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‘Whether you are still alive the next day is a matter of luck’

FES Project Manager Usama Antar on his evacuation from Gaza, the current humanitarian situation on the ground and support for Hamas among the population

You were evacuated from Gaza last week and arrived in Germany on Friday. How are you and your family doing?

> We are doing well, considering the circumstances. We are very relieved to be safe now, even if we don’t know what our immediate future will look like. Our daughter is still in Egypt with her husband and is waiting for her visa. Germany had been home to us for twelve years, so we are happy to be back.

Israel has been intervening militarily in the Gaza Strip since the terrorist attacks of 7 October. How did you experience the beginning?

> I woke up to the firing of the first rockets. Then I saw more rockets in the sky. It was immediately clear to me that these were not test missiles intended to land in the sea. I could tell from the force of the rockets that they were not from Islamic Jihad but from Hamas. Over time, you can recognise which type of rocket belongs to which group by the intensity and the sound. We only realised after half an hour, when the reports became more and more frequent, that there was also a major advance into Israeli territory. We then knew very quickly that there was going to be a war. We expected a strong reaction from the Israelis. We also expected that security buildings and Hamas positions would be bombed. However, we never, ever thought that buildings belonging to the civilian population would be attacked on such a massive scale. From the beginning, civilian buildings were targeted much more than in previous wars, to a much greater extent than local Hamas infrastructure. Every day was terrible. That’s why we decided we couldn’t stay in Gaza.

Hundreds of thousands had to leave the north of the Gaza Strip, including you. Now, Israel is also attacking in the south. What is the

situation on the ground for the civilian population?

The people in northern Gaza and Gaza City were asked to travel south. More than half of the entire population of the Gaza Strip, over a million people, lived there before the war. Within a week, 600 000 to 700 000 had fled to the south. However, the capacities there are not sufficient for such a large influx of people. This quickly led to a major emergency situation, for example in terms of water and food. Israel did not allow a single delivery into the Gaza Strip for several weeks. The war came as a complete surprise, so that fuel and food were not in stock for even a week. And then so many more people arrived. In a building with three flats, where a maximum of 15 people would normally live, suddenly 70, 80, sometimes up to 100 people had to be accommodated.

There is not enough tap water to meet the needs of the internally displaced people. There is also no electricity, which is needed to fill the water tanks on the roofs. This is now only possible to a very limited extent with small gas or diesel generators. If water is available at all, it is incredibly expensive. At present, 3 000 litres cost 400 shekels, which is €100. Normally, you only pay six shekels, or €1.50, for 1 000 litres.

Things are getting more difficult every day. The relief supplies that are allowed to be imported do not even cover 10 per cent of the people's needs. Crime has risen accordingly. Houses are being broken into in order to steal gas containers and non-perishable foodstuffs such as corn or beans. People are eating whatever is available, even if it is dry bread. We are currently experiencing the worst phase; people can no longer bear it. Whether you are still alive the next day or not is a matter of luck. So far, over 18 000 people have been reported dead. Over 6 000 are missing and lying under the rubble, and over 50 000 have been injured. Many of the injured will die because there is no medical capacity to treat them.

What do the people in Gaza specifically expect from the international community?

People expect only one thing: stop the war! In the eyes of many observers and experts, what Israel is doing is a war crime. According to the people in Gaza, countries such as the US, Germany, France and the UK have given Israel a free hand from the outset. The US only recently vetoed a ceasefire in the UN Security Council. Thus, many people see the US and some European countries as complicit in the killing of civilians and innocent people. The war must be ended immediately. Everything else can be solved later. As far as Hamas is concerned, the people in Gaza must remove it from power. Hamas

cannot be defeated militarily, it represents an ideology that must be fought politically.

How much support does Hamas have among the population in Gaza?

Just before the war, there was still considerable support for Hamas. Not out of love for the organisation but simply because the political course of Mahmoud Abbas' PLO, of trying to achieve something through negotiations, had achieved nothing. Every day, Palestinians experience Israeli aggression, terrorist attacks carried out by settlers against villages in the West Bank and daily provocations at the Al-Aqsa mosque. That is why there was such strong support in society for Hamas in the first place — with greater support, incidentally, in the West Bank, not in the Gaza Strip. Surveys show: Hamas has more support in the West Bank than in the Gaza Strip because people in Gaza see Hamas as the ruler and not as the opposition, as in the West Bank. Because of Hamas, there was a hard blockade in the Gaza Strip and hardly any freedom of movement. It was therefore seen as a disruptive factor that shouldn't remain in power.

Does the Palestinian population in Gaza feel sufficiently supported by its Arab neighbours?

No. All sides – the Arab states, Europe and the US – have failed the people in the Gaza Strip. We must also not forget that it was Benjamin Netanyahu, who, for years, was under the insane assumption that he could stabilise Hamas to divide the Palestinians and prevent a two-state solution. Hamas, on the other hand, is playing with people's lives in order to stay in power. The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are powerless. We are all paying the price for Hamas' terror with our deaths from Israeli attacks, and no one is helping us. This is a great lesson for the people there — they have to take their fate into their own hands. Everyone else is just watching.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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