

The brutal face of Israel's "total war" on Gaza

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While Israel has sought to conceal the atrocities that it is carrying out against Gaza's civilian population, reports of aid workers and testimony of survivors have provided a searing picture of the carnage unleashed by its military assault.

The Israeli government has barred the international media from entering the besieged Gaza Strip for good reason. It wants as much as possible to limit the images of the dead and maimed civilian men, women and children from reaching the outside world and to prevent the Palestinians trapped inside the blockaded territory from telling their stories.

Nonetheless, accounts of war crimes carried out by the Israeli military continue to come out of Gaza. One source is the testimony gathered by Israeli human rights groups, which have sought to telephone Gaza residents, with increasing difficulty as the bombardment has disrupted telecommunications throughout the territory.

B'Tselem, the Israeli group that monitors human rights in the occupied territory, spoke to 19-year-old Meysa a-Samuni, a young woman with an infant daughter, who witnessed the massacre of much of her family in the Zeitun neighborhood south of Gaza City. They were killed when Israeli troops shelled a house which they and others had been ordered to enter.

She told B'Tselem: "On Sunday [4 January], around 9 a.m., soldiers came to the house of my father-in-law, Rashed a-Samuni, which is located next to a concrete engineering company. We were 14 people in the house, all of us from a-Samuni family: me, my husband, Tawfiq, 21, our infant, Jumana, nine months old, my father-in-law, Rashed, 41, my mother-in-law, Rabab, 38, and my husband's brothers, Musa, 19, Walid, 17, Halmi, 14, Zeineb, 12, Muhammad, 11, Shaban, 9, Issa, 7, Islam, 12, Israa, 2.

"The soldiers came to the house on foot and knocked on the door. We opened and then, threatening us with weapons, they forced us to leave the house. They had bulletproof vests on and had automatic weapons. Their faces were painted black. We left the house. Walid ran from another door of the house, but the soldiers caught him.

"The soldiers led us by foot to the house of my father-in-law's brother, Talal Halmi a-Samuni, 50, about 20 meters away. In the house were already about 20 people, and together we were 35. The soldiers left us, apparently to search my father-in-law's house.

"About an hour later, the soldiers came back and ordered us to go with them to the house of Wail a-Samuni, 40. His house is a kind of concrete warehouse, about 200 square meters big, about 20 meters from Talal's house, where we were. We reached Wail's house at 11:00 a.m. There were already 35 people there, so now we were about 70 in total. We stayed there until the next morning. We didn't have

food or drink.

"Around six o'clock in the morning [Monday, 5 January], it was quiet in the area. One of the men in the family, Adnan a-Samuni, 20, said that he wanted to go and bring his uncle and family so they could be with us. My father-in law and his nephew, Salah Talal a-Samuni, 30, and his cousin Muhammad Ibrahim a-Samuni, 27, were standing at the door of the house and planned on going together to bring them. The moment they left the house, a missile or shell hit them. Muhammad was killed on the spot and the others were injured from the shrapnel. My husband went over to them to help, and then a shell or missile was fired onto the roof of the warehouse. Based on the intensity of the strike, I think it was a missile from an F-16.

"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 20-30 people who were dead, and about 20 who were wounded. Some were severely wounded and some lightly.

"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-Samuni, 45, Talal's son's wife, Maha Muhammad a-Samuni, 19, and her son, Muhammad Hamli a-Samuni, five months, whose whole brain was outside his body. Razqa Muhammad a-Samuni, 50, Hanan Khamis a-Samuni, 30, and Hamdi Majid a-Samuni, 22.

"My husband's brother, Musa, and I were lightly injured. Musa was injured in the shoulder and my left hand was injured. My daughter was injured in the left hand. Her thumb, second finger, and third finger had been cut off. I took a kerchief and wrapped her hand to stop the bleeding. The wounded who lay on the floor cried for help and couldn't move. The small children and my husband's grandmother, Shifaa a-Samuni, 70, were crying.

"About 15 minutes after the second strike, Musa said that it would be better to escape and go to the house of his uncle, Assad a-Samuni, about 20 meters away. We ran and knocked on the gate, but nobody answered. Musa jumped over the gate and opening it and we went inside. We were me, my daughter, Musa, and his little sisters Islam, five, and Isra, two. There were 40-50 soldiers in the house, and more people were gathered in one of the rooms. There were about 30 people, 7-10 of them men. The men were blindfolded.

"One of the soldiers came to me and gave me and my daughter first-aid. He bandaged our hands and checked our pulse. Then the soldiers tied Musa and blindfolded him.

"The soldiers told us that they would release us and leave only Musa and his uncle 'Emad in case Hamas came. I understood that they

intended to use them as ‘human shields.’ They ordered us to leave the house, and we walked along the street about 400-500 meters until we found an ambulance, which took me and my daughter to a-Shifa Hospital. The others from my family continued to walk in the street. Later, some of them also arrived at the hospital.

