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## **In Gaza, Long-Suffering Palestinians Are Directing Their Anger at Hamas**

More people who are tired of the hunger, sleeplessness and ever-present threat of Israeli airstrikes are demonstrating against the militant group



Crowds of people have chanted 'Hamas out' with little repercussions from the weakened militant group. PHOTO: AHMAD SALEM/BLOOMBERG NEWS

### Full text :

As the Gaza war nears its 20th month, pressure is building on Hamas from different fronts—not least of which is the growing anger among ordinary Palestinians who have had enough of the hunger, sleeplessness and the ever-present [threat of airstrikes](#) from Israeli forces.

Israel says it has started to expand its military offensive in the Gaza Strip, potentially displacing more Palestinians and [occupying territory](#). The specter of starvation is growing from two months of Israel [blocking humanitarian aid](#) into the besieged enclave after a fragile cease-fire broke down. A U.S.-backed aid distribution is being planned, which Israel says would prevent Hamas profiting from seizures of food and fuel deliveries to civilians. An Israeli airstrike this week [targeted Mohammed Sinwar](#), Hamas' top leader in Gaza, which if proven to be successful would be a big blow to the militant group.

But few expected Hamas to be wrestling with the most visible internal challenge to its authority since it seized control of the Gaza strip in 2007: the people it professes to represent.

Hamas has ruled harshly, often jailing and killing its critics or threatening them into silence. Yet a simmering, continuing resistance has added to the pressure on Hamas, especially in northern Gaza, where the town of Beit Lahiya is the epicenter of [anti-Hamas protests that began in March](#).

After the demonstrations erupted in the town, they quickly spread to other parts of the Gaza Strip. Chanting "Hamas out," large crowds, often at great risk, have demanded an end to the war and Hamas to cede control of the enclave. Since then, smaller but boisterous protests have taken place, where fear of Hamas has seemingly evaporated.

On social media, influencers—many of them Palestinians based in Egypt, Turkey, Europe and the U.S.—are urging Gazans to rise against Hamas and amplifying the protests globally. They are filling a void created by militant threats against journalists in Gaza, forcing many reporters to self censor their coverage of opposition to Hamas, said the Committee to Protect Journalists on Thursday.

"I consider myself the voice of the protests," said Hamza al-Masri, a Turkey-based influencer, who has more than 1.2 million followers across several platforms. "Hamas has terrorized people in Gaza."

What is unfolding in Beit Lahiya and on social media opens a window into how Hamas misinterpreted the shift in sentiments of many Gazans. It also represents an unprecedented collective defiance against the militants.

“The general feeling among Palestinians all over Gaza, not just Beit Lahiya, is that Hamas doesn’t care about their lives or suffering,” said Mkhaimar Abusada, a professor of political science at Al-Azhar University—Gaza who now lives in Cairo. “The general feeling is that Hamas cares more about its own survival.”

In Beit Lahiya, “they’ve lost a lot of their wealth, they’ve lost a lot of their cultivated land in this Israeli assault,” he added. “That’s why they are speaking out loudly against Hamas.”

A Hamas spokesman didn’t respond to a request for comment about the discontent.

In recent days, the pressure on Hamas has intensified. Early on Friday, Israeli airstrikes targeted Beit Lahiya and nearby Jabaliya camp, killing scores, according to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry. The Israeli military didn’t respond to a request for comment on the Beit Lahiya strikes. In a statement, the military said its air force had struck what it called over 150 targets throughout the strip, including terrorist cells and military structures. Later, the Israeli military said that it had been conducting strikes and mobilizing troops over the past day as part of an expanded offensive to take control in parts of Gaza.

The strikes are generating more discontent.

“People are very angry,” said Ahmed al Masri, 26, an activist in Beit Lahiya who says he has no connection to Hamas, after the airstrikes. “There is no safe place. What’s happening to us at the hands of both the occupation and Hamas is absurd and insane. This rage is against Israel and Hamas.”

Hours before the airstrikes, Hamas released a statement claiming they had released their last living American hostage seized in the Oct. 7, 2023 attacks, Edan Alexander, as a goodwill gesture to President Trump. A Hamas official said the understanding was that his release would result in the entry of humanitarian aid in Gaza and negotiations for a permanent cease-fire.

A U.S. official said Alexander was released by Hamas without any conditions.

While the protests have subsided in most areas as Gazans wrestle with deepening hardships such as finding food, medicines, clean water and shelter, a few hundred protesters took to the streets in Beit Lahiya three weeks ago. Calls are out for more protests on Saturday, one activist said, after the strikes on Friday. Nearly half of all Gazans support the protests, according to a poll released earlier this month by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, an independent nonprofit based in Ramallah.

Located 4 miles north of Gaza City and less than 2 miles from the Israeli border, Beit Lahiya is wealthier than most areas. Many of its roughly 100,000 population are farmers and agricultural workers who once thrived off economic links to Israel, especially exporting strawberries, which locals refer to as “red gold,” and flowers across the border and to Europe.

Now, residents have seen their properties destroyed, breeding resentment against both Israel and Hamas.

“Beit Lahiya was the vegetable and fruit basket of the entire Gaza Strip,” said Yousef Rajab, 30, a resident. “We lost our land, our livelihoods. What’s left for us?”

Airstrikes launched after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel crushed homes before Israel sent in ground forces, forcing tens of thousands to flee.

In mid-January, following a cease-fire deal, residents returned to their shattered neighborhoods, shocked by the destruction, said residents and activists. They began to rebuild their lives, but in March the cease-fire collapsed, as Israel launched further airstrikes after talks to extend the truce stalled. Soon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad militants arrived in Ahmed al Masri’s neighborhood in Beit Lahiya. They began launching rockets made from sewage pipes into Israel, he and other residents said.

Israeli forces then dropped leaflets on the town, ordering residents to evacuate their homes again. Those orders were the tipping point, said residents, protest leaders and analysts.

“That’s when things really exploded,” said Ahmed al Masri. “People had had enough. We didn’t want war. We didn’t want Hamas.”

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Anger spread through the town, including among influential families and clan elders. They met with activists and residents who then called on Facebook for people to take to the streets. Others went door to door or drove a car with a loudspeaker, encouraging protest.

“The fear barrier was broken when the evacuation orders came,” said Rajab.

Hamas in previous years swiftly cracked down on protests. This time, some militants threatened protesters and unsuccessfully tried to disrupt the demonstrations. But the group, weakened by months of Israeli attacks, didn’t systematically shut down the open defiance with force.

When the protests started in late March, Hamza al Masri said he called some of the activists to express support from his base in Turkey.

The 37-year-old influencer, from Beit Hanoun, joined the militants as a teenager, attracted by their religious stance and calls for Palestinian liberation, he said. By his late 20s, he was disillusioned. In 2017, Hamas militants repeatedly detained him, beat him and held him for as long as eight days to stop his critical social-media posts.

“I reached a point where it was either I commit suicide or leave Gaza,” said Masri, who fled the territory in 2021.

Like many Gazans, Masri at first voiced support for Hamas’ attacks on Oct. 7, seeing it as a long overdue response to Israel’s harsh treatment of Palestinians. But as the war and suffering deepened, he changed his mind. In last week’s poll, 37% of Gazans said they approved of the Oct. 7 Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel, down from 71% in March 2024.

As thousands took the streets in front of the Indonesian Hospital in Beit Lahiya, Masri stayed in touch with protesters, encouraging them to send videos and photos. He posted them on Telegram and other social-media portals. Many other social-media influencers around the world were posting as well. The protests went viral.

“It was clear Beit Lahiya wasn’t alone,” said Masri.