

When War Criminals Walk Free

By Mads Gilbert, M.D.

The title for this issue is not ours. It is taken from the Aug. 12, 2012 edition of the Israeli newspaper Haaretz.

The paper was reporting on Rayya Abu Hajjaj and her daughter Majda Abu Hajjaj who, on Jan. 4, 2009, while waving a white flag, were shot to death by advancing Israeli soldiers on the first day of Israel's Cast Lead incursion into the Gaza Strip. "That," said Haaretz, "was a war crime."

The paper also noted the killing of 21 members of the Samuni family in Gaza. This, too, said the paper, was a war crime.

And what has been the Israeli government's response? The paper notes that, in both cases, "the soldiers and commanders responsible for these crimes are walking around as free men."

Mads Gilbert is not surprised. He is the medical leader of Clinic of Emergency Medicine at University Hospital of North Norway and a

professor at the university of Tromsø. He has worked with solidarity medicine since the early 1970s. In 2009, he and Dr. Erik Fosse were the only foreign doctors in Gaza's al-Shifa Hospital during the first two weeks of the attack where "we waded in death, blood and amputated limbs." And, as he relates in this issue of *The Link*, the victims of those atrocities were, far too often, children.

But why focus on Israel's war crimes? This question was answered by 15 U.S. religious leaders who, on Oct. 5 of this year, sent a letter to all members of Congress. We have reproduced the letter on page 12.

Our book and video selections are found on pp. 14-15.

On page 16, we note with appreciation recent donations given in memory of two long-time AMEU supporters.

— John Mahoney, Executive Director

**About
This
Issue**

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An ex-Israeli soldier was sentenced this past August to 45 days in prison for killing a Palestinian mother and her daughter while they were waving a white flag during Operation Cast Lead.¹

Three and a half years have passed since Israel's invasion of Gaza on Dec. 7, 2008. With immensely deliberate destructiveness, Israeli forces attacked their predefined targets and executed what has come to be known as the Dahiya Doctrine.²

The name Dahiya comes from a suburb of Beirut that Israel nearly leveled during its attack on Lebanon in 2006. Dan Halutz, Israel's chief of staff at the time, boasted that the bombardment would "turn back the clock 20 years." Two years later, Yoav Galant, the commanding officer in Israel's south, said publicly that the aim of Operation Cast Lead was to "send Gaza decades into the past."³

According to the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, in the course of Israel's military offensive on the Gaza Strip between Dec. 27, 2008 and Jan. 18, 2009, more than 1,400 Palestinians were killed and 5,400 wounded.⁴

Jumana

At first I did not understand.

The little nine month-old girl I had been asked to attend was shivering with cold and almost unarousable following anesthesia. Lying her on her back, I had to gently lift her chin forward to open her airway in order to secure her breathing. Most of her tiny left hand had to be amputated after the nasty injury she had sustained in the family house where something terrible had happened.

I listened carefully on both sides of her delicate chest with my stethoscope. Good, symmetrical breath sounds. We placed the little body on a trolley which was far too big for her. We searched for a pa-

tient room on the crowded fourth floor of al-Shifa Hospital's surgical block, and finally found one.

The sun was streaming into the six-bed room. One of the windows was broken. The room was icy cold due to the lack of electricity and heating. The Israeli army assault not only caused a constant, overwhelming flow of injured, badly wounded, dying and killed Palestinians to Shifa and all the other hospitals, the same Israeli government had cut electricity, to the whole Gaza Strip. The hospitals had to rely on old generators barely working due to lack of spare parts, often leaving the corridors and patient rooms exposed to the winter winds. Cold trauma patients bleed more and have a much higher mortality than warm trauma patients. It was an endless, vicious spiral of destruction and death.

I stood beside little Jumana al-Samuni's trolley. Nobody knew her mother's whereabouts, but her father and grandfather were said to have been killed. The X-ray picture lying on the trolley showed that her thumb and second and third fingers had been crushed. Her bandage was soaked through with blood, but the bleeding appeared to have stopped. The little girl had pretty, sharp, almost adult features and strong eyebrows. Her sallow skin color was suggestive of anemia following blood loss, or as a result of the undernourishment typical of so many children in Gaza. She looked as if she was sleeping peacefully, and her closed eyes had an almost absurdly relaxed appearance.

