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EXCLUSIVE

Lies from Gaza

They have shown us only the Israeli bombs and tanks, but there is another truth Hamas keeps hidden: civilians used as human shields, summary executions, dozens of disappeared people, UN aid stolen, the money pocketed by the movement leaders.

Here are the testimonies of Palestinians who no longer want to live in terror.

GAZA  
The dirty war of HAMAS

By FAUSTO BILOSLAVO - from Gaza

“To die with us is a great honor. We will go to Paradise together or survive until victory. Allah’s will be done.” In this way Hamas militiamen responded to the entreaties of the Palestinian civilians not to use their homes as positions during the terrible Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip from December 27 to January 18.

Now that the international spotlights have been turned off, Panorama has gone to see what happens in Gaza and discovered the other side of the war, just as dirty, that has not been told: entire buildings taken hostage, the population used as human shields and, for the dissidents, even today the risk of getting a bullet as “quislings”.

A far from theoretical danger: since the end of December, 181 Palestinians have been summarily executed, kneecapped or tortured because they opposed Hamas.

But it is not over: now the Islamic movement that rules Gaza with the Koran in one hand and a gun in the other wants to control everything, including aid and reconstruction.

The Andalous building in the Al-Karama neighborhood of Gaza City is reduced to a skeleton of concrete. The Israelis have hit hard, and this middle-age Palestinian couple has nothing left but to pick up the rubble of an apartment not yet paid for. They escort us on what remains of the indoor stairs, on the condition that Panorama uses only their family nicknames. “We knew that it was going to end up like this. Since the early days of the attack the muqawameen (the guerrilla fighters of the Palestinian “resistance”, AN) had positioned themselves in the twelfth and thirteenth floors, with the snipers. Every now and then they tried, to no avail, to shoot down one of those UAVs that the Israelis use”, says Abu Mohammed, shaking his head. In the building, not yet finished, lived 22 families: more than 120 civilians, including women

and children. The Israelis had begun calling the tenants' cell phones ordering them to vacate the premises. Then, the militiamen got a more explicit message: a fighter dropped a bomb on the empty courtyard on the other side of road without causing victims, but opening a huge crater. "A delegation of householders beseeched the militiamen to leave" resumed the tenant. "The answer was: "You will die with us or we will survive together".

On January 13 the Israeli F16's hit the building at 9:30 P.M. "At night we would go to sleep at our relatives' homes: we were saved, but no longer had a home and we still have to repay 9 years of the loan" says Om Mohammed in despair, a veil on her head. The Islamic Bank does not grant exceptions.

In another building in Gaza, in the Al-Nasser neighborhood, lived about 170 civilians distributed on eight floors. When the militiamen positioned themselves on the roof, a former Palestinian colonel went to parley explaining to them that they would draw Israeli bombs on the children of the building. "It will be a great honor if you will die with us," replied the defenders of Gaza. As the officer insisted, they fired a burst of Kalashnikov over his head to get rid of him.

At Sheik Zayed, 20 kilometers to the north, a Palestinian pharmacist was barricaded with his family on the second floor of his condominium. The Islamic militants had placed a booby trap on the front road and were hiding on the third floor with the detonator. "They wanted to blow up the first Israeli tank that was passing. I tried to explain that the reaction would be furious and would strike even our apartments. In the end, to save ourselves, we had to go" accuses the pharmacist with a veil of resignation in his eyes.

In the Tel Al-Awa district of Gaza, invaded by the land incursion of Israel, there are people who were taken hostage twice. "Call me Naji, which means survivor, because if you write my real name they'll kill me" begs the Palestinian householder. "The Hamas men arrived at night to sleep under the stairs. First in uniform, then in plain clothes and with concealed weapons. We tried to bolt the door, but there was nothing to be done. The entire building was used as a shield by the militiamen and could be bombed at any moment."

When the men of Hamas won the elections in the Gaza Strip, Naji was pleased of the change, but now he hates them. "They launch rockets (on Israel, AN) without any military result other than self destruction" says the survivor. "They do it to get money from their Iranian and Syrian sponsors." When the Israelis arrived, the "resistance" fighters in the district had disappeared. To find them the soldiers entered the building. Together with the other men of the condominium, the Palestinian was held prisoner for a day and a night. "I was taken hostage twice in the same war", sighs Naji. "And the Hamas men have even threatened to settle the score at the end of hostilities, because I protested".

In other cases, the thugs of the Izzedine al-Qassam brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, did not limit themselves to threats. Osama Atalla was 40 years old and his youngest daughter, Iman, had been born five days earlier. He was

killed on January 28, 11 days after the cease-fire. Atalla was an elementary school teacher and an activist of al-Fatah, the party of the moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, better known as Abu Mazen. "He openly criticized Hamas, but never wielded a weapon against them" claims Mohammed Atalla, a relative of the victim.

