

Israeli troops detail Gaza atrocities as demand grows for war crimes probe

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The publication of testimony by Israeli soldiers detailing atrocities in which they participated or that they witnessed has lent further weight to the growing demands for an international war crimes tribunal to investigate the three-week Israeli siege of the Gaza Strip last December and January.

The testimony, published Thursday and Friday in the Israeli dailies *Haaretz* and *Maariv*, came from a group of soldiers and officers participating in a military training course at the Oranim Academic College in Tivon in February. The director of the program, Danny Zamir, invited them to discuss their experiences in Gaza. He recounted that he was "shocked" by what he heard, including reports of random shootings of unarmed civilians and generalized contempt for Palestinian life, and reported the matter to the Israeli Defense Forces command.

Now, weeks later, and with no indication that the IDF has carried out any serious investigation, the publication of sections of the discussion's transcript has triggered an uproar in Israel. The Israeli government has long promoted the myth that its army's conduct is based on a strict code of ethics and blamed the massive Palestinian casualties in Gaza—more than 1,400 killed—on Hamas, claiming that its fighters used the civilian population as "human shields."

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak reiterated this position in a radio interview Friday, declaring, "We have the most moral army in the world."

The atrocities testimony grabbed headlines in Israel at precisely the moment in which prime minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu, of the right-wing Likud Party, is maneuvering to bring Barak, a leader in the Israeli Labor Party, into his cabinet, with the aim of giving his government a more "moderate" cast. The testimony, however, provides yet more evidence that Barak, who as defense minister directed the attack on Gaza, is guilty of war crimes.

The stories told by the soldiers who participated in Israel's Operation Cast Lead, however, provide a very different picture of the "morality" of the IDF. Several of them expressed frustration and remorse over the killing spree in Gaza.

A squad commander identified as "Aviv" testified on the orders his unit was given in occupying houses in the densely populated center of Gaza City. "We were supposed to go in

with an armored personnel carrier called an Achzarit [literally, "cruel"] to burst through the lower door, to start shooting inside and then ... I call this murder ... in effect, we were supposed to go up floor by floor, and any person we identified—we were supposed to shoot."

Senior officers, he continued, argued that such actions were justified because anyone who had not fled the area was, by definition, a "terrorist."

"I didn't really understand," the squad commander continued. "On the one hand they don't really have anywhere to flee to, but on the other hand they're telling us they hadn't fled so it's their fault."

After he convinced his commanders to allow him to warn occupants of the houses to evacuate or be killed, he confronted opposition from soldiers in his unit. He recalled them telling him, "We need to murder any person who's in there," and "Any person who's in Gaza is a terrorist."

He said that the general attitude among the troops was that "inside Gaza you are allowed to do anything you want, to break down doors of houses for no reason other than it's cool ... to write 'death to Arabs' on the walls, to take family pictures and spit on them, just because you can."

Aviv recounted an incident in which a company commander spotted an old woman walking down the road. "In the end, he sent people on the roof, to take her out with their weapons ... I simply felt it was murder in cold blood."

Interrupted by the course director Zamir, who asked why she was shot, Aviv continued: "That's what is so nice, supposedly, about Gaza: You see a person on a road, walking along a path. He doesn't have to be with a weapon, you don't have to identify him with anything and you can just shoot him. With us it was an old woman, on whom I didn't see any weapon. The order was to take the person out, that woman, the moment you see her."

Another soldier, "Ram," who was with an operations company in the Givati Brigade, told of occupying a house and holding the family that lived there prisoner for several days before being ordered to release them.

"There was a sharpshooters' position on the roof," he recalled. "The platoon commander let the family go and told them to go to the right. One mother and her two children didn't understand

and went to the left, but they forgot to tell the sharpshooter on the roof they had let them go, and it was okay and he should hold his fire and he ... he did what he was supposed to, like he was following his orders." Ram added: "I don't think he felt too bad about it, because after all, as far as he was concerned, he did his job according to the orders he was given. And the atmosphere in general, from what I understood from most of my men who I talked to ... I don't know how to describe it ... the lives of Palestinians, let's say, is something very, very less important than the lives of our soldiers. So as far as they are concerned they can justify it that way."

The same soldier also testified on how the military prepared troops for the indiscriminate killing in Gaza by bringing in army rabbis who presented the siege of Gaza as a "religious mission."

"Their message was very clear," he said. "We are the Jewish people, we came to this land by a miracle, God brought us back to this land and now we need to fight to expel the gentiles who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land. This was the main message, and the whole sense many soldiers had in this operation was of a religious war."

The reporter who broke the story in *Haaretz* reported Friday that the military command had responded with an exercise in "damage control" that centered on an attempt to "witch hunt" the school director Zamir and intimidate the soldiers who had spoken out.

Haaretz carried another story Friday indicative of the "morality" of the IDF. It reported on T-shirts designed by a fabric-printing shop in Tel Aviv for Israeli army units, each with their own unit slogan and design.

"A T-shirt for infantry snipers bears the inscription 'Better use Durex,' [referring to a brand of condoms], next to a picture of a dead Palestinian baby, with his weeping mother and a teddy bear beside him," according to the report. "A sharpshooter's T-shirt from the Givati Brigade's Shaked battalion shows a pregnant Palestinian woman with a bull's-eye superimposed on her belly, with the slogan, in English, '1 shot, 2 kills.'"

The reporter explained that the designs and slogans were chosen by soldiers after completing their training, but approved by their commanding officers.

On Thursday, as the transcripts of the soldiers' testimony was being published in Israel, the United Nations human rights investigator for the Palestinian territories issued a report declaring that Israel's siege of the densely populated Gaza Strip "would seem to constitute a war crime of the gravest magnitude under international law."

Richard Falk, UN special rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territories, described the Israeli campaign as a "massive assault on a densely populated urbanized setting" in which Gaza's entire civilian population had been subjected to "an inhumane form of warfare that kills, maims and inflicts mental harm."

Falk's report listed among Israel's war crimes the "targeting of schools, mosques and ambulances" and the use of white phosphorus shells (which cause horrific burns) in densely populated neighborhoods.

Falk added that the war on Gaza was not legally justified and therefore could constitute a "crime against peace," the principal charge against the Nazi leaders tried at Nuremberg.

In his report, Falk cited newly updated figures for casualties from the 22-day Gaza operation issued by the Palestinian Center for Human Rights. The human rights group has compiled a list, including names, with a total of 1,417 victims. Among those killed, the rights group reports, were 926 civilians—including 313 children and 116 women—255 police officers and 236 Palestinian fighters. The total number of Israelis killed in the siege was 13, several of them by "friendly fire."

Given that Israel—like the United States—has refused to sign the Rome accords setting up the International Criminal Court, Falk suggested that the United Nations set up a special tribunal to consider charges.

Meanwhile, a group of 16 judges and legal scholars, many of them former members of tribunals formed to hear charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the former Yugoslavia, Darfur, Rwanda and East Timor, issued an open letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and the UN Security Council Monday entitled "Find the truth about Gaza war." The letter called for the formation of an international commission to investigate violations of international humanitarian law "by both sides."

The letter declared, "The events in Gaza have shocked us to the core," and called for the commission to "provide recommendations as to the appropriate prosecution of those responsible for gross violations of the law."



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