I touched her skin. It felt cool and slightly bumpy, as if she were chilled. She would certainly have lost heat both during the operation and now as she lay stripped in the chilly room. That was a problem for all the patients. Many of the windows in the surgical block were broken due to the Israeli bombing, and because al-Shifa lies only three blocks from the Mediterranean coast, where night temperatures dropped to between 40 and 50 degrees Fahrenheit. The scant power supply from the two emergency generators could not heat the wards adequately. Only the operating theatres and the intensive care departments had priority for heating. The rest of the

hospital was frigid. Most of the patients were equipped with blankets brought to the hospital by their families—often with what little extra food could be obtained—or by Islamic Relief. The blankets were good to have in the cold nights. But Jumana had not gotten a blanket. She was all alone, apparently without any family.

While I tried to cover her with the thin hospital sheet, one of the nurses told me that the little girl came from the poor quarters of al-Zaytoun in the southern outskirts of Gaza City. The nurse said the Israelis had bombed the family's house and killed eleven that morning. Another nurse said that ground forces from an Israeli tank position had forced many members of the Samuni family together into one of the family houses overnight, so that the house would be full of people when they bombed it the next morning.

The extended Samuni family is a big clan. Altogether, about a hundred of the family members including women, children and the elderly had been herded into a warehouse in al-Zaytoun before the Israeli government forces attacked the building.

I doubted it. Could such a well organized and experienced army as Israel's have executed a massacre of defenseless, unarmed and trapped Palestinian civilians? An army led by officers who take their orders from the government of a state which describes itself as one of the world's strongest democracies, led by a president who has won the Nobel Peace Prize? It sounded too barbaric. It must have been a misunderstanding, a rumor which had been blown up, a complete exaggeration of the facts.

Not in this case.

Sadly, it was true. There was a massacre. It was a systematically planned and executed Israeli military operation. Soldiers from the Israeli armed forces

had carried out the merciless operation. Our patient, little Jumana, was just one of many victims in the Samuni family that day.

More were to follow. As a defense mechanism we refused for as long as possible to believe that

Credit: Mads Gilbert



Jumana in Al-Shifa Hospital

such things are real. We want the instances of assault, killing, maltreatment and injury to be the result of unfortunate circumstances, a sick mind or horrible misunderstanding. That's not how it was in Gaza. The appalling details of the massacre of the Samuni family came to light bit by bit.

I saw Jumana again about midnight that evening. She looked like a little doll, lying in her big over-sized bed. She was no longer alone; standing beside the bed was an elderly woman dressed in black. The nurses introduced her as "a grandmother on the father's side."

I examined Jumana. She was alert, with normal vital signs of consciousness, breathing and circulation. She looked round the room with a surprised, inquisitive glance.

The lady in black was furious. Like other rela-

tives I met at al-Shifa, she wanted to talk about her anger over the Israeli killings. We were among the first outsiders to learn what had happened.

We reported. We sent pictures. We gave interviews. The F-16s' bombs kept falling. The drones kept shooting rockets. The Merkava tanks kept shelling. The rivers of Palestinian blood kept running.

As it turned out, the account was true. Members of the extended Samuni family, nearly a hundred men, women and children of all ages, had been herded together, on Jan. 4th, into a concrete warehouse about 2200 sq. feet in area that belonged to Wa'el al-Samuni. There, they were kept overnight without food or drink.

Next morning, at 6:30, the house was bombed by the Israelis. I didn't quite grasp whether it was an air attack by fighter-bombers, helicopters or drones, or whether the house was shot at by tanks. Many people were killed and even more wounded.

Jumana's father, grandfather and grandmother were killed, along with many other members of the family. Jumana's mother and uncle had managed to escape. Later we were told that when a few members of the family tried to leave the house, the military fired a missile or shell at them, killing one person and wounding two others. A few seconds later, the military fired two more shells or missiles that hit the house directly. The house partly collapsed on its occupants, killing at least 21 Samuni family members, including 9 children and many women, and injuring dozens of other.

We met many of them the following days in Shifa Hospital. Little Jumana was one of the youngest survivors. Jumana's mother Maysa saved her daughter by covering the little girl with her body; that day she would become a widow, at 18 years old.

