**Fire and forget**

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Earlier this month, the Israeli occupying forces withdrew from my hometown of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, presumably to prepare for an attack on nearby Rafah. Now, those civilians who won the lottery of life and death are on a trail of broken dreams back to Khan Younis. It is a pilgrimage – hajj in Arabic – but one of grief not of faith.

Danger still lurks in every corner, but my cousin Ikram and her husband, Awad, felt compelled to join the hajj and venture to the al-Qarara area in the north of Khan Younis to check on Awad’s brother Mohammad and his family.

What they discovered was beyond comprehension. Mohammed, his wife, Manar, and their seven children – Khaled, Qusai, Hadya, Said, Ahmad, Ibrahim and Abed, all under the age of 15 – had been brutally killed by an Israeli air strike on their home. Their house lay in ruins and their bodies lay decomposing, stray dogs and cats trying to gnaw at them. Ikram and Awad dug shallow graves and buried them.

This was the second time Ikram and Awad had to bury nephews and nieces. In October, they had to take care of the bodies of Tasneem, Yasmeen, Mahmoud and Ilyas, the children of Awad’s other brother, Ibrahim, who were killed along with their mother, Nancy, by an Israeli bombardment.

This time, the pain proved too unbearable. Upon her return home, Ikram, overcome by grief, suffered a sudden loss of vision. The cause of this tragic affliction remains unknown, leaving us all bewildered and devastated.

Meanwhile, in the west of Khan Younis, which now resembles a ghost town, some of my husband’s family embarked on a similar journey of anguish. Their destination: the ruins of their homes, not far from what remains of al-Amal Hospital.

The entire block, including the three multi-storey buildings where my brothers-in-law and more than 70 other people used to live, was destroyed. The young men of the family took pictures, videos and salvaged what little remained of their former lives. Then they made the journey back to al-Mawasi, once a vibrant hub of life on the beach of Khan Younis, now transformed into a tent camp, a wasteland of desperation, where they have been displaced for the past four months.

Upon returning to their tents, they shared the pictures and clips of the ruins of their homes with their parents and siblings. For my sister-in-law Nima, the news and images of her home proved too much to bear. She kept weeping while looking at the images. The next morning, Nima was found unresponsive.

Her family rushed her to the nearest hospital, al-Amal, which ironically translates to “hope”, only to find no hospital and no hope. One of the heroic doctors who remained there declared her dead. She simply could not withstand the anguish. Overwhelmed by grief and despair, Nima had suffered a stroke.

Nima’s husband, Suleiman, and his children struggled to complete the funeral arrangements, to wash the body in the correct way, to find material for a coffin and to reach out to Rabab, Nima’s eldest daughter, who had sought refuge in Rafah.

As they cried and mourned, Israeli bombs continued to fall on residential areas in Rafah, Nuseirat refugee camp, Deir al-Balah, Maghazi refugee camp and Beit Hanoon, resulting in hundreds of casualties. In Rafah’s Yibna refugee camp, a bomb killed members of the Abu Al Hanoud family – Iman; her mother, Ibtisam; her husband, Mohammed; and their four young children: Taleen, Alma, Lana and Karam.

During this heavy bombardment, Suleiman made the decision not to inform Rabab, fearing for her and her children’s safety. They buried Nima without her. The choice was devastating, but the risks of travelling to Rafah and back were too high. The drone strikes, shelling or ship bombardments were relentless.

On the day they buried Nima, the Israeli army bombarded the market at Maghazi camp, killing 11 people, many of them women and children.

This was not the first time that immense pain had resulted in such an untimely death in the family. In 1967, Suleiman’s father, Abdullah, suffered a stroke when the harsh reality of the Israeli military occupation dawned.

Having lost his home in the Nakba of 1948, the terror that the Israeli army unleashed onto the Palestinian population of Gaza in 1967 came as another shock. But ultimately, what proved too much to bear was Israeli soldiers kidnapping his son, Suleiman, who was a 16-year-old child at that time.

Knowing nothing about Suleiman’s fate and unable to accept the thought of losing him, Abdullah succumbed to grief, and a stroke ravaged his body, leaving him paralysed. He endured the misery of life in Khan Younis camp for seven years before passing away the week after Suleiman’s return to Gaza.

Grateful that his wife, Nima, did not suffer the same prolonged pain as his father, Suleiman thanked Allah and asked his children to recite Surah al-Fatiha for her.

Nima is just one of the more than 10,000 Palestinian women who have died so far in this war. She was an excellent host and a fantastic cook who dreamed one day of making the pilgrimage to Mecca, meticulously saving every spare shekel for the trip.

Nima’s death extinguished not only her dreams but also the warmth and generosity that defined her essence, the Palestinian essence. She leaves behind a void filled only with heartache and loss.

Like my children, I started to wonder who will be there and what will be there when we visit Gaza next?

The missiles from an Israeli-made Hermes drone can pierce Gaza’s unshielded airspace and destroy lives in seconds. The so-called “fire and forget” missiles can hit targets at a distance of more than 2.5km (1.5 miles) in the sky, so when they are fired, no one on the ground knows they are coming. Civilians going about their business are killed instantly because there is no one and nothing to protect them.

Not one Jordanian, British, French or American warplane was deployed in defence of the 50 women killed every day for the past 200 days by Israel. But they all scrambled to protect Israel from Iranian drones that took eight hours to reach its territory, many did not even make it that far. The only slower method of delivery of the Iranian strikes would have been to transport the weapons by camels through the desert.

But now the world has shifted its focus to Iran. Israel has been made into the victim again. No one speaks about the right to self-defence of Palestinian civilians living through genocide and crimes against humanity.

“Fire and forget” in Gaza appears to be a global policy.

Excerpted: ‘‘Fire and forget’ in Gaza’. Courtesy: Aljazeera.com