

Israel: Killing of Palestinian girl provides snapshot of a brutal regime

Brian Smith

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Damning evidence has emerged against an Israeli officer accused of gunning down a 13-year-old Palestinian girl, Iman al-Hams. It shows that the officer and his company were well aware that Iman was a defenceless child “of about ten” and was of no danger to them when she was shot. The officer then emptied his magazine into her prone body in an illegal practice known as “confirming the kill”.

Israeli television’s Channel Two played a recording of the incident on its documentary show *Uvda* (Fact) last Monday night. The recording contradicts the Israeli army’s version of events, which states that Iman was killed as she walked toward an army checkpoint with a schoolbag which the soldiers feared contained a bomb. The company commander, identified only as Captain R, claimed that he came under fire from Palestinian gunmen at least 300 yards (metres) away as he approached the girl’s body and shot at the ground, apparently to deter the gunfire.

The tape, however, reveals a three-way conversation at the Girit checkpoint adjacent to Rafah refugee camp in Gaza, on October 5 this year, at around 7am, between Captain R, the watchtower, and the army operations room.

The soldier in the watchtower radioed his colleagues in the operations room as Iman, who was on her way to school, was around 100 metres from the post. Some shots had just been fired toward her.

Operations room: “Are we talking about a girl under the age of ten?”

Watch tower: “It’s a little girl. She’s running defensively eastward [i.e. away from the post and towards the refugee camp]. A girl of about ten, she’s behind the embankment, scared to death.”

A few minutes later a shot from one of the army posts hits her in the leg.

Watchtower: “Receive, I think that one of the positions took her out.”

Operations room: “What, she fell?”

Watchtower: “She’s not moving right now.”

Captain R then runs over to her as she lies wounded.

Captain R: “I and another soldier... are going in a little nearer, forward, to confirm the kill...”

After a brief pause he adds, “Receive a situation report—we fired and killed her. She was wearing pants, jeans, an undershirt, a shirt. Also she was wearing a keffiyah on her head. I also confirmed the kill. Over.”

Captain R is then heard clarifying why he killed Iman: “This is commander. Anything that’s mobile, that moves in the zone, even if it’s a three-year-old, needs to be killed. Over.”

Soldiers in the company who initially reported the incident described how Captain R shot Iman twice in the head before withdrawing a short way and then turning and firing a stream of bullets into her corpse. Doctors at Rafah’s hospital confirmed that she had received at least 17 shots.

The soldiers, from the Givati Brigade’s crack Sheked Battalion, went to the media accusing the army of covering up the incident. The newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* quotes them as saying that the commander desecrated the body of the young girl and should have been relieved of his post immediately, since he has “turned us all into vicious animals and besmirched us all”.

A subsequent investigation by the officer responsible for the Gaza Strip, Major-General Dan Harel, was a whitewash. It found that Captain R had “not acted unethically” despite his actions being contrary to Israeli Defence Force (IDF) regulations. The captain was suspended, but only on the grounds of having a poor relationship with his subordinates.

The military police launched their own investigation, and military prosecutors issued a five-count indictment against the commanding officer who is remanded in custody. The charges include two counts of illegally using

his weapon and one count each of obstruction of justice [because of the false explanation], conduct unbecoming an officer, and improper use of authority to the extent of jeopardising human life.

Under open fire regulations soldiers may fire only when their lives are in danger. The military prosecutor said military law does not include “verification of the kill” as a crime, so they decided to charge Captain R with “illegal use of a weapon”. He is not being charged with manslaughter since supposedly there is no evidence that his bullets were those that killed the girl.

Responding to the incident and the broadcast recording, Army Chief of Staff Moshe Ya’alon claimed that the IDF had simply failed in its investigation. “The fact that in our operational investigation we were unable to reach the whole truth, is a grave failure,” he said. This stated inability to reach the truth cannot mask an unwillingness to do so.

Ya’alon then insisted that the IDF should retain the task of conducting investigations of military incidents. “An external investigation will not bring about the disclosure of the truth, rather the opposite,” he claimed, saying that he was “determined to deal with every incident of this type, in order to root out every failure of values from the IDF”.

In response to the embarrassing exposure of its brutal tactics, the military is seeking to blame the soldiers concerned rather than allow anyone to recognise how typical this episode is.

Citing serious malfunctions in the performance of the Sheked Battalion, the military has said it considers that there may be no alternative but to break up the company and disperse its members among other units in the brigade. But the fact that the soldiers from the company felt obliged to go to the media to expose the truth is almost certainly a factor in their proposed dispersal.

The incident confirms that the Zionist regime, under the guise of a security operation, is waging a deliberate war of terror against a civilian population. Israel routinely claims to be responding to a series of unprovoked rocket attacks by the Palestinians. But the truth is that vicious attacks and provocations by its army of occupation have led to the desperate use of usually ineffectual home-made rockets and suicide bombings by Palestinian militant groups. These are then used as justification for the next IDF operation aimed at building a Greater Israel.

Captain R’s actions are clearly a war crime, and yet the response to it within Israel is muted. The army, whilst quietly furious, is openly more embarrassed than horrified

at the exposure of the incident, and feels able to merely slap the officer on the wrist and leave it at that.

Since September 2000 when the current intifada was provoked by Likud leader and now Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Al Aqsa mosque, Israel has killed nearly 4,000 Palestinians, of whom more than 660 were children. Four hundred of the dead were assassinated. In the last two weeks of August alone, 142 people were killed in Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza by the IDF, of which 60 were under 18 years of age.

The IDF has also wounded some 30,000 Palestinians since 2000, including around 9,000 children. It has destroyed about 25,000 homes and hundreds of acres of farmland. It is estimated that the IDF demolishes on average 120 homes per month in Gaza and leaves about 1,200 people homeless. In the latest incursions into Gaza, schools and orphanages were destroyed.

In a separate incident, Ya’alon was forced to order a military investigation into allegations of IDF soldiers tampering with the bodies of dead Palestinians prior to posing for photos with the corpses. *Yedhiot Ahronot* reports that in one particularly gruesome episode, soldiers rearranged the body parts of a suicide bomber who had blown himself up at a checkpoint in the Jordan valley. The bomber’s head was placed on a concrete barrier with a cigarette in his mouth before the soldiers posed with it.

Such incidents, far from being aberrations, are the logical outcome of a war of occupation undertaken by Israel against the Palestinians. The IDF consists primarily of conscripts, young men and women who are obliged to serve in order to be citizens of the state of Israel. Fed a diet of lies about their foe, and forced to use the most brutal methods, they are often frightened but are largely unable to speak out. Encouraged to consider the enemy as less than human, some rebel and protest while others are themselves dehumanised.



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