the captives. "They told me about a practice of blowing up tunnels, and I thought to myself that if there were hostages [in them], it would kill them." After Israeli soldiers in Shuja'iyya killed three captives waving white flags in December, thinking they were Palestinians, Green said he was angry but was told "there's nothing we can do." "[The commanders] sharpened procedures, saying 'You have to pay attention and be sensitive, but we are in a combat zone, and we have to be alert.'"

B. confirmed that even after the mishap in Shuja'iyya, which was said to be "contrary to the orders" of the military, the open-fire regulations did not change. "As for the hostages, we didn't have a specific directive," he recalled. "[The army's top brass] said that after the shooting of the hostages, they briefed [soldiers in the field]. [But] they didn't talk to us." He and the soldiers who were with him heard about the shooting of the captives only two and a half weeks after the incident, after they left Gaza.

"I've heard statements [from other soldiers] that the hostages are dead, they don't stand a chance, they have to be abandoned," Green noted. "[This] bothered me the most ... that they kept saying, 'We're here for the hostages,' but it is clear that the war harms the hostages. That was my thought then; today it turned out to be true."

'Wow, what fun' to see buildings come down

A., an officer who served in the army's Operations Directorate, testified that his brigade's operations room — which coordinates the fighting from outside Gaza, approving targets and preventing friendly fire — did not receive clear open-fire orders to transmit to soldiers on the ground. "From the moment you enter, at no point is there a briefing," he said. "We didn't receive instructions from higher up to pass on to the soldiers and battalion commanders."

He noted that there were instructions not to shoot along humanitarian routes, but elsewhere, "you fill in the blanks, in the absence of any other directive. This is the approach: 'If it is forbidden there, then it is permitted here.'"

A. explained that shooting at "hospitals, clinics, schools, religious institutions, [and] buildings of international organizations" required higher authorization. But in practice, "I can count on one hand the cases where we were told not to shoot. Even with sensitive things like schools, [approval] feels like only a formality."

In general, A. continued, "The spirit in the operations room was 'Shoot first, ask questions later.' That was the consensus ... No one will shed a tear if we flatten a house when there was no need, or if we shoot someone who we didn't have to."

A. said he was aware of cases in which Israeli soldiers shot Palestinian civilians who entered their area of operation, consistent with a Haaretz investigation into "kill zones" in areas of Gaza under the army's occupation. "This is the default. No civilians are supposed to be in the area, that's the perspective. We spotted someone in a window, so they fired and killed him." A. added that it often was not clear from the reports whether soldiers had shot militants or unarmed civilians — and "many times, it sounded like someone was caught up in a situation, and we opened fire."

But this ambiguity about the identity of victims meant that, for A., military reports about the numbers of Hamas members killed could not be trusted. "The feeling in the war room, and this is a softened version,

was that every person we killed, we counted him as a terrorist," he testified.

"The aim was to count how many [terrorists] we killed today," A. continued. "Every [soldier] wants to show that he's the big guy. The perception was that all the men were terrorists. Sometimes a commander would suddenly ask for numbers, and then the officer of the division would run from brigade to brigade going through the list in the military's computer system and count."

A.'s testimony is consistent with a recent report from the Israeli outlet Mako, about a drone strike by one brigade that killed Palestinians in another brigade's area of operation. Officers from both brigades consulted on which one should register the assassinations. "What difference does it make? Register it to both of us," one of them told the other, according to the publication.

During the first weeks after the Hamas-led October 7 attack, A. recalled, "people were feeling very guilty that this happened on our watch," a feeling that was shared among the Israeli public writ large — and quickly transformed into a desire for retribution. "There was no direct order to take revenge," A. said, "but when you reach decision junctures, the instructions, orders, and protocols [regarding 'sensitive' cases] only have so much influence."

When drones would livestream footage of attacks in Gaza, "there were cheers of joy in the war room," A. said. "Every once in a while, a building comes down ... and the feeling is, 'Wow, how crazy, what fun.'"

