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## Gazans: IDF used us as 'human shields' during offensive

By [Amira Hass](#)

GAZA - The question "Who is it?" was answered with: "The Israel Defense Forces." Majdi Abed Rabbo, 39, who is a Palestinian Authority (Ramallah) employee and a member of its intelligence apparatus, went down to open the door. Standing there was the son of his neighbors, Mahmoud Daher, and behind him a soldier whose rifle was jammed into Daher's back. The soldier pushed Daher aside and aimed the rifle at Abed Rabbo.

"He ordered me to pull down my pants. I pulled them down. He demanded that I raise my shirt. I raised it. That I turn around. I turned around," Abed Rabbo related. And then the room filled up with soldiers. "Twelve, or something like that."

This was in the morning of Monday, January 5, 2009, about 40 hours after the start of the Israeli ground offensive in Gaza.

The soldiers had already taken over Daher's house on Sunday evening, located in I'zbet Abed Rabbo, an eastern neighborhood of Jabaliya city. First they gathered the family on the ground floor. Gunfire rang out around the house. Then they moved the family up to the first floor. The family wondered why the soldiers had taken them upstairs, to the cold, uncomfortable room - parents, children, two infants and an elderly mother. But they could not refuse, and they did not yet know that the move upstairs brought them closer to the range of fire. Only later did they learn about the three fighters from Iz al-Din al-Qassam, Hamas' military wing, positioned in the empty house to the northeast of them. The regular occupants of the house, owned by their neighbor Abu Hatem, had long since gone abroad. Abed Rabbo's tall house stood next to Abu Hatem's narrow, empty one.

At about 7 A.M. on Monday, the soldiers took Shafiq Daher - a 53-year-old financial manager who gets his salary from the PA in Ramallah - as well as Mahmoud and two other sons from their home, and then separated them from each other.

The soldiers took the elder Daher to the house of his neighbor to the east, Jaber Zeydan. The door had already been broken, and the neighbors were huddled in one room. The search here, as in the four

other homes Daher was forced to enter that day, was conducted in the same way: He entered first, with the soldiers behind him. One soldier placed his rifle on Daher's right shoulder, and pressed down on his left shoulder. The members of the Zeydan family were taken into the adjacent house, owned by Tawfiq Katari. The hands of all the men, including boys of 14 and 16, were tied, some behind the back, some in front.

### **Protecting soldiers**

The soldiers also took over Katari's house on Sunday night, January 4. The Kataris, too, were rounded up and taken to the ground floor. There was shooting all around. The soldiers took up positions on one of the upper floors and turned the northeast window, close to the Abu Hatem home, into a firing position. "There was one nice soldier who told us that where we were sitting was dangerous and moved us next to an inner wall," one of the women related.

At about 9 A.M. on Monday, the soldiers took Katari's son Jamal from the house. During the next four days Jamal accompanied the soldiers and performed several tasks. He was made to enter what he estimates were 10 houses, going in first and calling on the occupants to come downstairs. He preceded the huge army bulldozer that forced its way through the neighborhood, ripping up the streets. "I am afraid the soldiers will shoot me," he told a soldier, who replied: "Don't be afraid."

In the meantime, that same Monday morning, Shafiq Daher, too, was continuing his mission of protecting Israel Defense Forces soldiers. The second house he was made to check was also empty. It belonged to the Al-Ajarmi family. Daher did not know that his two oldest sons were accompanying other groups of soldiers, and were being forced to smash holes in the walls of houses using sledgehammers. Nor did he know that at that very moment, a soldier was jamming his rifle into the back of his third son, standing at the door of Abed Rabbo's home.

Abed Rabbo himself, after being forced to smash a hole in the wall that separated his roof from his neighbors' roof and to accompany the soldiers inside, was made to enter several houses near the mosque, break into a car and then go into the Zeydan house. He was then taken to the Katari family's home, where he met Shafiq Daher and told him that his son was all right. At about 2 P.M., a soldier took him outside, pointed to the Abu Hatem house and said, according to Abed Rabbo's testimony: "There were armed people in that house. We killed them. Take off their clothes and take their weapons." At first he refused and said that was not his job. "Obey orders," he was told.

