

Israel's Haaretz daily newspaper reveals army uses Palestinians to enter buildings and tunnels that could be booby-trapped



The image is a screenshot of a news article from Haaretz. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a search icon, the Haaretz logo, and links for 'LOG IN' and 'SUBSCRIBE NOW'. The main headline reads: 'Haaretz Investigation: Israeli Army Uses Palestinian Civilians to Inspect Potentially Booby-trapped Tunnels in Gaza'. Below the headline is a sub-headline: ''Our lives are more important than their lives': Gazans not suspected of terrorism are detained and sent as human shields to search tunnels and houses before IDF soldiers enter, with the full knowledge of senior Israeli officers, several sources say; IDF claims this practice is forbidden'. To the right of the text is a blurred photograph of two individuals in military uniforms; one is standing and the other is sitting. Below the article text are social media sharing icons for Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Email, Print, Save, and Zen Read. At the bottom left, there is a logo for 'Yaniv' and a paragraph of text: 'At first it's hard to recognize them. They're usually wearing Israeli army uniforms, many of them are in their 20s, and they're always with Israeli soldiers of various ranks.' At the bottom right, there is a caption: 'A Gazan dressed in an IDF uniform next to Israeli soldiers in a home in Rafah last month. The photo has been blurred to remove identifying features. Credit: David'.

Tel Aviv, August 18 (RHC)-- The Israeli army is systematically using Palestinian civilians as human shields during its operations in the Gaza Strip, an investigation by Israel's Haaretz daily has revealed.

According to a report published this week, the practice is conducted with the knowledge of senior military officials, including the Army Chief of Staff, Herzi Halevi.

The investigation, which is based on testimonies from Israeli soldiers and commanders, revealed that Palestinian civilians were usually wearing Israeli army uniforms and many of them were in their 20s, the daily said.

"Most of them are wearing sneakers, not army boots. And their hands are cuffed behind their backs and their faces are full of fear," it added.

The daily revealed that "random Palestinians have been used by Israeli army units in the Gaza Strip for one purpose: to serve as human shields for soldiers during operations."

'Our lives are more important than their lives'

The report describes how these civilians are forced to accompany Israeli soldiers during operations and are sent ahead of the soldiers to inspect potentially dangerous areas. The soldiers involved have reportedly been told that "our lives are more important than their lives," justifying the use of Palestinians as human shields to avoid Israeli casualties.

"There is pride in it," the report cited soldiers who choose Gazans for the missions and bring them to the brigades and battalions as saying.

Haaretz also highlighted that this practice violates international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit the use of civilians as human shields. Despite this, the practice appears to be widespread and systematic within the Israeli military operations in Gaza.

"The army has played innocent, despite footage shown on Al Jazeera about two months ago," the newspaper said.

In the footage, "Israeli soldiers can be seen dressing Palestinian detainees in uniforms and flak jackets, putting cameras on them and sending them into badly damaged houses and tunnel entrances with their hands bound by plastic ties," it added.

A soldier who took part in the use of Gazans as human shields told Haaretz: "When I saw the report from Al Jazeera, I said: 'Ah, yes, it's true.'"

"And then I saw the IDF's (army's) response, which totally doesn't reflect reality. It's done with the knowledge of the brigade commander at the least," he added.

Minors and elderly

Haaretz reported that Palestinian civilians, often minors or the elderly, are detained and used by the Israeli army across various areas in Gaza. They are forced to perform dangerous tasks such as entering tunnels or buildings ahead of the soldiers with a camera attached to their back.

"There were times when really old people were made to go into houses," a soldier said.

Palestinians were told: "Do one mission of...a (tunnel) shaft and you're free," another soldier recounted.

"Even though some Palestinians are required to remain with a unit 'only' for 24 hours, others wind up staying for two days or even a week," the report noted.

Military officials aware

The investigation also reveals that senior Israeli military officials, including Chief of Staff Halevi and Southern Command General Yaron Finkelman, were aware of this practice. Despite the practice being prohibited by international humanitarian law and previous rulings by Israel's Supreme Court, it appears to continue with the tacit approval of military leaders.

Haaretz highlighted that the use of civilians as human shields is not a new phenomenon, with similar practices reported during previous military operations. The Israeli army has faced criticism and legal challenges over these practices, but the investigation suggests that the use of Palestinian civilians as human shields has become systematic in the ongoing conflict.

Responding to the investigation, Israeli military spokesperson Daniel Hagari said the army's official policy prohibits the use of civilians as human shields and that the allegations would be investigated. However, the report suggests that this dangerous and illegal practice remains an entrenched part of military operations in Gaza.

Israel, flouting a UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate cease-fire, has faced international condemnation amid its continued brutal offensive on Gaza since an attack last October by the Palestinian resistance group Hamas.

Since then, an ongoing Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip has killed nearly 40,000 Palestinians.

Over 10 months into the Israeli war, vast tracts of Gaza lie in ruins amid a crippling blockade of food, clean water and medicine.

Israel stands accused of genocide at the International Court of Justice, which ordered it to immediately halt its military operation in the southern city of Rafah, where more than 1 million Palestinians had sought refuge from the war before it was invaded on May 6th.

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