

# The Tragedy of Israel's 135,000 Displaced Citizens

**Israelis from the north and south find themselves displaced within their own country, as a result of the Gaza war, without any clear resolution in sight.**

**Haaretz spoke to experts on displacement to understand the challenges it creates**

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It's been nearly five months since October 7 and many Israelis have established some kind of new routine. Yes, the economic situation is deteriorating, thoughts about the hostages are heartrending, the bereavement circles are widening and anxiety is part of any reflection about the future.

Yet children are attending school, sirens no longer wail at all hours of the day, movie theaters and stores are open.

But for some, such a routine is a distant dream. They were forced to evacuate their homes in the Gaza border communities or along the northern border in October – and ever since then have been drifting without knowing when and how they will return.

The media and the Israeli public called them "evacuees." But by international standards, anyone who has left his home during a

war and remains in his country is defined as a "displaced person." According to the most recent figures of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, in Israel there are 135,000 people who match that definition.

According to Avi Dabush, a resident of Kibbutz Nirim on the Gaza border and executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights, most Israelis don't really understand the situation of the displaced. Last week his family moved to a temporary home in Be'er Sheva, their third move since that Black Saturday. "But people are surprised and ask me, 'Really? You're not home yet?'" he says.

"There's a real disconnect among the public regarding our situation, and the fact that the existing solutions are very partial and most are not initiated by the government. My son, a high school senior, returned to school only last week. A second son still hasn't returned to a normal framework, and we belong to a strong kibbutz community. In Sderot, where I lived for years, the catastrophe is far greater."

One of the reasons for the disconnect, says Dabush, is the treatment of the problem as specific to certain people. "There's an understandable but problematic desire to make the political personal. People hear a story about some family or other and our hearts go out to them. But it's a systemic and political problem, which begins with the fact that people don't understand that the entire fabric of life – communal, family, educational, medical – everything is broken and destroyed and everyone is working to repair it in his own way."

Haaretz spoke to several experts from Israel and abroad about the phenomenon of displacement and its effects, the challenges

it creates and the failures in handling it, and heard from them about the unique situation of the displaced Israelis.

Unlike refugees, who were defined in international law in 1951, the phenomenon of displacement was recognized only in recent decades. The official definition of the term was coined in 1998, in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which was submitted to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. It determined that internally displaced people are those who were forced to leave their homes, or had to do so as a result of the effects of armed conflict, overall violent situations, violation of human rights, natural and man-made disasters – without crossing the border of their country; in other words, they remained in their country.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, at the end of 2022 there were 71 million displaced persons, most of them in Africa – 61 million due to violent conflicts and 9 million due to natural disasters. For the sake of comparison, in 2013 there were about 33 million displaced persons in the world.

In the local context, in the past the term related to Palestinian residents and to Bedouin from the unrecognized villages, at least some of whom fit the international definitions, but aren't included in the figures of the Central Bureau of Statistics. During the Second Lebanon War, tens of thousands of Israeli civilians left their homes in the north for a period of up to a month, but did so on their own initiative and without government support. The situation since October 7 is the first time that Israeli civilians have been displaced on such a scale for such a long period of time.

### **Unprecedented situation**

The case of displaced people in Israel is unusual compared to the rest of the world, says Prof. Dorit Nitzan, head of the master's degree program in the Department of Emergency and Disaster Management at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev's School of Public Health. Nitzan, who headed the emergency headquarters of the World Health Organization in Ukraine in 2022, notes that "countries with a population displaced for a long period of time due to a military conflict are usually on a low socioeconomic level. In developed countries there are no such examples, it's unprecedented," she says. "You can see it in developing countries but there many of the displaced persons will leave and become refugees, as happened in Ukraine."

The situation in Israel is more like that of the displaced after natural disasters in developed countries. Sociologist Prof. Lori Peek, director of the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, studied displaced people for about 10 years after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. "One of the things we saw is that in many cases, the displacement isn't a one-time event but a series of displacements," she says. "One of the families we studied moved to 12 different places in seven years. Many remained displaced for years, and many thousands never returned to Louisiana."

Roberta Cohen, the American human rights expert who was involved in writing the UN position paper, learned about the subject when she was living in Ethiopia in the 1980s. During that period of civil war, one to two million people were displaced from their homes. "I thought that there was a defect in the international system, which takes care of refugees but doesn't recognize those who are displaced inside their country," she says.

Cohen notes that displacement due to a wartime conflict often continues for a long time. "It's not a matter of 'Take a hotel room for a few weeks.' People remain displaced for a long time and are forced to deal with problems affecting the children's education and their livelihood," she says, emphasizing that the difficulties don't end at the conclusion of the emergency situation. "Often people can't or don't want to return, and need help during this stage too."

The situation in Israel differs from displacement after a one-time event such as a natural disaster," says Dr. Rony Berger, of Ben-Gurion University's Emergency Medicine Department and Tel Aviv University's Department of Social Work and Emergency Medicine. Berger, who has participated in delegations providing initial psychological support in many disaster areas, says "The social support in Israel really is more significant than in Japan or the United States, for example. But as opposed to natural disasters, in the case of Israel the event isn't over, but is part of an ongoing situation that seems insoluble. Along with the loss of confidence in the government, there is clear damage here to the sense of security and a fear that the issue won't be solved. That's why displaced Israelis have a greater tendency towards depression," says Berger, who also teaches in TAU's Stress, Crisis and Trauma program.

