

'I'm bored, so I shoot'

Israeli army's approval of free-for-all violence in Gaza



By Oren Ziv
Photojournalist,
reporter

INVESTIGATION

In early June, Al Jazeera aired a series of disturbing videos revealing what it described as "summary executions": Israeli soldiers shooting dead several Palestinians walking near the coastal road in the Gaza Strip on three separate occasions. In each case, the Palestinians appeared unarmed and did not pose any imminent threat to the soldiers.

Such footage is rare, due to the severe constraints faced by journalists in the besieged enclave and the constant danger to their lives. But these executions, which did not appear to have any security rationale, are consistent with the testimonies of six Israeli soldiers who spoke to +972 Magazine and Local Call following their release from active duty in Gaza in recent months. Corroborating the testimonies of Palestinian eyewitnesses and doctors throughout the war, the soldiers described being authorized to open fire on Palestinians virtually at will, including civilians.

The six sources — all except one of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity — recounted how Israeli soldiers routinely executed Palestinian civilians simply because they entered an area that the military defined as a "no-go zone". The testimonies paint a picture of a landscape littered with civilian corpses, which are left to rot or be eaten by stray animals; the army only hides them from view ahead of the arrival of international aid convoys, so that "images of people in advanced stages of decay don't come out." Two of the soldiers also testified to a systematic policy of setting Palestinian homes on fire after occupying them.

Several sources described how the ability to shoot without restrictions gave soldiers a way to blow off steam or relieve the dullness of their daily routine. "People want to experience the event [fully]," S., a reservist who served in northern Gaza, recalled. "I personally fired a few bullets for no reason, into the sea or at the sidewalk or an abandoned building. They report it as 'normal fire,' which is a code-name for 'I'm bored, so I shoot.'"

Since the 1980s, the Israeli military has refused to disclose its open-fire regulations, despite various petitions to the High Court of Justice. According to political sociologist Yagil Levy, since the Second Intifada, "the army has not given soldiers written rules of engagement," leaving much open to the interpretation of soldiers in the field and their commanders. As well as contributing to the killing of over 38,000 Palestinians, sources testified that these lax directives were also partly responsible for the high number of soldiers killed by friendly fire in recent months.

"There was total freedom of action," said B., another soldier who served in the regular forces in Gaza for months, including in his battalion's command center. "If there is [even] a feeling of threat, there is no need to explain — you just shoot." When soldiers see someone approaching, "it is permissible to shoot at their center of mass [their body], not into the air," B. continued. "It's permissible to shoot everyone, a young girl, an old woman."

B. went on to describe an incident in November when soldiers killed several civilians during the evacuation of a school close to the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, which had served as a shelter for displaced Palestinians. The army ordered the evacuees to exit to the left, toward the sea, rather than to the right, where the soldiers were stationed. When a gunfight erupted inside the school, those who veered the wrong way in the ensuing chaos were immediately fired at.

"There was intelligence that Hamas wanted to create panic," B. said. "A battle started inside; people ran away. Some fled left toward the sea, [but] some ran to the right, including children. Everyone who went to the right was killed — 15 to 20 people. There was a pile of bodies."

'People shot as they pleased, with all their might'

B. said that it was difficult to distinguish civilians from combatants in Gaza, claiming that members of Hamas often "walk around without their weapons". But as a result, "every man between the ages of 16 and 50 is suspected of being a terrorist." "It is forbidden to walk around, and everyone who is outside is suspicious," B. continued. "If we see someone in a window looking at us, he is a suspect. You shoot. The [army's] perception is that any contact [with the population] endangers the forces, and a situation must be created in which it is forbidden to approach [the soldiers] under any circumstances. [The Palestinians] learned that when we enter, they run away."

Even in seemingly unpopulated or abandoned areas of Gaza, soldiers engaged in extensive shooting in a procedure known as "demonstrating presence". S. testified that his fellow soldiers would "shoot a lot, even for no reason — anyone who wants to shoot, no matter what the reason, shoots". In some cases, he noted, this was "intended to ... remove people [from their hiding places] or to demonstrate presence."

M., another reservist who served in the Gaza Strip, explained that such orders would come directly from the commanders of the company or battalion in the field. "When there are no [other] IDF forces [in the area] ... the shooting is very unrestricted, like crazy. And not just small arms: machine guns, tanks, and mortars."

Even in the absence of orders from above, M. testified that soldiers in the field regularly take the law into their own hands. "Regular soldiers, junior officers, battalion commanders — the junior ranks who want to shoot, they get permission." S. remembered hearing over the radio about a soldier stationed in a protective compound who shot a Palestinian family walking around nearby. "At first, they say 'four people.' It turns into

two children plus two adults, and by the end, it's a man, a woman, and two children. You can assemble the picture yourself."

Only one of the soldiers interviewed for this investigation was willing to be identified by name: Yuval Green, a 26-year-old reservist from Jerusalem who served in the 55th Paratroopers Brigade in November and December last year (Green recently signed a letter by 41 reservists declaring their refusal to continue serving in Gaza, following the army's invasion of Rafah). "There were no restrictions on ammunition," Green told +972 and Local Call. "People were shooting just to relieve the boredom."

Green described an incident that occurred one night during the Jewish festival of Hanukkah in December, when "the whole battalion opened fire together like fireworks, including tracer ammunition [which generates a bright light]. It made a crazy color, illuminating the sky, and because [Hanukkah] is the 'festival of lights,' it became symbolic."

C., another soldier who served in Gaza, explained that when soldiers heard gunshots, they radioed in to clarify whether there was another Israeli military unit in the area, and if not, they opened fire. "People shot as they pleased, with all their might." But as C. noted, unrestricted shooting meant that soldiers are often exposed to the huge risk of friendly fire — which he described as "more dangerous than Hamas". "On multiple occasions, IDF forces fired in our direction. We didn't respond, we checked on the radio, and no one was hurt."

At the time of writing, 324 Israeli soldiers have been killed in Gaza since the ground invasion began, at least 28 of them by friendly fire according to the army. In Green's experience, such incidents were the "main issue" endangering soldiers' lives. "There was quite a bit [of friendly fire]; it drove me crazy," he said.

For Green, the rules of engagement also demonstrated a deep indifference to the fate of

”

Israeli soldiers describe the near-total absence of firing regulations in the Gaza war, with troops shooting as they please, setting homes ablaze, and leaving corpses on the streets — all with their commanders' permission.



An Israeli soldier from the 8717 Battalion of the Givati Brigade looks over the ruined Beit Lahia, northern Gaza Strip, on December 28, 2023.
● YONATAN SINDEL/FLASH90