Amal

For three days following the Israeli bombing, the casualties were trapped in the destroyed house along with the dead bodies. Only then did the Israelis allow rescue services to enter the home.

One of the trapped was Amal Attila Samuni, a 9-year-old Palestinian schoolgirl and Jumana's cousin.

Like Jumana, she had been forced into the building with her father, mother and siblings. Her father Attila Samuni, 40, gathered his family in what he thought to be the safest room.

He and his smallest child, Amal's little brother, were both shot at point blank when he opened the door to face the Israeli soldiers to tell them, in Hebrew, that the building was filled only with civilians, women and children.⁵

Amal was also hit by something in her head during the bombardment. She was trapped in the bombed building with dead and injured relatives. Her bigger brother managed to rescue her from the rubble and the stench of dead and decaying bodies on January 7th, when finally the Israeli soldiers allowed for some search and rescue in the house they had bombed.

I met the two in the ward after Amal was rushed to Shifa Hospital at midnight on the 7th of January. The brother introduced himself as Faraj al-Samuni, 22 years old. His face was tired, almost apathetic. He looked at me with a dark, angry gaze.

"We just rescued her. They killed my father and my little brother," he told me. His voice was low with an intense, trembling undertone.

"Twenty-nine members of my family were killed, including our father. We don't know how many more are lying in the ruins. The wounded didn't get any help because the Israeli soldiers refused to allow the Red Crescent and Red Cross through. There were over a hundred people gathered in the house when they bombed it."

"But we have already taken in little Jumana al-Samuni – is she also from your family?" I asked.

"Yes. And there are more still. We don't have the full picture. Have you seen anyone else from my family?"

I told him briefly about Jumana and her grand-

mother. He knew about them. He was injured himself but kept looking for the rest of the family. He dug out his little sister Amal with his own hands and got her to the hospital. Later he recovered the dead to bury them with the remaining family members.

“Amal is completely worn out by thirst, hunger and the cold. Is she going to survive?” he asked me.

I lifted the blanket and quickly examined the little girl’s delicate body. She did not seem to have any serious external physical trauma, but she was cold and suffering from fatigue.

“Does she have any other injuries?” I asked Dr Hamid, a skilled and devoted Palestinian colleague who was one of Shifa Hospital’s leading neurosurgeons and shared the initial examination of Amal with me.

“No, we have not found anything else. But she is exhausted, as you can see,” he replied.

Amal looked more like an old lady than a young schoolgirl. Her lips were cracked and dried out, the body severely dehydrated. She had survived. One could more easily understand the trauma of surviving an earthquake or other natural disaster. But this was man-made, a disaster executed with merciless, deliberate brutality. Judging from the graffiti scrawled on the walls of her family’s homes, the soldiers who had attacked and nearly killed Amal were profoundly racist.

According to a report in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, I.D.F. soldiers who took part in the operations in the al-Zaytoun district said that their brigade commander Col. Ilan Malka insisted that not a

single ambulance should enter the sector under his responsibility. He said that he feared Hamas attempts to capture Israeli soldiers—although, later, soldiers would tell Breaking the Silence, an organization of veteran I.D.F. soldiers, that they met next to no resistance. The commander, though, was adamant

that the wounded should be taken on foot for medical care, to meet ambulances forced to wait two miles away. And a number of reports from the field confirmed the story that Faraj told me, that civilians who did try to walk to the ambulances were turned back, with soldiers firing at them.⁶

After the wounded were evacuated, the army demolished the house with the dead bodies inside. It was only possible to remove

them from under the debris after the army withdrew, about two weeks later.

Walls and T-Shirts

In the remaining destroyed buildings, Israeli soldiers had signed their mission with graffiti on the walls. Some in Hebrew, many written in naive English: “Arabs need 2 die”, “Die you all”, “Make war not peace”, “1 is down, 999,999 to go.”

On a large peace symbol, three slogans were written in Hebrew: “Death to Arabs,” “War on Arabs—Sounds Good to Me,” and “The Only Good Arab is a Dead Arab.”⁷

On several walls in one of the remaining Samuni houses, my colleague Dr. Erik Fosse, later in 2009, took pictures of remaining graffiti. One was a tombstone with the inscription “1948-2009,” another “Die

Credit: Mads Gilbert



Amal in al-Shifa Hospital

you all” signed with a Star of David.

