

Gaza: The massacre in Zeitoun

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In the annals of war crimes, the name "Zeitoun" will assume its place alongside names like "My Lai," "Fallujah," "Sabra-Shatila," "Guernica," "Nanking," "Lidice," and "Wounded Knee."

In the last two days, the massacre that took place in Zeitoun, a neighborhood on the southern flats approaching Gaza City, has only now begun to come into focus. Aid groups, including the Red Cross, have used the three-hour pauses in Israel bombardment that began on Wednesday in a desperate attempt to remove the wounded, some of whom apparently still remain. Most of the dead have been left behind.

What is particularly horrifying about the Zeitoun massacre—details of which continue to unfold—is the sadistic behavior of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). This is a mass killing that has unfolded over days.

It appears that the IDF tricked residents, promising that they would be safe gathered in large groups in particular buildings, only to bomb them later. Over the course of four days, the Israelis then left the sick and dying—all civilians, the majority small children—with no medical assistance, food or water, even though Israelis enjoyed total control over the area. At the same time, they refused repeated requests for access to the neighborhood by aid workers.

It is not clear how many have died in Zeitoun. At this point, it appears the number is somewhere between 70 and 85. But this figure may grow significantly as the unassisted wounded continue to die, and as aid workers uncover bodies of victims in bombed-out buildings.

Israel raided Zeitoun on Sunday, quickly establishing its control. The town occupies a strategic location south of Gaza City, and will be used should the IDF launch an attack on the city proper.

According to survivors, after invading the IDF compelled extended families to gather in centrally located buildings, marching families at gunpoint from

one building to the next. The IDF told the residents of Zeitoun that they were being led to houses that would not be bombed.

But in at least one case, it has emerged that the IDF forced some 110 Palestinians into a house that was then bombed within 24 hours, killing perhaps 70 people, all civilians. Aid workers only discovered the corpses after being prevented for four days by the IDF from visiting the neighborhood in Zeitoun.

Those in the building, which has been described as a "warehouse" by one survivor, were left inside without food or water. After one day, three men attempted to venture out to find food. They were immediately hit by a barrage of IDF fire. At that point, a missile hit the rooftop of the warehouse.

Meysa Samouni, a 19-year-old who survived the attack with her two-year-old daughter, who was maimed, described the scene: "When the missile stuck, I lay down with my daughter under me. Everything filled up with smoke and dust, and I heard screams and crying. After the smoke and dust cleared a bit, I looked around and saw 20 to 30 people who were dead, and about 20 who were wounded.

"The persons killed around me were my husband, who was hit in the back, my father-in-law, who was hit in the head and whose brain was on the floor, my mother-in-law Rabab, my father-in-law's brother Talal, and his wife Rhama Muhammad a-Samouni, 45, Talal's son's wife, Maha Muhammad a-Samouni, 19, and her son, Muhammad Hamli a-Samouni, five months, whose whole brain was outside his body, Razqa Muhammad a-Samouni, 50, Hanan Khamis a-Samouni, 30, and Hamdi Majid a-Samouni, 22."

A Red Cross medic who visited Zeitoun described a horrific scene. "Inside the Samouni house I saw about 10 bodies and outside another 60," the medic told the *Telegraph*. "I was not able to count them accurately because there was not much time and we were looking

for wounded people.... I could see an Israeli army bulldozer knocking down houses nearby but we ran out of time and the Israeli soldiers started shooting at us."

"We had to leave about eight injured people behind because we could not get to them and it was no longer safe for us to stay."

In another building in Zeitoun, the Israelis gathered 80 people together. Survivors report Israeli soldiers gunning people down in cold blood as they later attempted to flee. One man, Atiyeh Samouni, was shot by Israelis after he opened his door to receive them. Then his two-year old son was shot, a survivor said.

Most of the men of Zeitoun were rounded up, blindfolded, and marched away. Some were used as human shields, survivors say.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' statement on the bombing was based on the account of survivors, but it corroborated an AP story and testimony gathered by an Israeli human rights group.

This was the same neighborhood where a day earlier the Red Cross found four half-dead children near the corpses of their mothers. The Red Cross discovered the bodies of 15 other people in a bombed structure, who likely suffered slow and agonizing deaths for lack of medical care. Israeli soldiers were stationed within 100 yards of the dying family.

Aid agencies became aware of the massacre at Zeitoun when surviving members of the Samouni clan arrived in Gaza City early in the week. According to the *Telegraph*, "A handful of survivors, some wounded, others carrying dead or dying infants, made it on foot to Gaza's main north-south road before they were given lifts to hospital. Three small children were buried in Gaza City that afternoon."

But Israel refused to allow the Red Cross to visit the neighborhood until Wednesday.

One hundred other people in need of medical treatment have been evacuated from Zeitoun—not for injuries, but for dehydration and famine. The town has been without water and food since Israel overran it Sunday evening.

Speaking in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay condemned the Israeli atrocities in Gaza. Israel claims that all of its actions are justified by Palestinians' ineffective rocket fire from Gaza. But Pillay said that this did not obviate Israel

from observing international law. In an interview with BBC, Pillay said Israel's actions appear to have "all the elements of war crimes."

Because the IDF has persistently attacked relief organizations, the UN and the World Food Program have stopped delivery of relief supplies to Gaza. Since Wednesday, Israel has claimed to observe a three-hour cease-fire in order to allow humanitarian workers to reach areas the IDF controls. However, in several instances, the IDF has fired on aid workers during the supposed three-hour lapse.

According to the Geneva Conventions, an invading army is responsible for caring for the sick, wounded, and hungry in the territory it controls. Israel clearly does not observe these conventions, effectively blocking the delivery of food and medicine, firing upon ambulances and preventing them from reaching the wounded, and leaving the sick and wounded under its own control to die.

There are indications that Zeitoun was specifically targeted for exemplary punishment by the IDF. The *Telegraph* reports that it was a place of known Hamas activity.

The Zeitoun massacre is a horrific war crime for which the IDF and the Israeli government bear responsibility. But the IDF's rampage would not be possible without the full backing of the US and the complicity of the UN, the European powers, and the Arab regimes of the Middle East.

Should Israel enter Gaza City, home to more than 400,000 people, the methods used at Zeitoun will be repeated on a much more deadly scale.



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