



A letter from... Gaza

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Before the war that began on Oct 7, 2023, we had in Gaza seven psychiatrists, three who had trained in Jordan, two in Qatar, one in Saudi Arabia, and one in Europe, most of whom had returned home to Gaza in the past 4 years. In August, 2021, we started a national programme for training in psychiatry (Board) under the umbrella of the Palestinian Medical Council. The programme received the recognition of the Arab Medical Council. Before the war, there were seven doctors in the programme, as well as dozens of mental health and social workers and psychiatric nurses. Gaza had a strategic stock of pharmaceutical drugs, which was sufficient to last for at least a full year.

During the first days of the war, in October, 2023, the Israeli forces separated Gaza into two parts, north and south of the Gaza Valley, and issued instructions for the departure of the population to the south. Suddenly, I became the only psychiatrist remaining north of the Gaza Valley, with a small number of mental health staff.

The Israeli forces attacked Gaza by air: we could move between the attacks, but this was risky. The only psychiatric hospital, which is located north of the Gaza Valley, was completely destroyed. All primary care centres that provided mental health services in the north were attacked and are now inoperable. One of the main drug warehouses was burned, destroying vital supplies.

Israeli ground forces (soldiers and tanks) then invaded the area in which I live (Jabalia) in December, 2023, and it became too dangerous to move. I stopped working completely for a month and lost my connection with the world. In January, 2024, after the withdrawal of the Israeli ground forces, I was able to provide some drugs from under the rubble of the destroyed hospital warehouse, which was enough to supply the north for a period of less than 3 months. South of the Gaza Valley, my psychiatry colleagues are continuing to work and trying to help patients, but there is a huge shortage of medications and an influx of refugees from the north of Gaza.

Gaza had a strong community mental health programme but the main building in Gaza city has been destroyed and three female psychologists were killed in three separate attacks. Some of the team have left Gaza. A small team (only two psychiatrists and a few psychologists) is working in two clinics in the south with huge shortage of medications.

The biggest of problems now in Gaza, especially in the north, are famine and lack of security. Police are unable to operate because they are immediately targeted by spy drones and aircraft in their attempt to establish order. Armed gangs that cooperate in some way with the Israeli forces control the distribution and prices of food and pharmaceutical commodities that enter Gaza as aid, including what is dropped by parachutes. Some foodstuffs, such as flour, have doubled in price many times, which exacerbates the crisis of the population here.

Therefore, I think that any attempt to send food or pharmaceutical relief materials in such circumstances and without the end of the war will, in the end, be to the benefit of these gangs. I hope that efforts and pressures will unite to end the war so that the Israeli forces will cease their aerial attacks and the police can re-establish order.

Mental health services are in dire need of a delegation of distinguished advisers after the end of the war (which I hope will be soon) to help us assess the situation and improve services to those in need.

Abdullah Al-Jamal

This letter was originally sent to Dr Mamoun Mobayed, a consultant psychiatrist in Northern Ireland, UK, who is a member of an online Arab psychiatrists' group, who brought it to the attention of *The Lancet Psychiatry*. Dr Al-Jamal Director of the psychiatric hospital in Gaza, wrote: "I apologize for not participating with your online discussion because of the difficulty of communication, which is only done through Israeli SIM cards that work in specific places, high and at certain times, so I can hardly read messages at intervals, and they are so weak that I cannot download pdf files."