

## Israel's shooting of young girl highlights international hypocrisy, say Palestinians

Chris McGreal in Khan Yunis

**01/30/06 "The Guardian"** -- -- As the votes were counted in the Palestinian election and the scale of Hamas's landslide became apparent to the world, Aya al-Astal drifted away from her home and wandered towards the fence along the border between the Gaza strip and Israel.

The nine-year-old girl's parents realised she was gone as they watched the election results on television. They do not know precisely what happened, but the Israeli army later said Aya was behaving in a suspicious manner reminiscent of a terrorist - she got too close to the border fence - and so a soldier fired several bullets into the child, hitting her in the neck and blowing open her stomach.

Aya was the second child killed by the Israeli army last week. Soldiers near Ramallah shot 13-year-old Munadel Abu Aalia in the back as he walked along a road reserved for Jewish settlers with two friends. The army said the boys planned to throw rocks at Israeli cars, which the military defines as terrorism.

The two killings went unnoticed by the outside world amid the political drama, but they made their impact among Palestinians angered by demands from western leaders for Hamas to recognise Israel and renounce its armed struggle.

Some Palestinians see the demands as a rejection of a democratic election and as siding with Israel. Others see hypocrisy. They say Israeli soldiers killed twice as many Palestinians last week alone - both of them children - as the number of Israelis killed by Hamas all last year.

"Aya was shot in the neck and stomach. Her stomach was hanging out," said the child's mother, Aisha. "We have no idea why she went there but she was a child. She was so small. She was nine years old. She didn't wear a hijab. It was clear she was just a young girl. This is hatred."

Hamas is responsible for the murder of more than 400 Israelis. But since it declared a ceasefire a year ago the group has killed one Israeli, according to the Israeli government's own figures. Sasson Nuriel was kidnapped in September and forced to record a video demanding the release of prisoners. Hamas said it shot him when the army got close to finding him.

Hamas also carried out a suicide bombing at Beer Sheva bus station in August that seriously wounded two security guards, and it was behind some of the attacks by rudimentary rockets fired from Gaza into Israel that frequently terrify but rarely kill. Hamas said it launched the rockets in response to Israeli attacks.

"Hamas has kept the calm for a year. Israel is still killing our civilians," said the Hamas leader in Gaza, Mahmoud al-Zahar. "Why is it that the Israelis can continue to kill our people, innocent people walking down the street, and there is no criticism from those who tell us we must give up our historic struggle against occupation? Why are they so afraid to criticise Israel but tell us what to do?"

The Astal family is politically divided. Aya's mother voted for Hamas. The child's aunt, Samir al-Astal, backed the losing party, Fatah. But there is little difference in their belief that there is a double standard at work in the foreign demands of Israel and of Palestinians.

"The Americans always give excuses for Israel," said Samir. "Israel is like a spoilt son. They never pressure them. They kill our children and no one says anything. If there is a reaction by Palestinians to these incidents they call us terrorists."

Israel said it regretted civilian deaths but added that they were accidental, unlike those caused by suicide bombs. It said Hamas was "intensively involved in terrorist actions" despite the ceasefire.

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