The murderers came to his home to apprehend him with two off-road vehicles full of armed people. With masked faces they showed membership cards of the Palestinian internal security. "Just a few routine questions. We'll bring him back within half an hour" they told the family. The elementary school teacher was tortured for a whole night. Then they killed him, shooting him point-blank in the hip, just before leaving him dying in front of the Shifa hospital.

"Since the war we have documented 27 summary executions. 127 other people were kidnapped, tortured or shot in the legs. At least 150 people were forced under house arrest. We know nothing about the fate of a hundred Hamas prisoners. The numbers could be higher, but many cases are not reported because people are terrified." The complaint on Hamas' dirty war against its opponents comes from Salah Abd Alati, a member of the independent Commission on Human Rights in Gaza.

From Ramallah, the capital of the West Bank where Abu Mazen governs, the names of 58 kneecapped people have been made public.

112 other Palestinians have legs broken by blows of iron bars or cement blocks. They are, for the most part, supporters of al-Fatah: they are accused of collaborating with Israel against Hamas. From Ramallah, the Palestinian minister for prisoners and refugees, Ziyad Abu Ein, has spoken of "terrorism" and "crimes committed against the Palestinian people."

One of the victims is Aaed Obaid, a former military policeman loyal to Al-Fatah. With blue eyes, a small red beard, and hollow cheeks, he is aching lying on a sofa at his home in Gaza City. Under the blanket he hides his bandaged left leg. "On January 26, around 7 P.M., I was sitting outside the door chattering with my brother," he says. "Four armed and masked men arrived in a silver off-road vehicle, such as those used by Hamas. They apprehended me, hooded me, and dragged me away. I hadn't done anything." First they took him to a militiamen training center, telling him that they were going to execute him. Then they made him pray and dumped him back into the car. "At some point they pulled up near the Shifa hospital and made me lie down on the ground. They fired two Kalashnikov shots at my left leg, without even telling me what I was accused of."

The brother of the kneecapped man, Obaid Adel, is one of the Al-Fatah prisoners released from the Saraia prison, in central Gaza, before the Israelis bombed it. A neat mustache, anger in his eyes. "Some prisoners were injured by the bombs and brought to Shifa. At least seven have been slain in their hospital beds."

After using the war to settle internal issues, now Hamas wants to control the distribution of aid and reconstruction. It also tried to confiscate the aid of UNRWA, the United Nations agency for Palestine refugees.

On February 4, Hamas policemen seized 406 food rations and 3,500 blankets intended for 500 Palestinian families. The day after, the UN chief official in Gaza, John Ging, firmly declared to Panorama: "It is the first time and it will be the last time they steal our aid. They must return it without arguing." During the night, a few hours later, 300 tons of food supplies were also seized. UNRWA has decided to suspend the arrival of aid to Gaza until the stolen goods are returned. On February 9 the fundamentalists surrendered and returned it all, but they always seek to manage consensus through the aid.

"Whatever gets through from Rafah, the border crossing with Egypt, ends in the hands of Hamas. Distribution is dealt with by the social committees of the mosques, 90 percent of which are controlled by the Islamic movement," explains Mkhaimer Abusada, a political science lecturer at Al-Azhar University of Gaza. Distribution lists, which favor those who support Hamas, are the weapon of consent in exchange for aid. In late January, the police stopped the trucks of a local humanitarian organization that works for an Italian NGO. They wanted the water distribution lists.

To meet the head of a Palestinian NGO, funded by the European Union and by the American USAid agency, we cautiously wander at night. The appointment is at Jabaliya. The chairman of the NGO is afraid of Hamas, not of the Israelis. "They want to force their men to control the distribution" accuses the source of Panorama. "We were told not to conduct statistics on destroyed homes: they are going to lay their hands on the reconstruction too. I know dozens of families who have suffered the Israeli aggression, but are discriminated against with regard to aid because they do not support Hamas."

In Beit Lahiya, in the north of the Strip, Fatima's home is partly destroyed. "I went to the Islamic Society, an organization close to Hamas that deals with aid and reconstruction. I don't vote for them. Strangely enough I was not registered in the distribution list" tells the middle-aged woman wrapped in a multicolored veil.

A Gaza journalist has lost a beautiful two-story house. He was handed over 380 euros to get an initial arrangement. "Friends of Hamas have pocketed 4 thousand euro. To a neighbor of mine who had just shattered window panes but is one of them, aid arrived straightaway" protests the journalist.

Despite the disaster, the Islamic movement has declared victory. A bitter joke circulates among the Palestinians of the Strip: "A couple more victories like this and Gaza will disappear from the face of the Earth." But something is changing: a poll of the Beit Sahour Palestinian Public Opinion Center reveals that the consensus for Hamas in the Strip has dropped from 51 percent in November to 27.8 after the war.