

Gaza: “The first victim of the war is truth”

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[Muhannad Hadi](#), a Jordanian national, served as the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis since 2020, after a career with the World Food Programme (WFP). Since 12 April 2024, he is the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator for Palestine, and the Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process.

He was in Brussels on 10 September to meet with European Union officials and hold a press briefing at UNRIC's offices. He gave a very moving testimony on the current situation in Gaza, and the hardships faced by the population and humanitarian workers.

“What happened on the 7th of October is unacceptable”, he stated. “The suffering of the hostages for almost a year is unacceptable. The hostages must be released. When we talk about human suffering, we talk about the suffering of all humans. No one should suffer because of war. No one should suffer because of the wrong politics. We as humanitarians are dealing with the results of failed politics.”

“Like a Hollywood horror movie”

At the end of August, during his last trip to Gaza, Mr. Hadi was in Deir el-Balah and Khan Younis with the World Health Organization (WHO) to prepare for the polio vaccination campaign. “When I first crossed the border, **it was like a Hollywood horror movie, from the destruction I have seen. It's like you're watching a movie; sometimes you lose your sense of reality, and it's hard to process.** Then once you meet the people and talk to women and children, you go into a different mode of operation. But honestly, it's painful.”

Mr. Hadi recalled a man he met in Gaza, who described the situation in these terms: “You have to look at us **as 2 million zombies living on our own.** The community is broken, the family is broken, society is broken. All ties are broken”.

The number of orphans surviving on their own is growing. “**There are 17,000 to 18,000 unaccompanied children, boys and girls running around the streets of Gaza** without any protection and no family members. **Can you imagine the exploitation, the gender-based violence? Can you imagine what they go through? It's horrible.**”

“Women in Gaza shave their heads because of lice and lack of shampoo”

Clean water, a simple coffee or breakfast: these ordinary things have become “dreams” for the Palestinian population of Gaza after 11 months of war, said Muhannad Hadi.

“There are things that we can't think of. The sense of security. The fact that you're sitting in this room without being worried about a bomb or an explosion next to you. The fact that you know where your relatives are. The fact that you know where your children and family members are. That's not available in Gaza, that is an issue for the population in Gaza”.

To have access to a proper bathroom without being subjected to harassment, exploitation or gender-based violence is also a big issue for [women and girls](#), underlined Muhannad Hadi. “**Women in Gaza shave their heads because of lice, lack of hygiene, lack of shampoo, lack of soap.**”

Children collecting firewood

Mr. Hadi also recounted the sense of despair and lack of purpose the population living under precarious shelters face in their everyday life in Gaza, “not knowing if they will be alive at the end of the day”. He noticed that “the full-time job of kids is just to go and collect firewood so their mother can cook for them. There is no cooking gas, there's no electricity. Children collect wood, cartons and sometimes plastic”.

“[Children](#) try to keep themselves busy. So you'll be driving in the streets of Khan Younis with all the destruction. And then you will see a little girl on the side of the road with a small table and trying to sell things like a broken door knob, a cup, anything. I can't figure out who would buy this, because there is, by the way, no currency in Gaza. The paper money is gone.”

The challenges faced by humanitarian aid

Mr. Hadi came to Brussels to “explain the agony of the people and to make sure we continue getting the political and [financial support](#)” from the EU member states, as well as “enabling support for us to do our job”.

“When you're in the business of saving lives, you don't leave a stone unturned (...). **It's not about the people we serve, it's about the people we are unable to serve.** When the UN tries to implement the agenda and the Charter of the United Nations, they need the support of Brussels and the EU member States.

We can't afford to give up. **We're the hope of the people in Gaza. And we said it time and again, and the Secretary General of the United Nations has said that we will stay, and we will deliver.** (...) My worry is always that Gaza [would fall from the humanitarian radar](#), from the international radar and the primetime news. And it shouldn't as long as there is war, suffering and killing.”

