected me from inside the Egyptian side. They said I should go back the next day. I stayed with friends of my father in law. At 5:30AM, we were at the border again. We were taken inside at 9AM and stayed there until 11AM. We thought it was finally over, that we finally made it. We waited for our turn to go back to Gaza until 12:30PM. Suddenly, the bus had to stop and we stayed inside of the bus until 11PM. We had women on the bus, injured men and elderly people. The bus started moving, but stopped again to kick us out. We were left in the middle of a desert in the middle of the night. When we returned home, I was in complete shock so I had to be taken to the hospital. Next day when I woke up, I was thinking that Rafah border is the sea that people are drawn into. I was feeling devastated.

I wrote about my husband about how we cry every day for the people who are pushed to leave their countries desperately to end up facing more death. It is the same in every country. The suffering is the same. Rafah border is just like the sea that people try to go to thinking of it as a journey to safety and freedom. However, I would say that I am fine. I am better than other people who suffer more. At least, I have a son that stands by me.