And Israeli snipers from the Givati Brigade returning from Operation Cast Lead could purchase T-shirts in Tel Aviv depicting a young, obviously pregnant woman in traditional Palestinian dress, her belly centered in the cross-hairs of a sniper’s scope, with the words underneath: “1 Shot 2 Kills.”

According to the Haaretz report, Israeli soldiers testifying to “Breaking the Silence” were upset by the destructive actions of the I.D.F., the trigger-happy atmosphere and what they called the “virtual reality” created by I.D.F. spokesmen inside Israel, to the effect that there was serious fighting in the Gaza Strip.

The soldiers soon understood that they were not actually confronting the dangerous Hamas resistance for which they had been prepared on the eve of the attack.

The massacre in the warehouse cost the lives of at least 26 members of the Samuni family. There were 10 children and seven women among those killed. Altogether 48 Palestinians were slaughtered during the Israeli attacks on al-Zaytoun village in just one day.⁸ Also destroyed were 27 homes, a mosque and a number of farms.

The Israeli Army closed its “investigation” of this massacre earlier this year. Major Dorit Tuval, Deputy Military Advocate for Operational Matters, said that the case has been closed after the investigation has found that the attack on and killing of civilians “who did not take part in the fighting,” were not done knowingly and directly, or out of haste and negligence “in a manner that would indicate criminal responsibility.”⁹

In a letter sent to the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza that filed a complaint into the matter as well, major Tuval wrote that the investigation “completely disproved” any claim about deliberate harm to civilians, as well as haste and recklessness regarding possible harm to civilians, or criminal negligence. The military’s response does not detail

the findings of the investigation, nor does it provide the reasons behind the decision to close the file to any new information about the circumstances.¹⁰

According to B’Tselem, there has never been a serious investigation into the suspicions raised by them or by any Israeli, Palestinian, or international organizations regarding breaches of international humanitarian law by the military during the assault on Gaza. And no investigation has addressed the responsibility of high-ranking commanders or governmental leaders.¹¹



Credit: Yechiel Yanai

Accordingly, three indictments have been filed against lower ranked soldiers who took part in Operation Cast Lead: for theft of a credit card from a Palestinian civilian, for use of a nine-year-old Palestinian child as a human shield, and for “manslaughter of an anonymous person.”

In three other cases, disciplinary action alone was taken. Two officers were disciplined for firing explosive shells that struck an UNRWA facility; three officers were disciplined for shelling al-Maqadmeh Mosque, in which at least 15 Palestinians were killed,

nine of them civilians; and one officer was disciplined for the use of a Palestinian civilian as a human shield.¹²

Investigations were all opened at a very late stage, the first, to B'Tselem's knowledge, in October 2009, ten months after Operation Cast Lead had ended. At present, three years after the operation, there is hardly a chance that investigations will lead to further indictments.

But no proper independent, international trial has been conducted to hold the Israeli military and political leaders responsible and to get all the evidence on the table. Several cases have, however, been filed against the Israeli Army central commanding officers and the Israeli Government for breaches of international law.

In Norway a national prosecuting authority is tasked with preventing the country from becoming a sanctuary for people suspected of having committed serious crimes abroad, including war crimes. Through our endorsement of the Geneva Convention and other conventions of international law and its ratification of the Rome Statute, Norway has acknowledged its obligation to be pro-active in the prosecution of international crimes and crimes against humanity.

On April 22, 2009, six renowned lawyers filed charges of war crimes against the leaders of the Israeli government and the Israeli armed forces to the Norwegian public prosecutor for international crimes.¹³ Through their action, the solicitors were exercising what they saw as their duty and right. They requested that those named in the complaint be arrested if they come to Norway, or that they be investigated and arrested through international police




Image context: People pull bodies of the al-Samouni family from the rubble of their home in Gaza.

co-operation. This was the first time in Norwegian legal history that political and military leaders were being called to account for "war crimes and gross violation of international humanitarian law."