Limited access for humanitarian aid

“Access for humanitarian aid is a word that is sometimes misused or, more often, misunderstood”, explained Mr. Hadi. “Access is more than physical access as people think. In our case, access starts with unconditional visas to the humanitarians, which we don't have. Physical access on the roads that we don't have, because not all crossings are open.

Access has to do with accountability, which we don't have. In order for us to meet the needs of the people, we need to do assessments, but we don't have the space to do that. The situation in Gaza does not allow us to do the pre-monitoring to monitor the distribution and then to do a post-monitoring. This is another issue about access that is important. Access is a long journey for us, but the end result of

access is basically to provide timely assistance and needed assistance to those people who need it, in the manner that they see is fit for them.

We especially need to talk to the women and the children to see what they need and provide them with that aid. Right now, we don't have the privilege to do that.

So basically, we're giving them what we can: wheat flour, boxes, cartons of canned food and other food items, but **we don't have the freedom to decide what we bring.**"

Safety issues for staff members

"Access also has to do with duty of care. Staff members need to be protected. We need communication equipment, but we don't have everything we want. We need armoured vehicles, personal protection equipment; the list goes on and on.

We are held at checkpoints, sometimes for 6, 7, 8 hours. It is normal for a staff member to sit in an armoured vehicle waiting for agreed green light to proceed to northern Gaza or any part of Gaza for seven or eight hours. Trust me, sitting in an armoured vehicle waiting for a green light to proceed in a war zone is nerve-wracking. And while you're sitting, if you receive a couple of bullets on the vehicle, that takes it to another level of anxiety.

The risks [that the NGOs and the United Nations](#) are taking in Gaza to save lives is unprecedented. Nowhere in the world have we accepted this level of risk for our staff.

On 27 August, one [of the WFP vehicles that had received clearance to pass was hit by 10 bullets](#) once it started moving. Five on the driver's side, and the rest on the passengers' side. Since the beginning of the conflict, [seven colleagues](#) from the NGO World Central Kitchen, 1 [colleague from UN Security \(UNDSS\)](#) and [214 UNRWA staff](#) lost their lives.

You can't imagine the devotion of the UN staff. I have to protect the UN staff from themselves sometimes for their own safety and security. I tell them: "No, you need to do this and this and that before you go. You cannot travel tomorrow to Khan Younis, because there are military operations, you need to take care of yourself".

I have to sometimes force people to take leave because they are so emotionally attached to their task. They are the ones who do the job, by the way, more than me. They are the ones who are risking their lives, working 24/7."

"The first victim in the war is the truth"

When asked from which belligerent the bullets come from, Mr. Hadi replied that the "first victim in the war is the truth. You get more than one story to the same incident, but a lot of the times the incidents come from the Israeli side, a problem of deconfliction".

All hope is not lost, as the recent [polio vaccination campaign](#) has shown. "There has been some localized ceasefire to allow us to do our jobs. So when parties of the conflict agree on something, they do it."

Escalation risks

On the West Bank, Mr. Hadi compared the situation with "a more than half a century old pressure cooker. **When it explodes, the situation of the West Bank could be worse than Gaza.**"

The situation in Gaza and the West Bank also has an impact on the entire region. "What we're seeing at the Israeli Lebanese borders could explode at any second. This region is so interlinked that what happens in Gaza would have an impact in Tehran, we all saw that. I hope that sooner than later we will have a ceasefire, and that people in the Middle East will realize that the way to exist and ensure their safety is through peace".

Commenting on the efforts to reach a ceasefire, Mr. Hadi stated : "The Americans are playing a good part, the Qataris, the Egyptians, other people in the region, and definitely a lot of European countries. What we would like to see is for the politicians to make sure that they join forces to put enough pressure on the warring parties to reach this ceasefire."

Humanity at stake

Mr. Hadi is pleading for "the **people in the region to understand one thing: [humanity](#) is above all religions. Unless we all realize this, people will continue finding a reason to fight in the Middle East.** War yields extremism on all sides."

"In order for us to know where we meet, we need to meet as humans on the values that we have as human beings. And humanity must be put before, above all religions for us to be able to live with each other in that region. Muslims, Christians and Jews".