

Opinion | Israeli Troops Separated a Gazan Grandma From Her Family. Her Death Will Haunt Her Descendants

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Did the Israeli soldiers shoot the Gazan grandma? Did she die of hunger or thirst, bedridden, completely alone? Did she suffocate in the smoke or was she burned to death?

Destroyed buildings in the Shifa Hospital area following the IDF's operation there this month. Credit: Mohammed Hajjar/AP

The soldiers who on March 21, around 11 A.M., burst into a building on Ahmed Abdul Aziz Steet in Gaza have grandmothers. These grandmothers may be full of energy and pep, or they may be in decline. They may be Israeli-born or immigrants. They may speak Hebrew with or without an accent. What is certain is that they worry about their grandsons, that they kissed and hugged them after they left Gaza, and prepared their favorite dish for the Friday night meal. They certainly don't think of their grandsons as cruel people.

Cruelty: the [causing of suffering](#) to others out of pleasure or indifference.

The soldiers certainly didn't tell their grandmothers about that old woman, a grandmother to other grandchildren, who was in the house they invaded as part of the final takeover and destruction of Shifa Hospital, during the exchange of fire with Hamas militants who were still there. Do the Jewish grandmothers wonder what their grandsons did in Gaza, or do they make do with the notion that they are heroes?

Indifference: a lack of interest. A deliberate or instinctive ignoring of the suffering of others. A self-defense mechanism against knowledge that will spoil the good impression we have of ourselves.

Naifa al-Nawati.

Her name was Naifa al-Nawati and she was 94 years old. Or 92, according to another grandson. Her husband had built a house on a plot he had purchased in the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City, back in 1955. That was the house the soldiers broke into. Hers was a pre-1948 Gaza City family, but she was born in Be'er Sheva, where her father worked in commerce. She did her high school matriculation during the British Mandate period, got married and returned to Gaza before 1948. Her parents followed with the wave of refugees. [I wrote about her](#) in a story published on April 10, while she was still listed as missing. She suffered from dementia or Alzheimer's disease and required constant care and supervision. Her final days must be described again, since indifference is toxic:

For four days, she and her family were imprisoned in their home, afraid to move even from one floor to another since tanks had suddenly returned, and there were explosions and gunfire all around. On

March 21, soldiers burst into the house after blowing up the front door. They separated the men and the women. They stripped, handcuffed and blindfolded the men. They questioned them before releasing them at the end of the day. They instructed the women to leave the house and area immediately, and to move southward. The soldiers denied a request by Naifa's daughter-in-law to remain behind with her confused and emaciated mother-in-law. They also didn't allow the women to take her with them.

"Perhaps they wanted the women to leave quickly, perhaps they knew how difficult it was to walk along the sandy beach even for people who weren't exhausted," said one of her granddaughters, adding: "We don't know what was in the soldiers' minds."

The soldiers promised that she was in safe hands and that they would transfer her to Shifa Hospital, say the family's women. Didn't the soldiers know that the army was instructing or shooting at patients and medical teams there so they would leave? That everyone's life there was in danger? Didn't they know that the hospital would soon be demolished? According to the family, the soldiers also promised that they would hand Naifa over to the Red Cross. With dread in their hearts, the women marched southward among the ruins and bodies, with explosions and the buzz of drones accompanying them the whole way. After 10 days, when the army moved away from the ruins around Shifa, the men in the family, who had remained in the northern part of the Gaza Strip after their release, started searching for their grandmother. The Red Cross knew nothing about her. She was not among the patients who had been evacuated from Shifa. They didn't find her among the corpses either, not the decomposing ones or the still-whole ones, not among the ones buried in unmarked graves nor among the ones lying in the streets. They searched the house, whose contents were burned, and found two burned bodies. These were one of the granddaughters and her husband. They were on the seventh floor and were unable to join the rest of the family when the raid started. At some point they had been shot to death. The family assumes it was gunfire from a drone.

The indifference of the cruel drone: In a video or reality game, operators sit far away, in safety, pressing buttons. They are immune from being accused of cruelty or indifference. Were the soldiers who saw up close a 94-year-old grandmother who wasn't theirs, insisting that she remain at home alone, cruel or indifferent?

When they despaired of finding her outside, family members returned to the burnt house, searching more thoroughly. Only a metal frame remained from her bed, and there, among the ashes and soot left by the mattress and clothes and chest of drawers, they found bones. Her bones, apparently. Before they were found, the IDF spokesman told me that the army wasn't familiar with the case. An army that knows about every money changer in Gaza so it can kill him with a drone missile cannot locate the soldiers who entered a house with a known address on a specific date.

Did the soldiers shoot the grandmother who wasn't theirs? Did she die of hunger or thirst, bedridden, completely alone after years in which she had been surrounded by dozens of grand- and great-grandchildren? What set the house on fire? Did she suffocate in the smoke and die before the flames reached her, or was she burned to death? These are questions that will forever torment her extended family, in Gaza and overseas, passing from generation to generation.

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P.S.

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<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-15/ty-article/.premium/idf-troops-separated-a-gaza-grandma-from-her-family-her-death-will-haunt-her-descendants/0000018e-e154-dba1-a7df-eb5f1f900000>