

Analysis | The Only Ones Still Buying the Israeli Army's Version of the Rafah Strike

Tuesday 28 May 2024, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 28 May 2024).

Israel's media has been concealing the unbearable figures and pictures of the Gaza war. The latest announcement from the army about the Rafah strike should also be taken with skepticism. Unless you are a devoted consumer of Israeli media

Palestinians mourn relatives killed in an overnight Israeli strike on a camp for internally displaced people in Rafah, at the city's Tal al-Sultan clinic morgue on May 27, 2024. Credit: Eyad BABA / AFP

It was reported on Monday afternoon that the Israel Defense Forces did not expect or estimate that civilians would be hit in the strike on Rafah. Such a disingenuous announcement can only be issued to consumers of the same media that for seven months has been hiding the unbearably high figures and choking photographs of toddlers who were killed or injured in every Israeli strike on the Gaza Strip. Such a statement can only persuade Israelis that this time too, the targets of the strike and the kind of munitions selected were scrupulously chosen by the Shin Bet security service, Military Intelligence and the IDF.

It's very possible that Israelis who don't support Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also would like to believe that this time, he was completely sincere when he said that this was a tragic mistake. It's also very possible that they won't suspect that he referred to it because the [recent order](#) to halt military operations in Rafah, issued by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, is hovering above his head and the heads of the Israeli judiciary.

According to the IDF Spokesperson's Unit, [this strike](#) had two targets: Yassin Abu Rabia and Khaled Al-Najjar. Abu Rabia was said to be Hamas' West Bank staff commander, and Al-Najjar was a senior staff officer. Both men were said to have carried out attacks in the early 2000s and transferred funds for terrorism. It was stated that Abu Rabia's attacks killed soldiers and Al-Najjar's attacks murdered Israeli civilians and wounded soldiers. By the way, it's the IDF Spokesperson's Unit that made the distinction between "killing soldiers" and "murdering civilians."

The fire that broke out in the tent encampment in Rafah after the Israeli airstrike on Sunday. Credit: Reuters

Palestinians mourning over the bodies of relatives killed in Sunday's Israeli airstrike, at a morgue in Rafah, on Monday. Credit: Jihad Alshrafi/AP

The announcement did not disclose that the two men were released in deal to release kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit in 2011 and that both were West Bank residents - Abu Rabia from the village of Mazra'a al-Qibliya, west of Ramallah, and Al-Najjar from the village of Silwad, east of Ramallah - who had been deported to Gaza. The announcement also did not share with the public that another man released in the same deal and deported to Gaza, Khuwaylid Ramadan from the village of Tel,

south of Nablus, was killed - as was reported by the Palestinian media. Was he also marked as a target, or just happened to be staying in the same tent encampment in western Rafah? We don't know.

What we know is that as of Monday afternoon, according to the Hamas-controlled Gaza Health Ministry, the [number of dead has reached 45](#) and the wounded about 250. A partial list of the dead includes three members of the Al-Najjar family: Huda, 15; Arkan, 12; and Ahmad, 2. Were they the children of Khaled Al-Najjar from Silwad in the West Bank or the Al-Najjar family from Khan Yunis? We don't yet know. When scores of people are killed every day, the ability of journalists to track the background of each of them and write about it is extremely limited.

Among the 25 last names of the dead in the list, like al-Attar, Zayid and Hamed, we know that families from the northern Gaza Strip lived in the encampment: from Beit Lahya and apparently also from Beit Hanoun. Like the refugee camps established in 1948, where refugees from each village chose to live together in the same encampment and then the same neighborhood, the displaced people in contemporary Gaza try to live near their relatives and neighbors in the new encampments.

The terrible overcrowding, the hunger and thirst, the food shortages and the death that's waiting at any moment give rise to frequent friction and fighting. The experience of the past seven months and the forced cohabitation of several families in one crowded house or apartment have taught people that it's easier to resolve conflicts when the two sides are from the same extended family, the same town (such as Beit Hanoun), or even the same village of origin (from before 1948). Who knows how many times the victims of this Sunday's IDF attack were uprooted in the past seven months and how many kinds of shelter they exchanged until they were killed or burned to death in this encampment in west Rafah?

