

19.04.2022

The Battle of Jenin - April 2002



On the morning of Friday 8th April 2022, Israeli security forces tracked down and killed Raad Hazem, a 28 year-old from Jenin. Hazem was hiding near a mosque in Jaffa. The night before, he had opened fire on Israelis drinking and socialising in the Dizengoff Street district of Tel Aviv, killing three young men and wounding seven others.

On the 10th April the Israeli authorities issued a punitive demolition order on Hazem's family home and demanded that his father hand himself in. The next day the security forces entered Jenin where they opened fire on a car carrying Hazem's father and brother. In the process they killed 17 year-old, Mohammed Zakarneh who was struck by an expanding bullet — a particularly lethal type of round — and eventually died of severe blood loss.

Raad Hazem was born in the Jenin refugee camp on the 29th November 1993. His father, Fathi Hazem, was a former security prisoner who had previously served as an officer in the Palestinian Authority's security services. Raad had studied computer science. He was unmarried. He was said to be in considerable debt and was even once shot in his leg by criminal elements in the camp. According to Shin Bet he had 'no clear organizational affiliation, no security background and no previous arrests'. His father was estranged from his family

We can only speculate as to Raad Hazem's motives or what drove him to carry out such a desperate and tragic act. But one thing is certain: 8th April 2022 was exactly 20 years since the most intense fighting in the Battle of Jenin, Israel's invasion and destruction of the Jenin refugee camp, which began on the 3rd April 2002, when Raad Hazem was eight years old.



The Battle of Jenin is one of the most disputed and controversial events in the history of Israel's occupation and colonisation of Palestine. It's accepted that Israeli forces killed at least 52 Palestinians in a two-week campaign that left 150 buildings destroyed and rendered 450 Palestinian refugee families homeless.

The scale of destruction was such that, at the time, many were convinced that a massacre of at least 500 people had taken place, with many bodies simply being buried under the rubble of demolished buildings. A subsequent investigation by the UN, which was hampered by limitations on direct access to the area, failed to find evidence of a massacre, and this was taken as vindication by the Israeli authorities, although the finding was rejected by Palestinian representatives such as Saeb Erekat.

Israel launched [*Operation Defensive Shield*](#) on the 29th March 2002 when their military forces invaded Ramallah and seized most of the buildings that formed the headquarters compound of PLO Chairman, Yasser Arafat. Over the following days the Israeli military invaded Tulkarm and Qalqilya (1st April), Bethlehem (2nd April), and Jenin and Nablus (3rd April). Six of the largest cities in the West Bank, and their surrounding towns, villages and refugee camps, were occupied and placed under military curfew. By the time *Operation Defensive Shield* ended on the 10th May, Israeli forces had killed 497 Palestinians and wounded 1,447. Approximately 7,000 Palestinians had been 'detained' by Israel. 30 Israeli soldiers were also dead and 127 wounded.

The aim of *Defensive Shield* was to reassert Israeli control over the major population centres of the West Bank, which, following the Oslo Accords, were now under Palestinian administration. The military operation followed a blueprint known as *Operation Field of Thorns* that had been laid out in 1996 by then Chief of Staff, Moshe Ya'alon. Immediately before it began, a Palestinian suicide bomber had killed 28 and injured 140 people at a Passover seder at Netanya's Park Hotel, a key moment in the *Second Intifada* during which, overall, 441 Israelis and 1,539 Palestinians were killed.

B'Tselem has identified a number of key aspects of *Operation Defensive Shield* that constitute forms of collective punishment and serious violations of Palestinian human rights: the IDF's open-fire policy; the use by the IDF of Palestinian civilians as human shields; extensive demolition of housing as a form of collective punishment; the use of indiscriminate, mass arrests; the preventing of injured people receiving medical treatment; looting and destruction of property by military personnel; draconian restrictions on movement; beatings and abuse of 'detainees'.