The list of the subjects of the complaint was startling: the former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert; former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni; former and current Defense Minister Ehud Barak; the Israeli defense chief Gabi Ashkenazi; the head of ground forces, Major General Avi Mizrahi; the head of naval forces, Admiral Eliezer Marom; the head of air forces, Major General Ido Nehoshtan; the chief of the Israeli war forces' "Southern Command," General Yoav Galant; the commander of the Givati Brigade, Colonel Ilan Malka; and the commander of the Golani Brigade, Colonel Avi Peled.

They were all reported for contravening Sections 102-109 of the Norwegian General Civil Penal Code (2005).

The Norwegian Bar Association's human rights committee supported the complaint, as did a number of legal campaigns by human rights organisations and other countries. In Israel, too, calls were made for a legal investigation into what happened in Gaza.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the Norwegian public prosecutor shelved the complaint in November 2009, probably for political reasons.

Sanctions Not Impunity

Not long after Operation Cast Lead, Norway actively participated in the bombing of Libya in order "to protect the civilians."¹⁵ The decision was enthusiastically supported by the Israeli Government, who wanted "tough sanctions" to be applied to Iran for "violating civil rights."¹⁶ At the time, Netanyahu said, "If the international community is applying special pressure on Libya and warning its leader and soldiers against violating civil rights, the same warning must be aimed at Iran's leaders and their henchmen," and he added: "While Gadhafi is massacring his opponents in Libya, the regime of the ayatollahs in Iran is systematically executing its opponents."

His comments came on a day when Iranian security forces reportedly fired *tear gas* in clashes with anti-government protesters demanding the release of two opposition leaders. "I believe that a firm reaction will send a very clear message of encouragement and hope to the Iranian people, that no one has forgotten their struggle for freedom and liberty," the Israeli leader said.¹⁷

Tear gas does not compare well with the systematic Israeli bombing of civilian Palestinians in Gaza with F16 fighter-jets, drones, tanks and naval ships. The civilian population has no way to flee Israel's military attacks, nowhere to shelter, and no international protection. The most cowardly way to wage war is to bomb a captive population that has no way to protect its vulnerable members in bomb shelters. Such are the double standards of the Israeli Government: provocative and deeply inhuman.

Such, too, are the *international* double standards securing the continuation of Israeli impunity: provocative, partial, profoundly pro-Israeli and colonial.

The United States, European Union, N.A.T.O. – and Norway – repeatedly impose strict economic sanctions, weapon embargoes, military actions with bombing and invasions to "maintain international law" and safeguard the security and rights of "the civilian population," as in the cases of Libya, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, Cuba and India, to mention a few.¹⁸ The state of Israel, however, seems totally exempted from the same international laws, arguments and fair justice. If anything, the Zaytoun massacre, as well as all the other collective and individual reported attacks on Palestinian civilians in Gaza during the Israeli onslaught, once more proves the provocative double standards of the U.S.A. and its allies.¹⁹

Israeli impunity and the continuous lack of accountability must be of grave concern to anyone who wants to uphold some level of peaceful co-existence based on fundamental principles of fairness, equality, justice and international lawfulness.

A global boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against the state of Israel is a non-violent way of forcing Israel to comply at least with fundamental international law: the prohibition for an occupier to establish colonies on occupied land (called "settlements"), the responsibility to safeguard the security of the civilian population in the occupied territories; the prohibition to impose collective punishment on a population, and the obligation to apply proportional military force in armed conflicts – just to mention a few.

And not to forget: The Palestinian struggle for freedom and the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the siege of Gaza, the right of return of the Palestinian refugees, and an end to Israeli apartheid rule is a just struggle also well anchored in international conventions and fundamental moral laws – just like the struggle of other oppressed people.

Health is a fundamental human right and human security is a key determinant of health.²⁰ The living conditions and security situation for Palestini-

ans gets steadily worse, not due to natural disasters followed by famine, but due to a chronic, low-intensity and man-made disaster imposed by the government of Israel. As such, it is easily reversible and amendable by lifting the siege and ending the occupation.

