

Gunfire Here, Aerial Bombing There: Israel Steps Up the Gaza-fication of the West Bank

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An Israeli warplane fired missiles into a crowded café in a Palestinian refugee camp, killing 18, including an entire family. Elsewhere, soldiers opened fire at a house of mourning. The West Bank increasingly resembles Gaza

Photo: The building that was bombed in Tul Karm last week. Credit: Raneen Sawafta/Reuters

Late in the morning of Wednesday, September 25, Amani Amur, 82, died in her home in the village of Anza. This ancient village, small and tranquil, abuts Highway 60 in the West Bank, about 18 kilometers southwest of Jenin. Olive groves cover much of its land. The deceased was laid to rest that afternoon in the small local cemetery. While the men were taking part in the funeral procession, the women gathered in the dead woman's home, as is the custom. Following the funeral, the men gathered in the diwan, the village's place of assembly, which is situated across the road, and the women sat in the yard of Amur's home. One of the mourners was her daughter-in-law, Zohur Amur, 34, a mother of five, whose husband is a laborer.

Some 40 to 50 women, most of them elderly, were sitting in the house of mourning and its yard, grieving for the dear departed. Quite a few children from the family were also present. Just then, an Israel Defense Forces special-ops unit invaded the village. Not an everyday occurrence in this relatively peaceful village. The troops passed by the house of mourning and continued on their way to the home of Mohammed Brahami, who was wanted by the Israeli authorities. They had come to take him into custody.

Brahami, 38, was imprisoned in Israel for 11 years after being convicted of security offenses, and was released in 2015. Less than two years ago, he was arrested by the Palestinian Authority and served a 15-month term in Jericho Prison, before being released in August this year. On Wednesday, September 25, Israeli soldiers surrounded his home and arrested him. According to witnesses, there was no special resistance during the arrest, other than stones being thrown at the force. The troops spent about an hour in Brahami's home, apparently for a preliminary interrogation.

Israeli troops near the city of Tubas in the West Bank this week. Credit: AFP/JAAFAR ASHTIYEH

The distance between the home of the man under arrest and the home of the late Amani Amur is about 200 meters, as the crow flies.

At approximately 5 P.M., shooting suddenly began, aimed at the house of mourning where the women were gathered. Individual shots, one after the other, not in a burst, were fired at the house. This went on for about five or six minutes, with some pauses. No one in the house had the slightest idea as to what prompted the soldiers to open fire, but the casualties mounted fast.

The first was the grieving daughter-in-law, Zohur, who was hit by two rounds, in the chest and the stomach. Immediately afterward, Halima Amur, a 73-year-old relative, took a bullet to her face. Then

the dead woman's 15-year-old granddaughter, Noor Abdel Hafez, was struck in the jaw and left hand; and finally, Sidra Abu Haniyeh, a girl of 9, was shot in the head. Chaos broke out and the women screamed for help. A few of men rushed over from the diwan across the street, even though the firing had not stopped.

The two girls and Zohur were bundled into a private car and taken to a clinic in the nearby town of Aja. Halima Amur's condition was too grave for the villagers to evacuate her by car. They summoned an ambulance, which rushed her to An-Najah University Hospital in Nablus. Zohur was dead on arrival at the clinic. The two girls were evacuated by ambulance to Al-Razi Hospital in Jenin. This week they were still recovering there; Amur was discharged.

The building that was bombed in Tulk Karm last week. Credit: Raneen Sawafta/Reuters

Abd al-Karim Sa'adi, a field researcher for the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, who investigated the incident the next day, reached the conclusion that the soldiers had aimed at the house of mourning and fired round after round at it for no apparent reason. There is no way in the world that the grieving women would even think to throw stones at soldiers, much less try to do so from a distance of 200 meters, Sa'adi explains. Moreover, there was no shooting from the vicinity of the house of the wanted person that would justify firing live ammunition. On top of all this, Anza, as noted, is a relatively tranquil village, and even though it's located on the main West Bank thoroughfare, Highway 60, as far as is known no security-related events have been recorded there since October 7.

Just a quarter of an hour from central Israel, the air force is bombing densely crowded population centers almost indiscriminately, and this too is by now considered normal, legal and moral, barely meriting coverage in the Israeli media.

A week later, October 3, around 10 P.M. in the Tul Karm refugee camp. Along with the nearby Nur Shams camp, Tul Karm has been a major target of IDF offensive activity in recent months. Devastation is rampant there, with roads ripped up, infrastructure wrecked, homes in ruins. Some places in the camp look like they've been transplanted from the killing fields of Gaza. The main road leading into the city of Tul Karm, which passes through both camps, has long been turned into rubble between puddles of sewage and mounds of earth, and traffic proceeds on it very slowly. In each of the camps, the row of houses closest to the road have taken a fearful pounding; people continue to conduct their lives and run their shops out of half-standing structures. This past week, too, on the night between Sunday and Monday, six bulldozers and 20 jeeps entered to continue the army's mission of destruction.

The Al-Hiyat Café, named for its proprietor, is situated in the Al-Hamam neighborhood in the heart of the Tul Karm camp. It is located on the ground floor of a three-story residential building, and has an apartment attached to it behind. The Al-Hiyat is a place where people who have nothing to do with their time kill it by sipping coffee and smoking a narghile; sometimes armed men from the camp frequent the place. At 10 P.M. last Thursday evening, the café was abuzz with young people.

