Amnesty International report details Israeli war crimes in 2014 bombing of Rafah

Jean Shaoul
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Amnesty International has uncovered overwhelming evidence of Israeli war crimes committed in a relentless and massive bombardment of residential areas in the city of Rafah.

Amnesty's report "Black Friday—Carnage in Rafah", published last week, shows that Israel attacked Rafah with disregard for the suffering it inflicted on the civilian population. Furthermore, this was official policy designed to ensure that no Israeli soldiers were captured alive, even if it meant some of them were killed.

The human rights organisation said the horrific events constitute grounds for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to prosecute Israel.

The massacre that became known as Black Friday was one of the deadliest episodes of the 50-day war on Gaza last year.

The Israel Defence Force (IDF) carried out a massive aerial bombardment over a four-day period using F-16 fighter jets, drones, helicopters and artillery. It killed anywhere between 135 to 200 Palestinian civilians, including 75 children.

It followed the capture on August 1, 2014, of an Israeli officer, Lieutenant Hadar Goldin, by Hamas fighters in one of the tunnels in Rafah, the southernmost city in the Gaza Strip. A ceasefire had been due to come into effect that morning, as his capture was announced, and many civilians were returning to their homes in the belief that it was safe to do so.

The massive bombardment took place without warning when many people were walking or driving along the streets, leading to one of the worst incidents of the 50-day war on Gaza.

The war followed two previous wars in 2006 and 2012, as well as several prolonged assaults on Gaza since Hamas, the Islamist party, was elected to power in 2006.

The assault was distinguished by immense Israeli firepower directed at an essentially defenceless civilian population, who live like prisoners in an open-air jail surrounded by razor wire and fortifications on three sides and the sea on the fourth side.

According to UN figures, 2,251 Palestinians were killed, including 1,462 civilians of whom 551 were children. More than 11,200 Palestinians were injured; of this, more than 3,400 were children. In contrast, just 67 Israeli soldiers lost their lives in the fighting while six civilians were killed by Palestinian rockets and mortars fired from Gaza.

Almost 500,000 Palestinians were displaced. Some 100,000 are still without a permanent home, one year after the war. Twenty schools, kindergartens and colleges were completely destroyed and hundreds of others damaged. One hundred and seventeen hospitals, clinics and pharmacies were damaged or destroyed.

Amnesty's evidence, based upon eyewitness accounts, videos, photos, satellite images and multimedia documentation of the carnage, was analysed by researchers at Forensic Architecture, a research centre at Goldsmiths, University of London. Using cutting-edge techniques, they established that Israel carried out the bombardment on locations that might be harbouring Goldin.

From this, Amnesty deduced that the IDF was trying to kill Goldin without any regard for the consequences for the neighbouring civilian population. Even ambulances, health facilities and medical professionals that may have been giving Goldin medical treatment were fair game, in an obscene defiance of the laws of war.

Israel sought to kill Goldin to prevent Palestinian militants using him as a bargaining chip. In 2011, after the capture and 5-year detention of Gilad Shalit in 2006, Israel was forced to agree to release some 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in order to secure Shalit's release.

Philip Luther, director of Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa programme, said, "The ferocity of the attack

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on Rafah shows the extreme measures Israeli forces were prepared to take to prevent the capture alive of one soldier—scores of Palestinian civilian lives were sacrificed for this single aim." He said that entire districts of the city, included heavily populated areas, were bombarded without distinction between military and civilian targets.

The attacks continued even after the IDF had determined that Goldin had not been captured but had been killed in a gunfight in the tunnel. Based on this, as well as statements made by Israeli officials and soldiers, Amnesty concluded that at least some of the attacks were motivated by the desire to punish the population as revenge for his capture. Such collective punishment is a crime under international law.

One Israeli officer told Breaking the Silence, an organization of Israeli soldiers who have served in the West Bank and Gaza that "The motto guiding lots of people was, 'let's show them.'" According to Amnesty, other soldiers told the media that they had wanted "to settle accounts" or to "extract a price."

Givati Brigade commander Ofer Winter, an ultra-nationalist religious Zionist who had led the tunnel incursion and ensuing shootout that led to Goldin's death, bragged to the press, "We shredded them," adding, "Anyone who abducts should know that he will pay a price." He boasted, "They simply messed with the wrong brigade."

But this was not simply an accident or the actions of some fascistic elements, but the outcome of official policy known as the Hannibal Directive, drawn up in the 1980s. This directive authorises the use of intense firepower should a soldier be captured, regardless of the risks to his life or to civilians in the vicinity, so as to ensure that Israel's political leaders were not confronted with demands for concessions to ensure his or her release.

"Major D.", a commander of the Givati anti-tank company, said, "When you enter such an incident, you prefer a body and not a kidnapped soldier." He added, "We made it clear many times to the troops about the threat of abduction, and the goal is to disrupt it if it happens—while hitting the enemy even at the price of harming your friend."

"I told myself, even if I bring [back] a body, the main thing is to bring back the missing [soldier]. In such an incident, you do everything in order not to put the entire country into the whirlwind of Gilad Shalit."

Amnesty's report shows that implementing the Directive to prevent the taking of one live hostage led to the ordering of unlawful attacks on hundreds of civilians. From the IDF's perspective, it had a further advantage. As Amnesty concluded, under the veil of the Hannibal Directive, the Israeli army enacted a "gloves off" policy, "whereby it struck general targets from its 'target banks'—a continuously updated list of targets prepared by the military intelligence—that were not previously authorized because they were determined to involve too high levels of collateral damage."

The Israeli government dismissed the report as "fundamentally flawed" and "one-sided," saying that the testimonies in the report were uncorroborated and potentially biased, bringing "into serious question Amnesty's professional standards."

The IDF predictably ruled that the overwhelming firepower unleashed on Black Friday was "proportionate." But a year later, the military authorities have yet to complete their investigation into Black Friday.

Amnesty's report follows countless similar reports about Israel's war crimes that have been supported by Washington. A culture of impunity reigns, officially sanctioned at the highest political and military levels. So far, only three Israeli soldiers will face prosecution by the military authorities—for alleged looting during the ground invasion.

Within Gaza itself, one year on, the situation is truly devastating. There is only intermittent electricity and water, and sanitation networks have been damaged. The only repairs to homes damaged in the war have been to those partially damaged. Some 83,977 homes still await repairs, meaning that people are living in partially bombed out homes. A further 18,000 homes were totally destroyed, but work has only just begun on the first house to be rebuilt since the war.

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