

Narratives Under Siege: (15) “We Could not Even Bury our Daughter”



Two eight year old girls have been killed by the IOF in the Gaza Strip in less than a week. Aya Hamdan Al-Najjar (above) was killed by a rocket fired from an Israeli Apache helicopter.

On June 11, eight year old Hadeel Al-Sumairi was killed when her home in south eastern Gaza was shelled by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF). Less than a week earlier, eight year old Aya Hamdan Al-Najjar was killed by a rocket fired from an IOF helicopter. These two young girls had been living just a few kilometers apart, in villages in south eastern Gaza, near the border with Israel. Their violent deaths highlight both the continual dangers facing families who live anywhere near the Israeli border – and the grim and rising child death toll in the Gaza Strip. Sixty two children have been killed by IOF in the Gaza Strip this year - almost double the number of children who were killed by the IOF in Gaza during the whole of last year.¹

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) is still investigating the circumstances of Hadeel Al-Sumairi’s death. Her uncle, Amin Suleiman Ahmad Al-Sumairi, has given PCHR an eye-witness account of the IOF invasion of Al-Qarara village near Khan Yunis, where Hadeel was killed. “I was at home when I heard a huge explosion. I ran from my house and saw fire coming from the home of my brother, Abdul Karim” he told PCHR. “As I ran towards the house I could smell burning flesh.” The IOF had just fired two tank shells into Al-Qarara village, and both shells struck the house where Abdul Karim Al-Sumairi and his family lived. His daughter, Hadeel, was killed instantly, her small body dismembered.

Six days earlier, On June 5, Zahra Ibrahim Al-Najjar, was at her in home in nearby Khizaa village with her young daughter, Aya. “My daughter had finished school just one week earlier and was waiting for her friends to come and join her” says Zahra Al-Najjar.

¹ 34 children were killed by IOF in the Gaza Strip in 2007: source – PCHR.

“At about 2pm I heard the sound of [Israeli] drones and helicopters. I went to the window to see what was happening, but I didn’t see anyone outside. I thought Aya was inside our building, or with a neighbour. Then there was a loud explosion.”

The helicopter had just fired a rocket, which, with pinpoint accuracy, hit eight year old Aya as she stood just three or four metres from her own house. Zahra Al-Najjar, who was struck in the head by shrapnel from the rocket, did not know her daughter had just been killed. It was the neighbours who found a small hand in the rubble outside. After collecting the other parts of Aya’s body, which were scattered over a distance of more than 150 metres, they then had the grim task of telling Zahra and her husband, Hamdan Hamdan Al-Najjar, that their daughter was dead.

Zahra and Hamdan Al-Najjar believe that Aya was deliberately targeted by the IOF in retaliation for the death of an Israeli civilian earlier the same day. The Israeli man was killed between 11-12 am, by mortar shells fired from inside the Gaza Strip that struck the Nir Oz kibbutz near south eastern Gaza. “The mortars [that killed the Israeli] had been fired at least two hours before Aya was killed” says Hamdan Al-Najjar. “But those mortars were not fired from here, there was no shooting in our village, and there was no-one outside our house except for my daughter. She was not carrying a gun and she did not fire a rocket. They wanted revenge for the death of the Israeli.”

Parents of other children that have been killed by the IOF in Gaza this year have also consistently alleged that their children were deliberately targeted by the IOF. On 20 May, twelve year Majde Ziyad Abu Oukal was killed in Jabalia, northern Gaza, by a missile fired from an IOF drone that dismembered him. His parents, Ziyad and Tahariya Abu Oukal, believe he was deliberately targeted in order to pressurize local parents to stop rockets being launched towards Israel.

The deliberate targeting of civilians is illegal under international human rights law, and constitutes a gross violation of human rights amounting to a war crime. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights is investigating these allegations in depth, and this summer will publish its findings in a report on child killings committed by the Israeli Occupying Forces in the Gaza Strip.

Driving along the eastern border of the Gaza Strip is a sinister experience. In between villages like Al-Qarara and Khizaa are vast tracts of empty land and hundreds of boarded up and abandoned houses. The IOF make frequent incursions here, and local Palestinian villagers are fleeing in fear of their lives, and the lives of their children.

“The Israelis can see everything from their planes” says Hamdan Al-Najjar. “They could see Aya was alone outside - and they could see she was just a small child. When we finally saw [the remains of] our daughter, there was almost nothing left of her. We could not even bury her properly, because her body had been completely destroyed.” All that Aya’s parents have left of their daughter now is one small, grainy photograph.