In the early hours of 3 April 2002, Israel invaded Jenin refugee camp as part of a broader military operation to reoccupy the West Bank. For twelve days, the densely populated camp, sealed off and declared a 'closed military area', was subjected to a brutal military campaign involving one thousand ground troops, columns of tanks and armored bulldozers, and aerial bombardments from Apache helicopters. The assault ended only after the Israeli army had systematically destroyed the center of the camp to make it 'visible' so as to reach the fighters defending it. In the end, 'the entire area, down to the last house, had been leveled,' widespread atrocities had been committed, and over fifty Palestinians had been killed. (Linda Tabar: 2012)

In 2002 the Jenin refugee camp was home to some 14,000 people, most of them originally from the Carmel mountains region and Haifa. Roughly half were either under 15 or over 65 years of age. It was the second largest refugee camp in the West Bank in terms of population and was densely populated, packed into an area of no more than one square kilometre.

According to both Palestinian and Israeli observers, the Jenin camp held some 200 armed men from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Tanzim, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. The Israeli government accused them of having carried out 28 suicide attacks between October 2000 and April 2002

Against them [Israel deployed](#) 2 regular infantry battalions plus commando teams; 150 tanks and armoured personnel carriers; Apache helicopters and F-16 fighter jets; and 12 D9 armoured bulldozers.



According to the [report presented to the UN General Assembly](#) on the 30th July 2002:

In the early hours of 3 April 2002, the Israeli Defence Forces entered the city of Jenin and the refugee camp adjacent to it, declared them a closed military area, prevented all access, and imposed a round-the-clock curfew. By the time of the IDF withdrawal and the lifting of the curfew on 18 April, at least 52 Palestinians, of whom up to half may have been civilians, and 23 Israeli soldiers were dead. Many more were injured. Approximately 150 buildings had been destroyed and many others were rendered structurally unsound. Four hundred and fifty families were rendered homeless. The cost of the destruction of property is estimated at approximately \$27 million.



The fighting lasted approximately 10 days and was characterized by two distinct phases: the first phase began on 3 April and ended on 9 April, while the second phase lasted during 10 and 11 April. Most of the deaths on both sides occurred in the first phase but much of the physical damage was done in the second.

Human Rights Watch published [its own report](#) in May 2002:

At least 140 buildings-most of them multi-family dwellings-were completely destroyed in the camp, and severe damage caused to more than 200 others has rendered them uninhabitable or unsafe. An estimated 4,000 people, more than a quarter of the population of the camp, were rendered homeless because of this destruction. Serious damage was also done to the water, sewage and electrical infrastructure of the camp. More than one hundred of the 140 completely destroyed buildings were in Hawashin district. In contrast to other parts of the camp where bulldozers were used to widen streets, the IDF razed the entire Hawashin district, where on April 9 thirteen IDF soldiers were killed in an ambush by Palestinian militants. Establishing whether this extensive destruction so exceeded military necessity as to constitute wanton destruction-or a war crime-should be one of the highest priorities for the United Nations fact-finding mission.

The harm from this destruction was aggravated by the inadequate warning given to civilian residents. Although warnings were issued on multiple occasions by the IDF, many civilians only learned of the risk as bulldozers began to crush their houses. Jamal Fayid, a thirty-seven-year-old paralyzed man, was killed when the IDF bulldozed his home on top of him, refusing to allow his relatives the time to remove him from the home. Sixty-five-year-old Muhammad Abu Saba'a had to plead with an IDF bulldozer operator to stop demolishing his home while his family remained inside; when he returned to his half-demolished home, he was shot dead by an Israeli soldier.

Among the civilian deaths were those of Kamal Zgheir, a fifty-seven-year-old wheelchair-bound man who was shot and run over by a tank on a major road outside the camp on April 10, even though he had a white flag attached to his wheelchair; fifty-eight year old Mariam Wishahi, killed by a missile in her home on April

6 just hours after her unarmed son was shot in the street; Jamal Fayid, a thirty-seven-year old paralyzed man who was crushed in the rubble of his home on April 7 despite his family's pleas to be allowed to remove him; and fourteen-year-old Faris Zaiban, who was killed by fire from an IDF armored car as he went to buy groceries when the IDF-imposed curfew was temporarily lifted on April 11.



