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Gaza: The children killed in a war the world doesn't want to know about

By Donald Macintyre In Rafah

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Nayef Abu Snaima says his 14-year-old cousin Jihad had been sitting on the edge of an olive grove talking animatedly to him about what he would do when he grew up when he was killed instantly by an Israeli shell.

He says he clearly saw a bright flash next to the control tower of the disused Gaza international airport, occupied by Israeli forces after Cpl Gilad Shalit was seized by militants on 25 June. "I went two or three steps and the missile landed," said Nayef, 24. "I thought I was dying. I shouted 'La Ilaha Ila Allah' [There is no God but Allah]."

When Jihad's older brother Kassem, 20, arrived at the scene: "My brother was already dead. There was shrapnel in his head. Nayef was shouting 'Allah, Allah'. The missile landed about four metres from where Jihad had been standing. There was shrapnel in his body as well, his legs, everything. He had been bleeding a lot everywhere."

Jihad Abu Snaima was just the most recent of more than 37 children and teenagers under 18 killed [out of a total death toll, including militants, of 228] in the operations mounted by the Israeli military in Gaza since 25 June, according to figures from the Palestinian Centre of Human Rights (PCHR).

Of these, the PCHR classifies 151 as "civilian", although beside non-combatants and bystanders, that total also includes militants or faction members not involved in operations against Israel at the time for example those deliberately targeted in Israeli air strikes because of their involvement in previous attacks. The Israel Defence Forces have always maintained that being under 18 does not automatically exclude a person from taking part in action against them.

The conflict in Gaza has attracted relatively little international attention, not least because for five weeks it was overshadowed by that in Lebanon. But the death toll has continued to rise.

Nayef, who was speaking from his hospital bed, has multiple shrapnel-inflicted cuts on his plaster-covered arms and legs. But he was lucky compared with Jihad. A school caretaker with a five-year-old daughter, Nayef insists the evening of Jihad's death was just a family get-together. It is normal, he said, in this Bedouin community in the Al Shouka hamlet outside the southernmost Gaza town of Rafah to socialise at each other's homes on a summer evening, and that he and Jihad were especially close.

"I was always with him. He was an innocent person, kind. He was talking to me about how he was going to inherit part of his father's land and farm it and how he was going to get married and stay here." Nayef added tearfully: "He was a boy who had hopes. He wanted to live his life." He added: "What is my daughter going to think? She is going to grow up hating the Israelis."

The family say there was no shelling in the area at the time either before or after the incident; and that they therefore presume Jihad and Nayef were targeted by a tank crew. They insist there was no activity by militants against Israeli positions on the day of the attack. "This is an open area," said Nayef. "The resistance would not go there because they would be seen."

By contrast, the Israel Defence Forces said, without specifying Al Shouka, that on 10 September it had identified and hit "two men" moving near its forces in southern Gaza crouching on the ground, and "apparently planting explosives". Nayef is adamant that on the night in question he and Jihad were merely pausing on an evening stroll to his own house.

The PCHR, which seeks to monitor every violent Palestinian death, does not only focus on the Israel-Palestinian conflict. It has, for example, repeatedly condemned the killing and injuring of growing numbers of civilians, also including children, during mounting inter-Palestinian disputes in Gaza; shootings by Palestinian security forces themselves; attacks on Christian churches by Muslims protesting against the Pope; the injury of civilians, including children, by Palestinian-fired Qassam rockets which fall short of targets in Israel; and the kidnapping last month of two Fox TV employees which has deterred journalists from visiting Gaza.

But Hamdi Shaqura of PCHR's Gaza office which accuses Israel of using repeated closures and destruction of the power supply to operate a policy of "collective punishment" in breach of international law in Gaza, argues that the excuse of "collateral damage" cannot justify the "very high" death toll in the operations since 15 June. He adds: "Israel's forces have been acting excessively and disproportionately, and this explains the high figures for the number of innocent civilians killed by them."

At the other, northern end of Gaza, close to the al-Nada apartment blocks between Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya, Aref Abu Qaida, 16, was killed by an artillery shell on 1 August. Sharif Harafin, 15, said: "We had been playing football and we had just finished. I was carrying the ball. I was going to my home, and [Aref] was going to his home. I heard a loud boom and then I saw him cut to pieces."