### **Dead or alive?**

Abbed Rabbo went to the Abu Hatem house, shouting in Arabic that he was the owner. In the house, he found three very much alive members of Iz al-Din al-Qassam. They told him to leave and threatened him not to come back, "because we will shoot you." He returned to the soldiers, who made him undress and turn around, and then told them that the three were alive. The officer on hand asked to see his ID card and discovered that Abed Rabbo was a member of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' intelligence. He was handcuffed and moved aside. He heard shooting. Then he was again sent to check the Abu Hatem house, after being told the three militants were now dead; he found one wounded and the others "all right." One of them said: "Tell the officer that if he is a man, he can come up here himself."

The soldiers didn't like what they heard. One of them cursed, said Abed Rabbo, who was handcuffed again and made to wait. It began to grow dark when he heard a helicopter approaching, followed by the sound of a missile exploding. One of the soldiers said: Now we have killed them, with a missile. Come over here. Abed Rabbo complied and saw, with horror, that the missile had struck his house.

He told the soldier that the missile had missed. "Are you majnoun [nuts]?" the soldier asked him. "No," Abed Rabbo replied. "The missile hit my house."

There was a huge mess: Water was bursting out of pipes, pieces of concrete were lying all over. And all around the shooting continued unabated, interspersed with the sounds of many explosions and helicopters flying overhead.

At about midnight, between Monday and Tuesday, Abed Rabbo was forced to go for a third time, to ascertain whether the three Hamas militants were dead. The soldiers lit the way for him. He found two of the gunmen, still alive, but buried under the rubble; the third was still holding his weapon. Abed Rabbo returned to the soldiers, stripped down again and repeated that the three were alive.

"Are you majnoun?" they demanded.

"No, I am not majnoun, I am telling you what I saw," he replied. Hungry, thirsty and with a throbbing headache, Abbed Rabbo was taken back to the Katari house.

At 6:30 A.M. he was brought out, in front of what was once his house. Soldiers brought a megaphone, he recalled later, and started to shout: "Ya, armed people, you have 15 minutes to turn yourselves in. Come down, remove your clothes, the Red Cross is here, the journalists are here, we will treat the wounded men."

The soldiers then sent a dog into the house. One of the Hamas fighters shot and killed it. The soldiers again started calling on them to come out. There was no reply. "And then a bulldozer arrived and started to demolish my house, right before my eyes." Abed Rabbo was sent into the Katari house as the bulldozer started to wreck Abu Hatem's house. He heard sporadic gunfire shots. When he emerged, two hours later, he found two of the armed men "sprawled on the demolished concrete, dead." He did not see the third man.

"What kind of army is this, which can't break into one house where there are armed men?" Abed Rabbo asked himself.

### **The IDF responds**

Haaretz spoke with eight residents of I'zbet Abed Rabbo neighborhood, who testified that they were made to accompany IDF soldiers on missions involving breaking into and searching houses - not to mention the family members who remained in the houses the army took over, which were used as firing positions. The eight estimated that about 20 local people were made to carry out "escort and protection" missions of various kinds, as described here, between January 5 and January 12.

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit stated in response: "The IDF is a moral army and its soldiers operate according to the spirit and values of the IDF, and we suggest a thorough examination of the allegations of Palestinian elements with vested interests. The IDF troops were instructed unequivocally not to make use of the civilian population within the combat framework for any purpose whatsoever, certainly not as 'human shields.'

"Following an examination with the commanders of the forces that were in the area in question, no evidence was found of the cases mentioned. Anyone who tries to accuse the IDF of actions of this kind creates a mistaken and misleading impression of the IDF and its fighters, who operate according to moral criteria and international law."

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