

The Killing of Salem Khalil Shammaly

Testimony of Eran Efrati

Eran Efrati was a sergeant in the Israeli Defense Force, and has been researching the Israeli military since 2008. He brought to light soldiers' testimonies about the use of white phosphorous in Operation 'Cast Lead' in 2008/9, and his investigative reports on the operation were published in the Goldstone report for the UN. During Operation 'Defensive Edge', he collected testimonies along the Gaza border.

Shuja'iyya is a neighbourhood in the East of Gaza City, home to almost 100,000 residents. It is one of the most impoverished and densely populated neighbourhoods in Gaza. Between July 19th and 23rd, 2014, the height of the massacre in Shuja'iyya, it is estimated that between 90 and 120 Palestinians were killed and 400 more were injured. The dead included at least 22 children, 19 women and seven elderly Palestinians. 884 buildings were hit by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF); 604 were utterly destroyed. During operation 'Defensive Edge', the facilities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) were overflowing, so the Shuja'iyya residents fleeing the bombing could not find shelter.

The Golani Brigade of the IDF was the first to enter the neighbourhood on the night of 19 July 2014, and was met with resistance. It thus requested backup, which arrived in the form of 600 tank shells as well as aerial bombing. An M-113 armoured vehicle of the IDF was targeted and hit, causing the death of seven combatants from the Golani Brigade. Later on that day, six more Golani soldiers were killed in the fighting, a rare occurrence during recent offensives in Gaza. During the combat, according to IDF officials, IDF forces dropped one ton bombs on at least 120 separate targets from the air. The armoured corps, advancing into the neighbourhood on 20 July, received the order to 'open fire at anything that moved'. At the same time, a military spokesperson announced that Israel would be 'taking off the gloves' in Shuja'iyya. A senior military official told the press that the IDF would be

pursing the ‘Dahiya Doctrine’, referring to a method used by the IDF in Beirut in 2006, whereby the neighbourhood of Dahiya was bombed intensively following the capture of two Israeli soldiers.

According to Pentagon reporting, as relayed by an American military officer, eleven battalions deployed 258 artillery pieces and fired 7,000 shells into the neighbourhood, 4,800 of which were shot in the course of seven hours. Another American expert claimed the only explanation for such use of firepower was ‘to kill a lot of people in as short a time as possible’.

On 20 July, soldiers from the Golani Brigade, along with two other units and covered by the armoured corps and the air force, advanced into the neighborhood and captured houses as bases. I collected testimonies independently from three soldiers who were stationed in two of these houses. Two of them are Golani combatants, stationed in the house from which Salem Shammaly would later be shot, and would witness the killing first hand. The third is an officer stationed with his soldiers in a house two buildings to the east, and would also witness the killing first hand.

Upon capturing the houses, the first order was to break the floor tiles so as to use the sand underneath them for sand bags to shield the windows. The second was to clear the main living room of all Palestinian belongings and to throw them into a back room. The third was to create guarding stations; two at the main entrance to the house, one at the back, and three at the front windows. The fourth was to create a ‘sniper’s position’ by breaking a narrow hole in the exterior wall under one of the windows, and to position a sniper there. Finally, the commanding officers drew an invisible red line on the ground between two houses amidst the rubble, which all soldiers would identify as the ‘death line’ – a line that whoever crosses it is deemed a danger to the soldiers and is therefore to be killed immediately by shooting to the centre of his body. Three of the soldiers who spoke to me relayed that already then it seemed strange to them that the ‘death line’ was drawn quite far, several hundred metres, from the house in which they were stationed. While a ‘death line’ has been previously used by the IDF, it has seldom been drawn so far from the soldiers.

The soldiers were then asked to wait for further orders. At 10am they received a briefing, in which they were officially told something that had until then been said only informally. They were told that the officers understood their frustration and their pain at the loss of their fellow soldiers, that they did not die in vain, and that they would soon have a chance to ‘take out’ this frustration and to avenge the death of their friends.



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At 12 midday a new order was given, declaring that a ceasefire would take effect at 1pm. The soldiers began preparations for the ceasefire.

According to Hesham Naser Shammaly, his family stayed behind to protect their valuable clothing stock. As a consequence, his uncle, aunt and two cousins were shot by the IDF. His father was also shot as he tried to speak to approaching soldiers, but survived. During the ceasefire

later that afternoon, his cousin, Salem Shammaly, 23, returned home to the neighbourhood to look for surviving relatives amidst the rubble. As he approached the place where his house once stood, a shot was fired, causing Shammaly and other Palestinians and international activists to take momentary shelter in a nearby alley, before returning to search the rubble. Then, at 3:30pm, as he returned to walk and call out the names of his relatives, he unknowingly crossed the death line. At this moment the Golani sniper recognised Salem Khalil Shammaly putting one leg over the death line. In the three independent interviews I conducted, they all brought up Shammaly's green shirt, which drew the attention of both the sniper and the commanding officer in the other house. Shammaly was an easy target because of his brightly coloured shirt.

The sniper announced that someone had crossed the 'death line' and requested permission to shoot. The commanding officer stood over him and ordered him to wait, and then turned off his radio. Only then did he give the permission to shoot once. This shot hit Shammaly on the left side of his body and his left hand, causing him to fall to the ground. The sniper requested permission to finish him off. The officer stood silent for a moment, and then said: 'wait, wait'. He then gave the soldier permission to kill Shammaly. With two additional shots the sniper confirmed his death. The officer then complimented the sniper and turned his radio back on. This is not the only deliberate killing of a Palestinian civilian with impunity that occurred, but it is the only one that was caught on film.