One of the main reasons for the psychological damage to the displaced is the loss of one's home and possessions, adds Dr. Stav Shapira of Ben-Gurion University's School of Public Health. "Even in natural disasters, there's a big difference between someone whose home was destroyed and someone who was evacuated without damage to his home," she explains. "If the house is standing, that provides some foundation, a sense of

stability and the knowledge that in future there's a place to return to. But for someone who has lost his home and possessions, the danger of psychological damage is far greater. They're totally uprooted."

Shapira notes that displacement could also cause an exacerbation of physical illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure. The severance is sometimes from an entire system – medical clinic, doctor, pharmacy. That makes it difficult to maintain a regular regimen of medications and tests, and then there's a danger of deterioration and loss of equilibrium. That's one of the most common things one sees all over the world."

Peek says that the worst effects on the mental health of those harmed in natural disasters are usually in evidence in the months following the event. But the blow to the mental health of those displaced by Katrina sometimes lasted for two or three years. "After the destructive storm, the displacement was a second disaster, with less immediate and more lasting effects," she says.

### **Children hard hit**

One of the reasons for the complexity of the displacement experience is the large number of parallel needs, says Peek. "The displaced need a place to live, transportation, work, schools for their children and an opportunity to rebuild a supportive network, and all that at a time when they're processing trauma. But the solution they obtain doesn't always arrive uniformly. Someone can find housing, but still have no work. That's why one of the things we learned is that the handling of displaced people must be comprehensive and include combined attention

to their mental and physical health and their social situation."

Teenagers and children are particularly hard hit by displacement. "We know from innumerable studies what protects children," says Prof. Asher Ben-Arieh, dean of the School of Social Work and Social Welfare at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and director of the Haruv Institute for the study of child abuse and neglect. "Children need routine, familiar surroundings, friends, privacy and to be seen. All these are proven sources of resilience, and all these things are missing when they're evacuated."

In recent months Ben-Arieh and his team have examined focus groups of children from the Gaza border communities, and he says that the first problem raised by the children is that nobody listens to them – whether it's parents, who are under stress themselves, or the new educational staff that doesn't know them. "There are children who haven't left the hotel room for 100 days because they're in trauma, and nobody is checking what's happening with them," he says.

Displacement turns the children into an at-risk and especially vulnerable population, warns Ben-Arieh. This comes up clearly also from testimony about the evacuees' hotels that was presented in the Knesset early this month, and among other things described sexual assaults against minors, both girls and boys. "What's happening there is Sodom and Gomorrah," says Ben-Arieh. "There are reports of pedophiles who come to stalk children, about cars that come to collect young girls and an hour later they return with a 'gift' – but nobody is monitoring the issue. All the systems that are supposed to protect the children aren't functioning."

Unsurprisingly, displaced people from low socioeconomic classes suffer more. "After Katrina the instability among those who were on the margins of society to begin with was huge," says Pick. "People with few financial resources were often displaced further away and remained displaced longer than others. In other words, anyone whose living circumstances were less stable before the hurricane found himself in a shakier situation than others after it."

This is also true of the displaced in Israel, where cooperative communities with strong internal systems of management and support, like the residents of the kibbutzim, are in better shape than those who were evacuated alone from Sderot or Kiryat Shmona. And people of means can deal with the problems of displacement more successfully, for example by paying for private psychological help.

However, compared to displaced persons in most other countries, the situation of the displaced Israelis is relatively good, one reason being that Israel is a developed country, with public health and welfare services. And thanks to the immediate mobilization of civic society, Nitzan says that "nowhere in the world have we seen a situation in which the displaced received health and welfare services so fast as they did here. What's needed now is planning, together with the displaced, of the coming steps, and of course, the construction of a network of local security in each community, so that they can return to their homes."

### **Gaza's displaced**

In Gaza the situation is very different and particularly devastating not only due to the massive numbers. Nitzan says



that the situation of the displaced Gazans is more similar to what she saw in Ethiopia, where she spent time as part of the World Health Organization emergency team. "The displaced are living in difficult conditions, without access to drinking water or food, without a protected shelter or living space, and without being able to maintain hygiene in the absence of electricity, water and sewage infrastructure," she says. "The result, which we saw in Africa too, is malnutrition, harm to mental health, injuries, epidemics and illness from chronic and contagious diseases."

But Nitzan points to an important difference. "The displaced in Gaza are in a closed area without being able to leave, and that's almost unprecedented. There are other places in the world where the conditions are very bad, but there are almost no cases where the displaced person cannot leave the country and become a refugee. People in such a situation must be rehabilitated as quickly as possible. Already now we have to plan the rehabilitation of the homes and sources of livelihood in Gaza, and to let the people participate in the decision making. That's what we know from the study of such instances in the world."

In the meantime, all displaced persons are eligible for humanitarian assistance, notes Cohen. According to the UN guiding principles, when there is nobody to take care of the displaced in their country, the international community becomes responsible to help, she says. "It's impossible to deny medical assistance or food to starving people, not even with the claim that the assistance won't reach those for whom it's designated," she continues. "The assistance must enter the Strip, with monitoring by international agencies that ascertain that it's reaching its destination. That's a matter of principle: It

is forbidden to deny food and medicine to civilians who are not directly involved in combat."

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