“As far as I know, the dead and wounded who were under the ruins are still there. I didn’t see that any of them had been brought to the hospital.”

In another testimony gathered by B’Tselem, Abdallah Tawfiq Hamdan Kashku, a 44-year-old policeman with four children living in Gaza City, recounted:

“My family lives in a three-storey house in al-Zeitun, Gaza City. On Sunday [28 December], around 7 p.m., I was sitting with nine members of my family around a bonfire in the yard. It was cold, and we didn’t have electricity to heat the house. I turned on the generator to turn on the light. Then we heard the sound of planes in the sky. I heard a buzz and within a few seconds, I found myself under the rubble. I didn’t know what happened to me or to my family. I began to cry for help. The smoke was thick. I couldn’t see any of my family, who had been sitting with me a few moments earlier.

“It took a few moments before I realized the house had collapsed because of the bomb. Neighbors rushed to pull us from the rubble. People took my family to the hospital, some by car and some by ambulance. I was taken to al-Shifa Hospital where the doctors treated me. I was slightly wounded in the leg. I asked my relatives and the doctors where the rest of my family was. They told me my wife had a broken pelvis and that the others had suffered light wounds but that they hadn’t found my little daughter, Ibtihal. I felt horrible, worrying so much about her.

“Early the next morning, my brothers went home to look for Ibtihal. They looked under the ruins and found her body in the kitchen on the second floor.

“Our house was in a quiet area. I don’t think there are military targets in the area. We don’t have relatives or neighbors who are wanted. I am still in shock. In a few minutes, the life of my family was turned completely upside down.”

Yusef ‘Abd al-Karim Barakeh Abu Hajaj, a resident of Juhar a-Dik, an agricultural area in the center of the Gaza Strip, described a January 4 attack on his home where 15 members of his family were staying:

“Around 7 a.m., an Israeli tank fired at our house. We decided to leave, and went to our neighbor, Hussein al-’Aydi. A little while later, we heard that the army told people to leave the houses in the area, and we decided to go to another place. We left together with the neighbor’s family. Together, we were 25 persons.

“When we went outside, we held up white cloth, so the soldiers would know we were civilians. We were afraid they would shoot us, but we walked anyway, having no alternative. Women and small children were in our group. When we got to a point opposite the tanks, they opened fire at us. My mother was hit and fell down. Then my sister Majda was hit in the back. Both were killed. We ran back, toward Hussein al-’Ayadi’s house. Mother and Majda remained lying on the ground.

“We immediately called the Red Crescent and the Red Cross to ask them to remove the bodies. Because of the shelling, nobody could get

there. The next day, we realized we had to leave the area, and we fled.

“Now I’m living in the school in Nuseirat. We didn’t manage to coordinate removal of the bodies of Mother and Majda, and they are apparently still outside. We don’t know when we can move them. It is very crowded in the school, so some of my family went to stay in other places.”

Hussein al-’Ayadi, 60, also from Juhar a-Dik, spoke to B’Tselem on January 7:

“My house is made of concrete, which is why my brothers came to live with me when the fighting began,” he said.

“Saturday night [3 January], there was lots of tank fire and aerial bombing, and we all went into the main room, which is more secure. A shell fell on the roof of the house, tearing a hole into the ceiling and injuring a few of us lightly. We all went to the ground floor and then a tank fired another shell, which hit the house, injuring eight people in my family: Nur Hussein al-’Ayadi, 16, Wa’ed Adnan al-’Ayadi, 13, Raghda Adnan, 17, Hind Adnan, 14, Walid Adnan, 6, Kamela Hashem al-’Ayadi, 80, Doha Hassan al-’Ayadi, 80, and Doa’a Farid al-’Ayadi, 18. All were lightly injured.

“With the house damaged, we are now hiding in a small room in the yard. We have been in contact with all kinds of people in an attempt to get the army to let us take out the injured without getting fired at, but without success. The Red Cross told us that the army claims that nobody is trapped in our area, and is not willing to let them enter.

“We called Physicians for Human Rights and contacted Knesset members. Lots of people are trying to help us, but nothing has happened so far.

“We are eating what remained in the house and vegetation from the yard, which we cook, but we are a large number of people, and the food is beginning to run out.”

And the Reuters news agency carried the tragic account given by Dr. Awni Al-Jaru, a surgeon at the Shifa Hospital, Gaza’s largest medical facility, whose house in the Tuffah neighborhood of north Gaza was fired on by an Israeli tank Thursday.

“I was sitting inside the room when there was a boom and I ran out to the hall and saw my son Abdel-Rahim. I asked him where was his mother and brother Youssef.

“I found my wife Albina cut in two parts and my son Youssef completely blown apart. I could only recognize him from his teeth,” said the doctor.

Dr. Jaru’s wife was Ukrainian-born and could have left Gaza with other foreign-born residents before Israel unleashed its full fury against Gaza, but she refused to go. Their son Youssef was 18 months old.



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