

Hamas and Its Discontents

Charges and countercharges about who's responsible for civilian deaths in Gaza.

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It was 11:30 p.m. on Jan. 17, in a complex of apartment buildings at the Nuseirat refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, and Israel had just declared it would impose a unilateral ceasefire to begin at 2 a.m. The incessant sorties of Israeli jet bombers stopped almost immediately, but then suddenly there was a terrific whoosh, louder even than a bomb explosion. It was another of Hamas's homemade Qassam rockets being launched into Israel—and the mobile launchpad was smack in the middle of the four buildings, where every apartment was full, most of them with newly made refugees.

On this occasion, fortunately, there was no Israeli retaliation. At places all over Gaza, however, Palestinian civilians have not been so lucky. Israel blames Hamas for using housing areas, hospitals, schools and mosques to launch attacks into Israel or against its soldiers, provoking defensive counter-fire that it says is responsible for most of the civilian casualties. Hamas retorts that Israel was using indiscriminate force with complete disregard for civilians in the way, especially in its efforts to assassinate Hamas leaders. There are plenty of examples to support both their contentions.

In eastern Jabaliya, just north of Gaza City, an entire neighborhood—at least 50 homes—had been bombed by the Israelis, then occupied with tank units, and then methodically demolished house-by-house, some of them with bulldozers, others with high explosives. In several hours of interviews, every one of the residents interviewed in eastern Jabaliya insisted that there had been no provocation from the area, no resistance fighters, and no rocket launchings. "They are punishing us because they can't reach the resistance to punish them," said Majdi Qatari, a lawyer whose home was one of those destroyed, leaving 13 people homeless. Near him, Najah Abd Rabo shook her head and said Israeli actions were beyond comprehension. "They were claiming there are tunnels under here," she said. Hamas fighters use tunnels, often short ones that are little more than bunkers, to pop out and launch attacks and then get back in, hiding from Israel's ubiquitous surveillance drones, reemerging in a house or backyard as an unarmed civilian. "There aren't any tunnels around here, we are not resistance," she said. Yet not more than 20 feet away from Najah, there was just such a tunnel, which Israeli troops had unearthed. Right in the middle of the road, it had a convincingly camouflaged roof that matched the rest of the road. Inside it was shored up with timbers and concrete.

Down the road from the non-existent tunnel was Khalid Abd Rabo, who claimed that Israeli troops fired on his daughters and mother as they left his home under a white flag, killing Suad, 9, and Amal, 2, and gravely wounding Samer, 4, who has since been evacuated to Belgium for treatment. "The children died before my eyes," he said. "Four days later they came back and destroyed the house." Khalid, who had been a policeman with the anti-Hamas Fatah party, said the Israeli troops fired at them from only 22 yards away. His mother was wounded; he could not explain why they spared him. Surrounded by neighbors, he had no criticism of Hamas, but later on one of his relatives took a journalist aside and said that Hamas's actions had brought retaliation on such communities, while accomplishing nothing militarily. "We blame Israel but we also blame Hamas, because Hamas was not able to defend the people," he said, asking that his name not be used for fear of reprisal by Hamas militants.

Hamas officials accuse the Israelis of reflexively blaming them for provoking attacks, and even when they are retaliating, using excessive force. "I don't understand how Palestinians would use other Palestinians as a human shield," said Ahmed Yousef, Hamas's deputy foreign minister. "They consider all Palestinians collateral damage."

The most notorious of attacks killing civilians was the bombing of a UNRWA-run school, Faqhourah School, which was being used to house people newly homeless from the fighting.

Forty-three persons were killed in the attack, and some of them lay dying while troops denied them medical assistance. At least two other UNRWA schools were hit by Israeli bombs. UNRWA head John Ging said the Israeli excuse that the schools were being used as firing positions against them is implausible. "These people had already fled the fighting, some of them lost everything they had. Do you think they'd tolerate someone setting up positions there?" In addition, he said, UNRWA staff strictly controlled access to the schools and would not have allowed armed men in.

Israeli Defense Forces spokesperson Avital Leibovich, head of the IDF's foreign-press branch, counters that the military has documentary evidence including aerial surveillance tapes of the northern part of Gaza City "in which you can see schools next to [Hamas] training camps, launching sites in or near schools or from the streets themselves ... When fire is opened at us and soldiers are in a life or death situation, we protect ourselves and Hamas is accountable for casualties if it chooses to put a launching site near schools and hospitals." She also gave NEWSWEEK a copy of what she said was a [Hamas map](#) which paratroopers recovered during ground operations inside Gaza. "It shows how a neighborhood was taken and divided into three war zones. Hamas centers were scattered over the neighborhood including a gas depot with explosive charges ... On the map, you can see the Football Association and Technical School are surrounded by 45 Hamas positions, from which Hamas fired."

Many Gazans have no problem with the idea of Hamas attacking Israelis, but complain that they made a disappointing job of it this time. Only 10 Israeli soldiers were killed in the three-week-long operation, compared to more than 200 dead Hamas fighters, according to independent Palestinian figures. And thousands of rockets fired into southern Israel killed just three civilians there. "There's nothing in Gaza but buildings," said a former Fatah military commander, who gave the name Mahmoud Barbakh. "No fighter can fight except in the streets, we can't fight Israel in the open." Yet Hamas did precious little fighting, he said, while ticking off half a dozen cases of Fatah militants who were deliberately shot in the legs by Hamas during the Israeli war, some for violations of Hamas orders putting them under house arrest.

One of the most notorious incidents during the war was the Jan. 15 shelling of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society buildings in the downtown Tal-al Hawa part of Gaza City, followed by a shell hitting their Al Quds Hospital next door; the subsequent fire forced all 500 patients to be evacuated. Asked if there were any militants firing from the hospital or the Red Crescent buildings, hospital director general Dr. Khalid Judah chose his words carefully. "I am not able to say if anyone was using the PRCS buildings [the two Palestine Red Crescent Society buildings adjacent to the hospital], but I know for a fact that no one was using the hospital." In the Tal-al Hawa neighborhood nearby, however, Talal Safadi, an official in the leftist Palestinian People's Party, said that resistance fighters were firing from positions all around the hospital. He shrugged that off, having a bigger beef with Hamas. "They failed to win the battle." Or as his fellow PPP official, Walid al Awad, put it: "It was a mistake to give Israel the excuse to come in."

Perhaps a doctor at Shifa Hospital summed it up best. "Hamas doesn't care about anything," he said, "and the Israelis will kill anyone to get to Hamas." Today Hamas threw a victory parade. A few hundred young men with green flags marched through the middle of Gaza City, one of them riding on a cart at the head of the procession and holding aloft a chunk of metal, purportedly from an Israeli tank. No one lined the streets to cheer them on. No one poured out from his or her home to join the parade. Most Hamas critics in Gaza are afraid to openly say what they think, but sometimes actions (or the absence of them) speak louder than words.

With reporting by Joanna Chen/Jerusalem

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