As his family displayed Aref's shredded red baseball cap, Sharif said he saw his friend's severed head on the ground, adding: "His chest was torn out by the rocket. People were collecting parts of his body. I was crying a lot."

The IDF says that on 1 August it had fired and hit "a number of Palestinians" in "the area of Beit Lahiya" who had "approached a number of rocket launchers placed in the area". Both PCHR and local residents, including Mohammed Abu Qaida, 39, the dead boy's uncle, say that, while three other civilians were wounded, the only other death in this incident was that of Mervat Sharekh, 24, a woman who was visiting relatives from Rafah and who died in hospital an hour later.

Although the area had been shelled before, and some residents had fled in response to Israeli warnings the previous week, Mr Abu Qaida said the area had been quiet on the day except that Qassam rockets had been fired about four hours earlier from northern settlements more than a kilometre away from the flats.

The IDF said last night that, of those killed in Gaza, it had the "positive identities of over 220 gunmen killed in fighting, and can confirm their affiliation with terror organisations". The 220 figure said to be "unbelievable" by Mr Shaqura coupled with another 20 dead which the military acknowledges as genuine civilians, is all the more strikingly at variance with PCHR figures since it produces a total exceeding the centre's own records.

Mr Shaqura said that, at the absolute minimum, the IDF figures do not take into account the casualties under 18 which PCHR estimates at 44 and from which he said every effort is made to exclude the "rare" teenagers with militant connections or eight women killed since 25 June. "We do not believe their figures. We do not believe their investigations."

The IDF said: "Since the abduction of Cpl Gilad Shalit by the Hamas and PRC terror organisations, the IDF has been operating in the Gaza Strip against terrorist infrastructure and in order to secure the release of Cpl Shalit. In the course of the operations, the IDF engaged in intense fighting with Palestinian gunmen, who chose heavily populated areas as their battlegrounds. The IDF takes every measure to prevent harm to civilians, often at a risk to its soldiers."

The forgotten war in the Middle East

* 25 June: Palestinian gunmen from the Hamas-linked Izzedine al-Qassam brigades cross from Gaza into Israel and launch a raid on an Israeli military patrol. Two Israeli soldiers are killed, four wounded and one, Cpl Gilad Shalit, is captured and taken back into Gaza.

* 28 June: Israel masses troops before launching a reoccupation of the Gaza Strip under the codename Operation Summer Rains. Civilian casualties mount as Israeli forces search the Khan Younis refugee camp for Cpl Shalit.

* 12 July: Mimicking the tactics of Palestinian militants, Hizbollah launches mortars and rockets into northern Israel from southern Lebanon to divert attention from a cross-border raid that ambushes an Israeli military patrol, killing three soldiers and capturing two others. The raid threatens to draw the whole Middle East into conflict.

* 13 July: International attention is diverted from Gaza as Israel launches a full military invasion of southern Lebanon in response to Hizbollah's attack. The mounting civilian death toll across Gaza pales in comparison to Lebanon as Israeli jets pummel infrastructure.

* 24 July: As world powers frantically search for a UN-backed ceasefire in Lebanon, Israel increases its bombardment of the Gaza Strip in an attempt to force Palestinian militants to release Cpl Shalit. Under the codename Operation Samson's Pillars, Israeli jets pound Gaza's roads and buildings, including the power station.

* 14 August: UN approves a ceasefire for Lebanon after four weeks of fighting which has left approximately 1,500 Lebanese and 150 Israelis dead. International community continues to ignore the conflict in Gaza over fears that Lebanon could slip back into warfare unless a UN peacekeeping force arrives in the region.

* Mid-August-present: Israel continues to carry out air strikes and raids in Gaza. At least 33 civilians have been killed since the beginning of August, 10 of whom were under the age of 18.

