

Rugs, cosmetics, motorbikes: Israeli soldiers are looting Gaza homes en masse

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Soldiers describe how stealing Palestinian property has become totally routine in the Gaza war, with minimal pushback from commanders.

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Israeli soldiers play cards inside a building in Al-Shati refugee camp, northern Gaza Strip, November 16, 2023. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Israeli soldiers fighting in Gaza have not been shy about posting videos on social media gleefully documenting their wanton destruction of buildings and [humiliation of Palestinian detainees](#). Some of these clips were even exhibited in South Africa’s presentation at the International Court of Justice last month as [evidence of genocide](#). But there is another war crime being readily documented by Israeli soldiers that has garnered less attention and condemnation despite its prevalence: looting.

In November, the Palestinian singer Hamada Nasrallah was [shocked](#) to discover a TikTok of a soldier playing the guitar that his father had bought him 15 years earlier. Other videos uploaded to social media in recent months show Israeli soldiers [boasting](#) about finding wristwatches; [unboxing](#) someone’s collection of soccer shirts; and [stealing](#) rugs, groceries, and jewelry.

In a Facebook group for Israeli women comprising nearly 100,000 users, someone [wondered](#) what to do with the “gifts from Gaza” that her partner, a soldier, had brought back for her. Sharing a photo of cosmetic products, she wrote: “Everything is sealed except for one product. Would you use these? And does someone know the products or are they only in Gaza?”

Indeed, since the start of Israel’s ground invasion in late October, soldiers have been taking whatever they can get their hands on from the homes of Palestinians who have been [forced to flee](#). More than an open secret, the phenomenon has been widely — and [uncritically](#) — reported in the Israeli media, while rabbis from the Religious Zionist movement have been answering soldiers’ questions about what is permissible to loot according to Jewish law.

Soldiers who returned from fighting in Gaza confirmed to +972 Magazine and Local Call that the phenomenon is ubiquitous, and that for the most part their commanders are allowing it to happen. “People took things — mugs, books, each one the souvenir that does it for him,” said one soldier, who admitted that he himself took a “souvenir” from one of the medical centers that the army occupied.

Israeli soldiers from the 646 Battalion of the Paratroopers Brigade operating in Al-Bureij camp, central Gaza Strip, January 2, 2023. (Oren Ben Hakoon/Flash90)

Another soldier, who served in northern and central Gaza, testified that soldiers “took rugs, blankets, [and] kitchen utensils,” and explained that there was no briefing on the matter from the army either before entering or while in the field. “There was zero talk about it from the commanders,” he said. “Everyone knows that people are taking things. It’s considered funny — people say: ‘Send me to The Hague.’ It doesn’t happen in secret. The commanders saw, everyone knows, and no one seems to care.”

The soldier offered his explanation for why the phenomenon is so widespread: “There is something about this reality in which the house is already [in ruins] that allows you to take a plate or rug. In one of the operations, in a destroyed house, there was a cupboard with antique kitchen utensils, special plates, special mugs. I saw them being looted, unfortunately.”

“[The commanders] didn’t really talk to us about it,” another soldier testified. “They didn’t say you couldn’t take things. And most people felt the need to take a souvenir.”

The soldier noted that the looting was no secret; indeed, some of their seniors were doing it too. “The company sergeant major distributed Qur’an study books that he found and gave to whomever wanted them,” he said. “Another soldier took a set of coffee mugs, a serving tray, and a pot. Another unit, whom we met after they returned from a tour, brought a motorcycle, like the Nukhba [Hammas special forces] motorcycles. One of the soldiers declared that it was his. They [the soldiers] talked about renovating it.”

Another soldier who served in Gaza told +972 and Local Call that soldiers took “prayer beads, spoons, glasses, coffee pots, jewelry, rings. Whatever is easy and accessible is taken. Not everything, but people felt like the lords of the land.” He noted also that “maps from children’s textbooks were taken to show how they are taught there.”

Israeli soldiers from the 8717 Battalion of the Givati Brigade operating in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza Strip, December 28, 2023. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

In contrast to the others who testified, this soldier said that it was clear to him that looting was forbidden. “In my experience, of course, it’s a big no no,” he explained. “They emphasized this issue, but no one supervises the reservists. The most common thing [to steal] is ‘local souvenirs’ [i.e. quintessentially Palestinian or Arab items]. Once, they kicked out a soldier who stole money.”

The soldier added that he and his team tried, with varying degrees of success, to persuade other soldiers to leave behind the items they had stolen in Gaza. “They [soldiers] would come back with things; we told them it was better to leave them [inside the Strip, near the fence], it’s better to throw them away than to take them.”

‘From the ruins of Khan Younis, in the classic Gazan style’

In a [communique](#) this week to commanders in charge of units fighting in Gaza, IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi urged soldiers “not to take anything that is not ours.” But this letter comes after several months in which looting has become completely routine.