Some of the cases documented by Human Rights Watch amounted to summary executions, a clear war crime, such as the shooting of Jamal al-Sabbagh on April 6. Al-Sabbagh was shot to death while directly under the control of the IDF: he was obeying orders to strip off his clothes. In at least one case, IDF soldiers unlawfully killed a wounded Palestinian, Munthir al-Haj, who was no longer carrying a weapon, his arms were reportedly broken, and he was taking no active part in the fighting.

The systematic bulldozing of Palestinian homes began four days after Israeli forces blasted their way into the camp on the night of April 3, strafing houses from helicopter gunships, and pounding them with tank shells. Several civilians were killed in the initial assault, including Afif al-Dasuki. An elderly woman, who lived alone, she was evidently too slow when the Israeli soldiers pounded on her door and asked her to open up. Her neighbours discovered her body a week after her death, by the smell of decomposition, huddled behind the yellow-painted steel door, with the large hole in the middle.

Four days later, the army razed six houses in the Damaj neighbourhood on its eastern edges. They began with the house of Fatima Abu Tak, flattening homes on both sides of the street, 'When I saw the house of Ahmed Goraj collapse, there was a tremendous amount of smoke and dust. I never expected that the bulldozers would continue moving. I was in a state of shock,' said Mr Damaj, who fled to a neighbour's when his own home became dangerously unstable.

In the aftermath of the invasion a number of observers from Human Rights NGOs were finally allowed access to the camp. Among these, was Jennifer Loewenstein, who published an account of her experience and impressions in *Mondoweiss* on April 7th 2022.



At first, I didn't know if I was in the right place. Before me was a landscape of ruin. I remember asking an old man where the camp was. He gave me a look, gestured toward the wreckage and said, 'al-mukhayim!' ('the camp!') That's when it hit me just how devastating the destruction had been. I wandered from heap to heap of debris often not even knowing what I was seeing. The ground was muddy and there were people, including women and children, trying to salvage personal property, clear pathways around the fallen buildings for emergency medical teams, and locate the dead.

The smell of death permeated the camp. I'd heard of people talking about 'the terrible smell of death' but until then had never experienced it. When I did, I knew what it was almost instinctively. In the ruins of someone's home, I saw the bottom of a shoe sticking out of a pile of dirt. Around me people held pieces of cloth over their noses and mouths to keep from gagging at the smell. That's when I realized the shoe was attached to a foot, and the foot to a person. To keep out of the way, I left the area and walked to what I now know was the entrance to the camp – where the hospital was. I walked through its mostly empty hallways until I came to the back entrance. Outside there was a lot of commotion.

I moved away from the throng of people and climbed up on a ledge overlooking the area in back of the hospital. There, the dead were wrapped in white sheets and lay on the ground in the sun. Workers piled some of the bodies into the back of a pickup truck, leaving the rest lined up next to each other, their names scribbled in black marker on the sheets, for the living to identify. A young man knelt before one of the bodies, deep in thought or prayer or grief. Behind the rows lying in the sunlight, men dug open a grave where those who had died during the siege had been buried. The grave had been dug hastily so that the bodies of those who had died would not spread disease. Now they were unearthed, brushed free of dirt, and lined up alongside the others. They, too, would be loaded onto the truck and taken away for proper burial.

An old woman stood in the center of this commotion screaming at the journalists to stop taking pictures. The journalists ignored her, snapping photographs anyway: the need for proof of what happened overruled preserving the dignity of the dead. Two men carrying a makeshift stretcher brought another body in from the camp. I didn't count how many bodies were there. At the time, it didn't occur to me that so much controversy would surround the number of people killed.