Names of children under the age of 18 killed during the operations mounted by the Israeli military in Gaza since 25 June, according to the Palestinian Centre of Human Rights

Bara Nasser Habib, 3 (hit by shrapnel to the head and body, Gaza City, 26 July)
Shahed Saleh Al-Sheikh Eid, 3 days old (bled to death after airstrike, Al-Shouka, 4 August)
Rajaa Salam Abu Shaban, 3 (died of fractured skull in air raid, Gaza City, 9 August)
Jihad Selmi Abu Snaima, 14 (killed by a shell, Al-Shoukha, 10 September)
Khaled Nidal Wahba, 15 months (died of wounds from an airstrike, 10 July)
Rawan Farid Hajjaj, 6 (killed with his mother and sister in an airstrike, Gaza City, 8 July)
Anwar Ismail Abdul Ghani Atallah, 12 (shot in the head, Erez, 5 July)
Shadi Yousef Omar 16 (shot in the chest by IDF, Beit Lahya, 7 July)
Mahfouth Farid Nuseir, 16 (killed by missile while playing football, Beit Hanoun, 11 July)
Ahmad Ghalib Abu Amsha, 16, (killed by missile while playing football, Beit Hanoun, 11 July)
Ahmad Fathi Shabat, 16 (killed by missile while playing football, Beit Hanoun, 11 July)
Walid Mahmoud El-Zeinati, 12 (died of shrapnel wounds, Gaza City, 11 July)
Basma Salmeya, 16 (killed in Israeli airstrike, 12 July, Jabalia)
Somaya Salmeya, 17 (killed in Israeli airstrike, 12 July, Jabalia)

Aya Salmeya, 9 (killed in Israeli airstrike, Jabalia, 12 July)
Yehya Salmeya, 10 (killed in Israeli airstrike, Jabalia, 12 July)
Nasr Salmeya, 7 (killed in Israeli airstrike, Jabalia, 12 July)
Huda Salmeya, 13 (killed in Israeli airstrike, Jabalia, 12 July)
Eman Salmeya, 12 (killed in Israeli airstrike, Jabalia, 12 July)
Raji Omar Jaber Daifallah, 16 (died of shrapnel wounds from missile, Gaza City, 13 July)
Ali Kamel Al-Najjar, 16 (killed by Israeli tank shell, Al-Maghazi refugee camp, 19 July)
Ahmed Ali Al-Na'ami, 16 (killed by Israeli tank shell, Al-Maghazi refugee camp, 19 July)
Ahmed Rawhi Abu Abdu, 14 (killed by drone missile, Al Nusairat refugee camp, 19 July)
Mohammed 'awad Muhra, 14 (killed by Israeli bullet to the chest, Al-Maghazi refugee camp, 20 July)
Fadwa Faisal Al-'arrouqi, 13 (died from shrapnel wounds, Gaza City, 20 July)
Saleh Ibrahim Nasser, 14 (killed by artillery fire, Beit Hanoun, 24 July)
Khitam Mohammed Rebhi Tayeh, 11 (killed by artillery fire, Beit Hanoun, 24 July)
Ashraf 'abdullah 'awad Abu Zaher, 14 (shot in the back, Khan Younis, 25 July)
Nahid Mohammed Fawzi Al-Shanbari, 16 (killed by artillery fire, Beit Hanoun, 31 July)
'aaref Ahmed Abu Qaida, 14 (killed by artillery fire, Beit Hanoun, 1 August)
Anis Salem Abu Awad, 12 (killed by airstrike, Al-Shouka, 2 August)
Ammar Rajaa Al-Natour, 17 (killed by drone missile, Al Shouka, 5 August)
Kifah Rajaa Al-Natour, 15 (killed by drone missile, Al Shouka, 5 August)
Ibrahim Suleiman Al-Rumailat, 13 (killed by drone missile, Al Shouka, 5 August)
Ahmed Yousef 'abed 'aashour, 13 (killed by missile fire, Beit Hanoun, 14 August)
Mohammed 'abdullah Al-Ziq, 14 (killed by drone missile, Gaza City, 29 August)
Nidal 'abdul 'aziz Al-Dahdouh, 14 (killed by rifle fire, Gaza City, 30 August)
Jihad Selmi Abu Snaima, 14 (killed by artillery fire, Rafah, 10 September)