A. noted the irony that part of what motivated Israelis' calls for revenge was the belief that Palestinians in Gaza rejoiced in the death and destruction of October 7. To justify abandoning the distinction between civilians and combatants, people would resort to such statements as "'They handed out sweets,' 'They danced after October 7,' or 'They elected Hamas' ... Not everyone, but also quite a few, thought that today's child [is] tomorrow's terrorist."

"I, too, a rather left-wing soldier, forget very quickly that these are real homes [in Gaza]," A. said of his experience in the operations room. "It felt like a computer game. Only after two weeks did I realize that these are [actual] buildings that are falling: if there are inhabitants [inside], then [the buildings are collapsing] on their heads, and even if not, then with everything inside them."

'A horrific smell of death'

Multiple soldiers testified that the permissive shooting policy has enabled Israeli units to kill Palestinian civilians even when they are identified as such beforehand. D., a reservist, said that his brigade was stationed next to two so-called "humanitarian" travel corridors, one for aid organizations and one for civilians fleeing from the north to the south of the Strip. Within his brigade's area of operation, they instituted a "red line, green line" policy, delineating zones where it was forbidden for civilians to enter.

According to D., aid organizations were permitted to travel into these zones with prior coordination (our interview was conducted before a series of Israeli precision strikes killed seven World Central Kitchen employees), but for Palestinians it was different. "Anyone who crossed into the green area would become a potential target," D. said, claiming that these areas were signposted to civilians. "If they cross the red line, you report it on the radio and you don't need to wait for permission, you can shoot."

Yet D. said that civilians often came into areas where aid convoys passed

Israeli female soldiers pose for a photo on a position on the Gaza Strip border, in southern Israel, on February 19, 2024.
● *TSAFRIR ABAYOV/AP*

through in order to look for scraps that might fall from the trucks; nonetheless, the policy was to shoot anyone who tried to enter. "The civilians are clearly refugees, they are desperate, they have nothing," he said. Yet in the early months of the war, "every day there were two or three incidents with innocent people or [people] who were suspected of being sent by Hamas as spotters," whom soldiers in his battalion shot. The soldiers testified that throughout Gaza, corpses of Palestinians in civilian clothes remained scattered along roads and open ground. "The whole area was full of bodies," said S., a reservist. "There are also dogs, cows, and horses that survived the bombings and have nowhere to go. We can't feed them, and we don't want them to get too close either. So, you occasionally see dogs walking around with rotting body parts. There is a horrific smell of death."

But before the humanitarian convoys arrive, S. noted, the bodies are removed. "A D-9 [Caterpillar bulldozer] goes down, with a tank, and clears the area of corpses, buries them under the rubble, and flips [them] aside so that the convoys don't see it — [so that] images of people in advanced stages of decay don't come out," he described.

"I saw a lot of [Palestinian] civilians — families, women, children," S. continued. "There are more fatalities than are reported. We were in a small area. Every day, at least one

or two [civilians] are killed [because] they walked in a no-go area. I don't know who is a terrorist and who is not, but most of them did not carry weapons."

Green said that when he arrived in Khan Younis at the end of December, "We saw some indistinct mass outside a house. We realized it was a body; we saw a leg. At night, cats ate it. Then, someone came and moved it."

A non-military source who spoke to +972 and Local Call after visiting northern Gaza also reported seeing bodies strewn around the area. "Near the army compound between the northern and southern Gaza Strip, we saw about 10 bodies shot in the head, apparently by a sniper, [seemingly while] trying to return to the north," he said. "The bodies were decomposing; there were dogs and cats around them."

"They don't deal with the bodies," B. said of the Israeli soldiers in Gaza. "If they're in the way, they get moved to the side. There's no burial of the dead. Soldiers stepped on bodies by mistake."

Last month, Guy Zaken, a soldier who operated D-9 bulldozers in Gaza, testified before a Knesset committee that he and his crew "ran over hundreds of terrorists, dead and alive". Another soldier he served with subsequently committed suicide.

The full article first appeared on +972 Magazine.

> 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 Yuval 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.

This screengrab shows an Israeli soldier indiscriminately firing on Palestinian residential buildings in Gaza without aiming carefully while smoking a cigarette.
● *X*