

Branded: Satellite images show Star of David carved into Gaza



A satellite image shows a Star of David etched into the ground in Beit Hanoon in northern Gaza [Google Maps]

The symbol, apparently created by Israeli tanks, can be seen from space in the Palestinian enclave.

Gaza City, January 28 (RHC)-- Zooming in on newly released satellite images of what used to be farmland in northern Gaza, the outline of what clearly appears to be a Star of David is carved into the ground.

The symbol of both the Jewish faith and the state of Israel can be seen in images of Beit Hanoon, an area of northern Gaza that has seen extensive fighting and losses for the Israeli military.

The Netzah Yehuda Battalion, an all-male ultra-Orthodox unit, was reported to have deployed from the occupied West Bank to Gaza in January last year and has operated in Beit Hanoon.

Before its deployment, the battalion had been accused of numerous violent crimes, including what some United States officials said could amount to gross violations of human rights, including the killing of unarmed Palestinians and the torture and sexual abuse of prisoners in its custody.

Among the battalion's alleged victims was a Palestinian American man in his 80s, Omar Abdulmajeed Asaad, who died during his arrest by the Netzah Yehuda Battalion in January 2022.

After pressure from the U.S. government, Israel agreed to pay compensation to Asaad's family later that year. However, as part of the payout, the Israeli government insisted that no one in Netzah Yehuda be held accountable for Asaad's death.

The Netzah Yehuda Battalion made the Star of David "for Google Maps, to be seen that they were here", Hamze Attar, a Palestinian defence analyst, told Al Jazeera.

Attar said the act could have been a response to plans by the administration of former U.S. President Joe Biden to sanction the battalion. In August, however, the US Department of State ended its investigation into breaches of its own Leahy Laws, which prohibit the transfer of weapons to overseas military units involved in gross human rights violations, following objections by the Israeli government. The investigation had been focused on Netzah Yehuda.

"We're seeing what absolute impunity looks like in an army that is given everything it needs to destroy Palestinian life," said Elia Ayoub, researcher and author of the Hauntologies newsletter. "As in any genocide, those committing them often take pleasure in displaying their superiority by forcing their symbols on their victims. The Israeli army also utilises religious figures who speak of this genocide of Palestinians and the colonisation of Gaza as a religious duty."

Al Jazeera has contacted the Israeli Ministry of Defence regarding the Star of David etched into northern Gaza but did not receive a response by the time of publication.

The Star of David is not the first symbol left by Israeli forces. In Gaza, images uploaded to social media have shown soldiers putting up giant menorah candles or drawing Jewish symbols in the wreckage of buildings. Soldiers have done the same in southern Lebanon since Israel invaded in October.

"The [Israeli military] has rabbis on the ground, and soldiers have brought the menorah and shofar to the battlefield," Ayoub said. "This is not new. It's just much more widespread now. The Israeli religious philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz described these attitudes as that of Judeo-Nazis in the 1990s, warning that it could become the norm if not stopped. Sadly he was right."

A ceasefire on January 19 brought an end, at least temporarily, to Israel's attacks on Gaza carried out since the Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel of October 7, 2023. Those killed 1,139 people and took about 250 people captive. Israel's subsequent war on Gaza has killed at least 47,306 Palestinians in Gaza and wounded another 111,483 while displacing about 1.9 million of its 2.3 million people.

According to research by Jamon Van Den Hoek of Oregon State University and Corey Scher of the City University of New York, 60 percent of all buildings in Gaza have been destroyed by Israeli forces since the war began. In Beit Hanoon, the figure is 70 percent.

The issue of Gaza's future beyond the war received added relevance last week after U.S. President Donald Trump's suggestion that the Palestinian inhabitants of the enclave be "cleaned out."

The forced displacement of Gaza's entire population has been a cornerstone of the Israeli far right for decades.

Israel's far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who has often spoken of his desire to re-establish Israeli settlements within Gaza, welcomed Trump's suggestion, pledging: "I will, with God's help, work with the prime minister and the cabinet to ensure there is an operational plan to implement this as soon as possible."

"Branding is about ownership. It's about marking your territory," said Chris Arning, the founder and director of Creative Semiotics, a consultancy specialising in the meaning of brand symbols. "Branding originally came from tradespeople marking their products or farmers branding their cattle to signify ownership. Over time, that also included the branding of convicts and slaves."

The carving of the Star of David into the soil of Beit Hanoon can be seen as an act of symbolic violence, Arning said, referring to the violence that symbol represents in the local context.

"In many ways," Arning continued, "it's branding the land."

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