This should be the concern of all international medical associations and communities, including the World Medical Association and Israel's Medical Association.²¹

For those interested and willing to see alternative sources of knowledge, The Lancet Series on Health in the Occupied Palestinian territories gives valuable insight by presenting brilliant research on the interconnection between the Israeli occupation and population health in Palestine.²² As stated in one of the papers in this series, "The Occupied Palestinian Territory" by Richard Horton: "For too long, the health and welfare of Palestinians within the occupied territory have been secondary to powerful outside interests. ... the solution lies in justice, sovereignty, and self-determination for the people of the West Bank and Gaza Strip."²³

Three Years Later

Gaza, New Year 2012, we are driving from Gaza City to al-Zeitoun. I want to see Jumana, Amal and the rest of my previous patients from the Samuni family again.

People are everywhere, Gaza being one of the most densely populated regions in the world (over 12,000 people per sq. mile). The cold winter rain dissolves the gravel roads to deep flows of mud and water. Gaza is grey. The intensified Israeli blockade imposed in June 2007 is beginning its sixth year. The scent of burning litter mixes with a revolting smell from open waste water dams along the road. According to the U.N., some 25 million gallons of untreated and partially treated sewage are dumped in the sea each day and over 90 per cent of the water from the Gaza aquifer is unsafe for human consumption without treatment .

The siege is harsh. Israel hampers aid agencies at Gaza crossings.²⁴ Essential water and sanitation supplies—even for UNICEF projects—and other spare parts badly needed to repair essential civilian infrastructure sit for years, blocked from entry to Gaza from the Israeli side of the border at Karni, Erez or Ashdod port.²⁵

We see children playing outside the houses, many barefoot and soaking wet from the icy rain, shivering with cold. Poverty is rampant and on the increase. Already prior to Operation Cast Lead, Gaza's children were anemic and stunted (abnormally low height for age) due to protein malnutrition and lack of essential food as a result of the man-made food crisis caused by the long siege. Seventy-five per cent of families remain reliant on food aid from the U.N.: a meager diet of flour, sugar, oil and rice. As a result, stunting and chronic malnutrition now affect 10 per cent of the under-fives and anemia, caused by a lack of iron-rich food, affects over half of Gaza's school children. If left untreated, anemia and undernourishment can have an irreversible impact on a child's development.²⁶

I travel with my friend Ashraf Mashharawi who is a respected and industrious documentary film- and TV professional in Gaza with his own production company. His 11-year-old brother Mahmoud was killed by a rocket fired from an Israeli drone while he was playing on the flat roof of his family home in Al-Wahda Street in central Gaza City. He was playing with his elder cousin Ahmed, 16, who was killed on the spot. Mahmoud was carried to Shifa Hospital where I headed the desperate resuscitation efforts. He died in the ICU despite all of our efforts, penetrated by numerous, small cubical fragments from a small diameter bomb. It was a painful first meeting with Ashraf, telling him the sad news of his brother's death.

We became friends. Now we have planned to revisit the Samuni children whom we both know well. Ibrahim and Mahmoud, two of his cameramen, join us in the car. We talk, laugh and remember.

I never stop admiring the resilience and survival capacity of the Palestinian people. From my first encounter with them in West Beirut in 1981 and 1982, until my last 15 years of solidarity medical work in Gaza, their resistance to hardship and unyielding, stubborn will to survive attacks, siege and occupation impress and stun me.

I learn from them on every mission. I see how their determination, sense of justice, social fabric and, for those who are Muslim, their religion make a strong web of interdependent factors of survival. This determination is palpable and felt not least in their dignity and ever present hospitality. Even in the direst moments, in the cold, dark nights of bombing and death, they maintain a stubborn warmth and social support amidst themselves. I often think that they carry our dignity on their shoulders.

We approach al-Zaytoun, find the house and park the car. Jumana is waiting outside her mother's childhood home to which Maysa has moved to live with her parents, Jumana's grandparents. She is curiously peeking at me, remembering that we met also in August 2009, half a year after the onslaught. Jumana is now three years and 9 months.

She has dressed up, has a little fur jacket, her hair nicely tied up. I kneel down, waiting for her next move. We smile. I'm moved. Tears blur my vision. Maysa is behind her, closely watching and smiling a more confident smile than last time. We greet, shake hands and Jumana walks me into the house, hand-in-hand.

The afternoon is joyful, and painful.