Earlier, on that day after the siege ended, I had stood in a line with foreign reporters waiting for permission from the army to enter the camp and document the aftermath. We filed down a snaking path from a nearby village. I came to understand that we took this path to avoid being fired at by soldiers who'd remained behind, but the soldiers fired anyway —above our heads. Undaunted, this procession of outsiders moved in anyway: Eastern Europeans, a Greek photographer, a couple of Italians, some Lebanese, a Russian, and a collection of others. Only one other American, a student from the Midwest, and a British NGO volunteer entered with us.

This was the first time civilians, journalists and photographers —except for a very few who had risked their lives to get in earlier —had been allowed in. The perpetrators had not wished to be filmed with their bulldozers, guns, and bombs; their helicopter gunships, their missiles, their use of human shields; the explosives they used to blow up buildings and family homes, one with a paralyzed man in a wheelchair still inside. Evidently, they didn't want outsiders to know that electricity, water, food, and medical supplies had been cut off; that no one was allowed in or out. They didn't want observers to see how soldiers burned family photographs; how they urinated and defecated in kitchen pots and pans; stuck pins into and ripped up children's toys; fired missiles into people's living rooms; slashed women's clothing, and dumped supplies of food on kitchen floors; how they ruined furniture and smashed cups, plates, bowls, glasses, vases, picture frames, televisions, and radios on the ground. In the hallway of a school at the back of the camp someone had taken great care, with something like an exacto knife, to scratch the eyes out of each of the children painted on a wall mural. When it was all over, some laughed or bragged at the destructiveness in overdrive.



In a now infamous interview, a soldier nicknamed Kurdi Bear (Moshe Nissim), recalled his time driving an armoured bulldozer around the camp. With a bottle of whiskey stashed up front, Kurdi Bear spent three days straight demolishing what he could of the camp.

For three days I just destroyed and destroyed. The whole area. Any house that they fired from came down. And to knock it down, I tore down some more. They were warned by loudspeaker to get out of the house before I come (sic), but I gave no one a chance. ... I would just ram the house with full power, to bring it down as fast as possible. Others may have restrained themselves, or so they say. Who are they kidding? ... I

didn't give a damn about the Palestinians, but I didn't just ruin with no reason. It was all under orders. Many people were inside the houses we sought to demolish. ... I didn't see, with my own eyes, people dying under the blade of the D-9. And I didn't see house falling down on live people. But if there were any, I wouldn't care at all. ... I really enjoyed it. I remember pulling down a wall of a four-story building. We would go for the sides of the buildings, and then ram them. If the job was too hard, we would ask for a tank shell. ... On Sunday... after the fighting was over, we got orders to pull our D-9s out of the area and stop working on our 'football stadium', because the army didn't want the cameras and the press to see us working.

Now the work was done and the same soldiers responsible for this had retreated outside the camp to rest. Some sat on their tanks talking to one another; some walked around, guns slung over their shoulders. Others relaxed on the grass watching the parade of cars and trucks going in and out. A group of soldiers sat on a bench eating ice cream.

In the aftermath, there was still no water or electricity or food available for the inhabitants because there was no camp. It had been flattened; wrecked beyond recognition. A few empty homes, their windows and doors blackened and blown out, stood empty, as if gaping in shock. More than thirteen thousand people fled the camp in terror, became refugees of the refugees. Husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers disappeared, leaving behind family members with no idea how to find them.

Mohammed Bakri's documentary film [Jenin, Jenin](#), features a range of testimonies from inhabitants of Jenin which suggest that a massacre had indeed occurred. The film has been the object of a number of bans and legal cases that have claimed compensation for defamation, most recently in 2016.

The experience of Jenin's refugees is the subject of Susan Abulhawa's exceptional novel, [Mornings in Jenin](#).

The Battle of Jenin was one element, the most brutal and destructive component, of a larger Israeli campaign, Operation Defensive Shield. The Israeli organisation, [Breaking the Silence](#), is currently publishing testimony from military personnel who took part.





Breaking the Silence

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Three horrific terror attacks in the space of a week have shaken Israel. 11 men and women, Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, and foreign citizens, who until a moment ago lived their lives, are now part of the cruel statistics of 'the situation'.

