**Zone of horror**

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Al-Mawasi used to be a rare beauty spot on the otherwise overcrowded coast of the Gaza Strip. Stretching for about 12km (7.5 miles) between Khan Younis and Rafah, it was one of the most magnificent beach areas, with rolling golden sand dunes. Its beautiful landscape, breathtaking sunsets and a calming sea breeze made it a popular spot for families.

But al-Mawasi, the serene beach spot, is no more. Israel’s genocide has transformed it from an area of recreation to an area of endless horror.

In late October, as Israeli planes rained bombs and missiles all across the Gaza Strip, the Israeli occupation forces (IOF) designated al-Mawasi as “a safe area” where Palestinian civilians fleeing Israeli aggression could supposedly find safety. Israeli commanders would later claim that they considered it a “permanent safe zone”.

Although there was hardly any infrastructure in al-Mawasi and humanitarian agencies warned that it was not suitable for a displacement camp, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Gaza City, Khan Younis, my hometown, and later Rafah streamed to it, having no other place to go. Many set up improvised shelters with sheets of plastic or blankets, barely able to protect the dignity of their families. Life in the camp was miserable, with starvation, disease and thirst plaguing its inhabitants.

Soon it became clear that the “permanent safe zone” was not safe at all.

In February, the IOF attacked al-Mawasi, including a safe house for Doctors Without Borders (MSF) staff and family members, killing two and injuring six, including women and children.

In late May, the IOF bombed the area again, killing at least 21 Palestinians, including 12 women. The attack came just days after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel to stop its genocidal offensive on Rafah.

On June 21, the IOF attacked al-Mawasi again, killing at least 25 Palestinians and wounding 50. These are just a few examples of the IOF’s constant attacks, to which Western media has paid little attention and on which it has offered little detail beyond the Israeli denials.

On June 27, I woke up to a message from a doctor in my family. My heart sank as I read his description of yet another attack on al-Mawasi. This time, the IOF had targeted al-Shakush and the regional park areas.

“These areas are full of displaced people, encampments of tents, pergola tents, and temporary shelters. People are living on top of each other,” read my family member’s message. “The tanks entered, without warning, running over a few tents and opening fire indiscriminately. I saw people fleeing in terror. Some managed to grab a few of their personal belongings, while others left with nothing – running for their lives.

“Many lay flat on the ground away from the gunfire. Others took refuge in any available shelter, while some sat in the street, waiting for what seemed like an endless nightmare to end.

“Today, I went to the hospital and saw a large number of injured people from that area,” the message continued. “This relentless process of chasing, persecuting, and hunting people from place to place, akin to monsters hunting prey, is beyond my comprehension.” The following day, I received the testimony of another doctor, who also had witnessed what happened in al-Shakush.

He was returning from his shift at a hospital when the Israeli tanks began to roll in from different directions, indiscriminately shooting without any warning. He ran to rescue his family, managing to get them out. Fire started, transforming the scene into a living hell.

In the panic, people left all of their belongings and some even their children, for whom they rushed back, as they fled in terror. On the way and while running, the doctor helped people load the dead and wounded onto donkey carts, but he could not offer any medical help. Like others, he ran for his life and the lives of his family. As soon as they reached what they thought was a safe place, his wife fainted from the terror.

The United Nations reported “scores of casualties” and at least 5,000 people displaced by Israel’s new assault on al-Mawasi. Medical sources spoke of at least 11 killed and 40 injured.

A few days after the al-Mawasi massacre, on July 1, the scene of devastation and horror shifted to the eastern part of Khan Younis, what used to be one of the most picturesque areas in the Gaza Strip. The towns of Abasan, Bani Suhaila, Khuza’a, and the al-Fukhari neighbourhood, which houses the European Hospital, were ordered to evacuate.

The IOF orders came in the evening, leaving no time for residents to pack their belongings. Amid the ruins of their destroyed homes and makeshift tents, people faced such immense distress that a relative described the experience as if living through “the day of judgement”.

According to the UN, the IOF forced a quarter of a million people to leave Khan Younis. The European Hospital also had to evacuate, with many of its patients transferred by their families on donkey carts to the devastated Nasser Hospital, which was also the scene of a recent massacre.

In the exodus, reminiscent of previous mass displacements of the past nine months, people flocked to al-Mawasi, which was still reeling from the Israeli attacks. Many were actually returning to al-Mawasi, having left weeks earlier for the ruins of their homes in Khan Younis to make space for the stream of people fleeing from Rafah. The return to Khan Younis was prompted by the IOF’s own claims that it was safe for fleeing Rafah residents to head there, as well as to al-Mawasi.

As with every displacement, people endured the torment of searching for family members – dead or alive – while looking for new temporary shelter and securing water, food, toilets, and other necessities.

My siblings, and their families, also displaced in al-Mawasi since December, described to me the fear-stricken faces of children, women, and men, the sick and the elderly, wandering the streets without direction. Today, nine out of every 10 Palestinians in Gaza have been forced to flee their homes in search of safety, moving from place to place, tent to tent, only to be attacked and forced to flee again.

Excerpted: ‘Gaza’s ‘safe zone’ of horror’. Courtesy: Aljazeera.com