We talk about the hardship caused by the siege and the ever present Israeli drones, the worries and grief after the massacre and about the future. Jumana is doing quite fine. She sleeps at night and plays well. She can manage with her two-fingered left hand and keeps pace with her friends. We chat, play and laugh. Jumana is happily receiving my small gifts, some toys and chocolate from Norway. She snatches my mobile and shoots some pictures of us, joyfully managing the camera and giggling about the

results. Maysa tells me she has started studies at one of the two large Gaza universities.

Maysa's father is angry. We discuss the history of Palestine from back to the British mandate. Like most elder Palestinians he knows history very well, also culture and politics.

"How can we smell and feel peace? We long for that," he says.

I tell him that I'm going on yet another speaking tour on Gaza to U.S. and Canadian universities.

"What do you want me to tell them," I ask.

"Tell them this: Your tax money is killing our people!"

"I will," I said.

"And tell them to listen to world news, not only the U.S. news. They need information and the truth."

We leave after an hour of conversation, mints, Arabic coffee, and playing, with promises to meet again soon. I hug Jumana. It feels she won't let go, or maybe it's me. I can't let go.

The next day we visit Amal and her twin brother Abdallah, both now 12 years old. We meet them and their remaining siblings and their mother. They have managed to get a new flat in al-Zaytoun. Amal and Abdallah are doing well in school she tells me. But she has a terrible headache. Also Abdallah is doing fine, but is plagued with a stinging pain in one buttock. What can it be, she asks me.

Before I go on to examine the two, we talk for a while. The children are testing out their English and are easy to understand. It's hard to imagine they are sitting here, smiling and chatting. The resilience of Palestinian children is strong, but not always enough to sustain trauma and losses from the Israeli attacks. From research in Gaza, we know that caring parents, listening adults, a return to normal life and human security are key factors for mental health survival.²⁷

I'm all the more impressed by the warm and reassured attitude of the al-Samuni children. But why cannot the world community secure their rights to

food, education, safe water and human security? Why are they denied basic human rights with so little concern from Western governments?

Small gifts are exchanged, we play and laugh—and suddenly it feels like it could have been a normal afternoon. Amal's mother tells me she wants to share two pictures with me. From a drawer she takes out two pictures: her beloved husband, alive, and her smallest son, pictured in the morgue in al-Shifa Hospital with bullet wounds in the chest.

"They shot them when he opened the door to plea for mercy," she tells me, pointing to her husband.

"My little boy bled to death. They did not allow the ambulances through, nor could we leave."

I am speechless. There is no normality in Gaza.

Before we leave, we agree to take the twins to al-Quds Hospital in Gaza city a few days later for a CT-scan to see what is wrong. We find bullets remaining in Amal's brain and a bullet in the muscles of Abdallah's buttock. The latter is removed with minor surgery the next day. The Israeli bullet in Amal's brain is too risky to remove due to its location.

Amal, Abdallah, Jumana and the other 990,000 Palestinian children and youngsters 18 years and younger are still forced to live in the world's largest open-air prison.

We cannot rest until this situation is solved. ■

Footnotes

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Credit: Mads Gilbert



Dr. Mads Gilbert and Jumana, January 2012

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Facts on the Siege of Gaza

- Gaza is one of the most populated regions on earth, with over 12,000 people per sq. mile.
- 34% of Gaza's workforce, including half its youth, is unemployed.
- 44% of Gazans are food insecure and about 80% are aid recipients.
- In 2011, the GDP per capita was almost 17% below the equivalent figure in 2005, before the Palestinian elections.
- In 2011, less than one truckload of goods per day exited Gaza, less than 3% of exports during the first half of 2007.
- 35% of Gaza's farmland and 85% of its fishing waters are totally or partially inaccessible due to Israeli imposed restrictions.
- Severe fuel and electricity shortages result in outages of up to 12 hours a day.
- Some 25 million gallons of untreated and partially treated sewage are dumped into the sea each day.
- Over 90% of the water from the Gaza aquifer is unsafe for human consumption without treatment.
- 85% of schools in Gaza run on double shifts.
- Some 71,000 new housing units are required to cover current housing needs.
- Since the intensification of the blockade in 2007, at least 172 Palestinian civilians have been killed and 318 injured while working in tunnels between Gaza and Egypt.
- During this period, nearly 2,300 Palestinians have been killed and 7,700 injured by Israeli forces, about two-thirds of them during the "Cast Lead" offensive. Some 27% of all Palestinian casualties were women and children.
- Since June 2007, 37 Israelis have been killed and 380 injured in attacks launched from Gaza, 40% of whom were civilians.