So normalized is the phenomenon that in a recent [segment](#) on Israel’s public broadcaster, Kan, soldiers presented reporter Uri Levy with a mirror they had brought back from Gaza. “From the ruins of Khan Younis, in the classic Gazan style,” Levy jokes, without asking the soldiers where they found the mirror or why they stole it. In a [column](#) on Ynet, Nahum Barnea quotes a soldier who said he saw the looting of “phones, vacuum cleaners, motorcycles, and bicycles.”

Israeli soldiers display a mirror they stole from Gaza on Israel's public broadcaster, Kan. (Screenshot)

Channel 13 also [reported](#) on the phenomenon earlier this month. Rather than condemning it, however, the presenters simply noted that the videos are being shared around the world to “shame” Israeli soldiers. (The segment also included an interview with the soldier who filmed himself with the wristwatches he found inside a Palestinian home, who claims that he did not steal them: “They see me holding watches, not looting, nothing ... My intention was to show that the Hamas leadership lives there at a high level.”)

Another sign of how widespread the phenomenon has become is the fact that rabbis from the Religious Zionist movement have been receiving questions from soldiers on the issue. In a [Q&A](#) uploaded to YouTube, Rabbi Yitzchak Sheilat of the Ma'ale Adumim Yeshiva in the occupied West Bank noted that looting is forbidden.

“This is a very serious issue, in two respects: in terms of halacha [Jewish law] and military law,” he said. “Halacha permits looting only food or perishable things from the enemy ... taking objects is strictly prohibited. According to halacha, all the spoils must go to the king, that is, the army commander ... It would be a shame for someone to be caught and have to pay a heavy price.”

One of the soldiers asked the rabbi if it is permissible to take things from a house before it is demolished. “It is forbidden to take things,” Sheilat answered. “If you take something, it must be handed over to the chief of staff.” “And if a commander approves taking things for the company?” a soldier asked. “No, that’s exactly the problem, that there are commanders who don’t know military law, or don’t want to know, and suddenly they allow guys [to do] things they shouldn’t allow,” Sheilat replied.

However, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu, the chief rabbi of the northern city of Safed, offered a different perspective on the issue in a [Q&A](#) of his own. He explained that because the “Arabs in Gaza do not observe international conventions, we are not obliged to abide by any of the rules of war. Nonetheless, we are very careful, because we want to preserve the image of God within us.”

Israeli soldiers from the 8717 Battalion of the Givati Brigade operating in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza Strip, December 28, 2023. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

It should be noted that in addition to the “independent” looting by soldiers, there is a special unit in the Israeli army dedicated to [seizing](#) money and other property found in the battlefield. So far, [it is known](#) that the military has seized tens of millions of shekels from Gaza, which it claims belonged to Hamas.

‘And you shall eat the riches of all the nations’

Alongside the looting of Palestinians’ belongings, Israeli soldiers are also routinely eating the food they find in Gaza’s abandoned homes. “After two or three weeks, soldiers use whatever they find, clean it, and disinfect it,” a soldier told +972 and Local Call — though, according to him, soldiers are not supposed to use food found in Palestinian homes in case it is contaminated. Others said that no precise instructions were given regarding how to behave while staying in houses, many of which are [set on fire or blown up](#) by the army once they are no longer of use.

In a [recent Haaretz article](#), Israeli soldiers described their “experiences” of cooking in Palestinian homes using the ingredients they found there. “Gazan cuisine, from what we’ve seen, is full of spices,” one soldier said in the article. “In every house you’ll find a lot of ras el hanout style mixes.

There are also plenty of lentils, so at first we made a lot of stews Every house we stayed in had olives that [Palestinians] make, which we tasted ... Olive oil is also present in every home, in gallons, and it helps a lot to upgrade any food. They also have a great spicy sauce.

“Sometimes you encounter special things — suddenly there’s garlic and then you go all out on pasta with tomatoes and garlic,” the soldier continued. “I also came across this carob sauce that we added to the porridge and it was excellent.”

Last month, a letter published by the military rabbinate detailed instructions on how to keep kosher when using food and utensils found in homes in Gaza. The letter, signed by Rabbi Avishai Peretz ends with the [biblical directive](#): “And you shall eat the riches of all the nations.”

Rabbi Sheilat also addressed the issue of whether it is permissible to eat food found in Palestinian homes in his Q&A. “With regard to non-kosher foods, there is a difference between what happens when you find food in enemy homes, where the law is that if you find food that you don’t have, and you want that food, even if it’s not essential, say sweets ... it’s permitted to eat them without worrying whether it’s kosher or not.”

In a statement to +972 and Local Call, the IDF Spokesperson said: “The IDF views with severity any case in which soldiers act contrary to the spirit of the IDF, including cases of unlawful taking of property. IDF commanders in various units conduct an ongoing dialogue on the subject throughout the fighting. Every report received on the subject is examined and dealt with individually. In relevant cases, an investigation is opened by the military police, and in some cases suspects are detained for interrogation purposes. The IDF operates in accordance with international law and will continue to do so.”

Oren Ziv

P.S.

- +972. February 20, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/israeli-soldiers-looting-gaza/>

A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Oren Ziv is a photojournalist, reporter for Local Call, and a founding member of the Activestills photography collective.
- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas’ murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel’s retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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