The building that was bombed in Tulk Karm, last week. Credit: Raneen Sawafta/Reuters

Suddenly, in the sky above the café, the sound of drones could be heard - par for the course here. But an instant later the skies thundered and three huge explosions ripped through the camp, sending a cloud of dust skyward. Three missiles had been fired at the café from an Israel Air Force fighter plane. Just a quarter of an hour from the central Israeli city of Netanya, the air force is bombing densely crowded population centers almost indiscriminately, and this too is by now considered normal, legal and moral, barely meriting coverage in the Israeli media.

In the apartment attached to the café an entire family was wiped out. There is no way to know who was still awake when the missiles landed on them or who was killed in their sleep. But they are all dead: the mother, Sajaa Harwish, 28; the father, Mohammed Abu Zahra, 31; and their two small children, 8-year-old Sham and 5-year-old Karam. A whole family, innocent of any wrongdoing, obliterated. All told, 18 people were killed in the café and adjacent apartment. The target of the attack was Zahi Oufi, 39, the commander of Hamas in the Tul Karm camp, according to Israeli authorities. He was indeed in the café at the time and was killed.

Sa'adi, the field researcher, says that in his view at least six of those killed were noncombatants. But were the "combatants" sitting in the café and apparently not posing any threat at the time also "marked for death"? Has Israel declared war on Tul Karm refugee camp? Residents told Sa'adi that in the minutes after the missile attack it was hard to breathe because of the dense smoke and dust that blanketed the camp. An elderly man who was sitting at the entrance to his home was hurtled from his chair by the shock wave.

At the Deir Sharaf checkpoint, northwest of Nablus and adjacent to the Jenin junction, stood an endless line of trucks and cars, most of them Palestinian. Credit: Moti Milrod

We wanted to cover these two grim events this week. Getting to Tul Karm camp was out of the question, after we learned that the army was still operating there. So we headed for the village of Anza, with the idea of meeting with the women who were wounded and with the relatives of Amani Amur, to see the site of the awful event and to collect testimony from eyewitnesses - our standard procedure.

At the Deir Sharaf checkpoint, northwest of Nablus and adjacent to the Jenin junction, stood an endless line of trucks and cars, most of them Palestinian. The line moved lethargically. The soldiers were behaving differently than usual, turning back all vehicles with yellow Israeli license plates. All of them belonged to Arabs from Israel who were on the way to visit relatives or to shop or do other business in nearby West Bank towns and cities. The line was intolerable. We too were ordered to turn back: Today is October 7, it's dangerous, the reserve soldiers explained.

From a filthy, neglected and ugly booth, decorated with a large photograph of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, they expressed their belief in the murderousness of Arabs and were pedantic about bureaucratic matters. The driver's license I presented was cracked, which they viewed as seriously problematic. They said that Israelis were not allowed to enter Area A of the West Bank - something I as a journalist have been doing for the past 35 years consecutively - and they were uninterested in my explanation that the village to which we were headed is not in Area A.

The soldiers of the IDF Spokesperson's Unit, whom we contacted in the mistaken notion that their job is to assist journalists to do their work in the West Bank, were also quick to say that travel there was banned. They then promised to check nonetheless, but never got back to us.

The Deir Sharaf checkpoint this week. Credit: Moti Milrod

It's another worrisome sign of the dangerous Gaza-fication of the West Bank: a ban on proper journalistic coverage. Maybe we'll soon be able to travel in the West Bank, too, only with the permission of the IDF spokesman, to report on places and stories that only he allows, under his supervision and escorted by his soldiers, as has been the case in the Gaza Strip since 2006, when Israeli journalists were prohibited to enter altogether. In 2024 Israel, after all, entering Gaza with an army escort is also considered "journalism," in the Middle East's "only democracy." Ask most of the military correspondents: They're certain that they are journalists.

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit issued this statement to Haaretz this week: "In the course of operational activity by the security forces to apprehend an individual suspected of terror activity in Anza village in the Jenin district [on September 25], local terrorists opened heavy fire against the forces, which responded with fire to eliminate the threat. That was followed by a report that a Palestinian had been shot to death. According to an investigation carried out by the IDF, the Palestinian in question apparently was in a building situated between the security forces and the terrorists, and it is possible that she was wounded during the exchange of fire between the terrorists and our forces. The incident's circumstances are being clarified." On Thursday, October 3, the IDF attacked a building [in the Tul Karm camp] where preparations were underway to carry out an act of terror against Israeli citizens. The attack was intended to remove a concrete and immediate threat. As far as is possible, the IDF avoids harming noncombatants, investing significant efforts to this end, while terrorists in Judea and Samaria carry on setting up terror infrastructure in civilian areas.

"It should be noted that the entry of Israeli citizens to Area A [under Palestinian administrative and police control] is forbidden by law. It is possible to coordinate entry to the area vis-à-vis the relevant bodies."

Gideon Levy

P.S.

• Haaretz. Oct 11, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/twilight-zone/2024-10-11/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/gunfire-here-aerial-bombing-there-israel-steps-up-the-gaza-fication-of-the-west-bank/00000192-774a-d2b4-afbe-ffdbf8580000>