Palestinians search for food among burnt debris in the aftermath of an Israeli strike on an area designated for displaced people, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, May 27, 2024. Credit: Mohammed Salem/ REUTERS

Two Palestinians hugging next to the destruction after an Israeli strike on an encampment in Rafah, Monday. Credit: Jihad Alshrafi/AP

Many more details are unknown and may never be known; for example, why Al-Najjar and Abu Rabia were staying near or in the large encampment in the dunes. We don't know whether they were targeted because the IDF and Shin Bet had solid proof that they were still operating in the Hamas military arm, or if these were only assumptions, or if they were targeted in revenge for their attacks in the early 2000s. We don't know what these men would have chosen to do had they been released to their homes in the West Bank. Maybe they would have preferred to change their paths? We don't know if the alleged money transfers were intended for armed attacks against Israelis, or to help the families of dead Palestinians.

What we know is that in the IDF wars against the Palestinians since the early 2000s, and in particular in the past seven months of the current Gaza war, a number of norms have been formed that enable and facilitate the mass killings of Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and Gaza. We first learned about these norms from Palestinian reports and through testimonies, and then from investigations by independent journalists about the [rules of engagement](#) and the soldiers' conduct.

Palestinians searching for food in the aftermath of an Israeli strike on an encampment in Rafah, on Monday. Credit: Mohammed Salem/Reuters

* The definition of "[collateral damage](#)," which has become increasingly lenient over the years; in

other words, the number of Palestinian civilians whom military advocate general jurists (and the state prosecutor's) permit be killed as the result of killing a single marked target (a senior military commander from Hamas or another Palestinian organization, a political figure or moneychanger, official or junior armed men, a tunnel shaft or an empty command post) and that they are prepared to defend in international judicial forums). According to an investigation by Yuval Abraham of +972 Magazine, the number of "permitted uninvolved" civilians who may be killed ranges from 20 for each targeted junior member in a Palestinian armed organization to 100 "in exchange" for a senior member.

* The "[targets bank](#)" - the members of armed Palestinian organizations who may and ought to be killed (or arrested, especially in the West Bank), according to the army and the intelligence - is a bottomless pit that includes former members who are no longer involved in military or even political activity, and also includes out-of-date addresses.

Palestinians looking at the destruction after Sunday's Israeli strike on an encampment in Rafah, on Monday. Credit: Jihad Alshrafi/AP

* Strike location: The targets bank not only permits the killing of Palestinians during battle and exchanges of fire, when they are about to launch a missile or are wearing an explosive vest, but also when they are asleep in bed, even in a hospital bed, or while visiting a sick relative, and even if when they are in the company of their children and parents, or engaged in an activity defined by the army as "suspicious" - standing by a window or on the roof of a home, riding a motorcycle or lighting a fire to boil water.

* Use of the [AI program Lavender](#), exposed by Abraham in +972 Magazine, which allows for a much shorter interval of time between identifying a target and hitting a person as a result of the minor human involvement in the process.

* A climate of disobedience in the army's lower ranks, and the lower ranks' lack of interest in the immediate political contexts, that attract global attention, like the famine in Gaza did. Low ranks' decisions led, for example, to the [lethal strike on World Central Kitchen employees](#) on April 2, and to [IDF tank fire at "suspects"](#) who were among the hundreds of starving residents waiting for an aid convoy and who had rushed to the food trucks on February 29.

Rafah following Israel's Sunday night attack on a tent camp housing displaced Palestinians. Credit: Jihad Alshrafi/AP

* An Israel-wide climate of ignoring the facts. Under the cover of sterile words like "evacuation of the residents," "the IDF is operating" and "humanitarian area," the reality of the tent encampments with no infrastructure or protection from natural hazards and bombs doesn't sink into the Israelis' consciousness at all. The same is true for the various ballistic experts who apparently don't bother to calculate the potential of a missile striking adjacent civilian areas.

* An [extreme dehumanization of the Palestinians](#) among broad swaths of both the Israeli public and IDF soldiers. The disregard for the Palestinians' right to live, and their right to a decent life with dignity, has fallen in recent years - and not just since October 7 - to a nadir the likes of which we have never known. This process, consciously or unconsciously, willfully and wholeheartedly or not, has since long permeated the professional echelons at the Justice Ministry, IDF war rooms and army headquarters.

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P.S.

• Haaretz. May 28, 2024 7:32 pm IDT:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-05-28/ty-article/.premium/the-only-ones-who-still-believe-in-sraeli-armys-latest-reports-on-rafah/0000018f-bfa5-df6b-a3ff-ffaf75350000>