Source: U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Occupied Palestinian Territory; see www.ochaopt.org

"Eyes in Gaza" by Mads Gilbert and Erik Fosse was first published by Quartet Books, London, in 2010. The second edition will be released late this year or early in 2013.

On Oct. 5, 2012, 15 U.S. religious leaders sent the following letter to Congress:

Dear Member of Congress,

We write to you as Christian leaders representing U.S. churches and religious organizations committed to seeking a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians. Our organizations have been deeply involved in this pursuit for decades, inspired by the call and promise of Jesus Christ who said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." ...

It is this experience and these commitments that lead us to write to you today to express our grave concern about the deteriorating conditions in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories which threaten to lead the region further away from the realization of a just peace.

Unfortunately, unconditional U.S. military assistance to Israel has contributed to this deterioration, sustaining the conflict and undermining the long-term security interests of both Israelis and Palestinians. This is made clear in the most recent 2011 State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices covering Israel and the Occupied Territories, which details widespread Israeli human rights violations committed against Palestinian civilians, many of which involve the misuse of U.S.-supplied weapons.

Accordingly, we urge an immediate investigation into possible violations by Israel of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act which respectively prohibit assistance to any country which engages in a consistent pattern of human rights violations and limit the use of U.S. weapons to "internal security" or "legitimate self-defense."

More broadly, we urge Congress to undertake careful scrutiny to ensure that our aid is not supporting actions by the government of Israel that undermine prospects for peace. We urge Congress to hold hearings to examine Israel's compliance, and we request regular reporting on compliance and the withholding of military aid for non-compliance...

We want to be clear that we recognize that Israel faces real security threats and that it has both a right and a duty to protect both the state and its citizens. However, the measures that it uses to protect itself and its citizens, as in the case with any other nation, must conform to international humanitarian and human rights law.

As Christian leaders in the United States, it is our moral responsibility to question the continuation of unconditional U.S. financial assistance to the government of Israel. Realizing a just and lasting peace will require this accountability, as continued U.S. military assistance to Israel -- offered without conditions or accountability -- will only serve to sustain the status quo and Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian territories.

We request, therefore, that Congress hold Israel accountable to these standards by making the disbursement of U.S. military assistance to Israel contingent on the Israeli government's compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies.

As Israel is the single largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid since World War II, it is especially critical for Israel to comply with the specific U.S. laws that regulate the use of U.S.-supplied weapons.

Signers of the above letter included Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons; Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; United Methodist Council of Bishops President Rosemarie Wenner; transitional general secretary of the National Council of Churches Peg Birk; general secretary of the American Friends Service Committee Shan Cretin; executive director of the Mennonite Central Committee U.S. J. Ron Byler; and North American secretary for the Orthodox Peace Fellowship Alexander Patico.

AMEU's Book Selections

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See page 15 For AMEU's video selections.

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Andoni, G., et. al., eds.	Peace Under Fire	2004	297	\$22.00	\$12.00	Int. Solidarity Movement, intro by Edward Said.
Armstrong, K.	Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths	1999	474	\$17.50	\$15.50	Critically acclaimed history of Holy City.
Ateek, N.	A Palest.-Christian Cry for Reconciliation	2008	224	\$24.00	\$17.50	Sabeel founder's program of non-violence.
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We note with gratitude the donations given in memory of two longtime AMEU supporters.

Leila Meehan Goodman was an American who, having lived in Palestine early in her life, spent the rest of her days protesting the injustices she witnessed there.

Howard Victor Norton also lived in the Middle East, working for Aramco (now Saudi Aramco). Mary, his wife of 51 years, is a member of AMEU's National Council. Both "Howie" and Mary have promoted our efforts in extraordinary ways.

To the relatives of Leila Goodman, especially her son Nidal and to Howie's family, especially his wife Mary, we offer our profound condolences.

—John F. Mahoney, Executive Director

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