

■ Witness in Palestine Nablus Invasion: Human Shields & Medical Obstruction

Monday, March 5, 2007

Most of the jeeps pulled out late last Monday night, but we all knew they would be back. Israeli officials announced that the operation was not over, as they had not yet achieved their objectives. Typically the army will officially withdraw for several hours or a whole day, hoping to draw out the wanted men. Soldiers will remain in occupied houses, where they typically set up sniper nests.



During the invasion, soldiers trashed countless local shops.

Despite the lingering soldiers, the withdrawal gave the city a chance to move and relax a bit before the next strike. We took the chance to document the destruction and take reports from victims and their families. Our first stop was Al-Watani Hospital, one of many that had been surrounded during the invasion. According to the director, soldiers set up a checkpoint for everyone coming into or out of the hospital, and questioned several patients after checking them. He worried about the psychological and physical effects of even mild interrogation on patients already frail with sickness.

In the hospital we met family members of Ghareb Selhab, a man who had been in critical condition since the day before. According to his son, Ghareb was in the bathroom when his home began to fill with tear gas. He gasped to his wife that he could not breathe, and went into cardiac arrest. The family immediately called for help, but soldiers prevented the ambulance from reaching Ghareb's home for over an hour. By that time, Ghareb had stopped breathing and fallen into a deep coma. When they reached the hospital, he had no pulse and it was too late. Doctors hooked him up to a breathing machine but, knowing it was hopeless, yesterday the family decided to pull the plug. He was 47 years old, the father of seven.

Normally UPMRC volunteers serve as a backup if ambulances can't get through, but as luck would have it, while Ghareb was breathing his last independent breath, the army was raiding the UPMRC. Soldiers came into the clinic with dogs and herded all the doctors and internationals into one room while they searched the building. My colleagues Nova and Yara overheard someone being beaten next door.



Ghareb, a 47-year-old father of seven, was tear-gassed in his home, causing him to go into cardiac arrest. Soldiers prevented ambulances from reaching him in time to save him.

The raid was just another instance of the army detaining medical relief workers. We interviewed Alaa from the UPMRC about his detention on Monday when he tried to evacuate Ashraf's father. Alaa said the soldiers handcuffed him and held him in a jeep for 7 hours. They scolded him when his hands shook (he has a weak pulse condition), and hit him whenever he raised his head. Alaa was released 5 miles south of the city at midnight, but was back delivering medicine with UPMRC on Wednesday, when the soldiers reinvaded Nablus and curfew was imposed again.

The second invasion seemed heavier than the first, with even more soldiers and jeeps around every corner. More and more families were going incommunicado, which, we understood, meant that their homes were being occupied. Sometimes people would call for help and when we arrived at their houses nobody would answer the door. Had they left their homes? Neighbors would assure us that they were still inside. We would yell to the soldiers that we knew the families were there and we just wanted to deliver medicine. After some insisting sometimes the soldiers would answer; sometimes not.

At one point we were made to wait 40 minutes outside an occupied home. As we waited, soldiers escorted detained men in and out, including one group of 10 medical volunteers from the Red Crescent Society and the UPMRC. After half an hour they let the medical relief workers go on the condition that they would leave the area and stop distributing medicine.



Medical Obstruction

Top left: Alaa, a UPMRC volunteer who was detained and beaten while delivering medical services because soldiers said he “looked suspicious”

Top right: Soldiers confiscate the IDs of medics and refuse to return them for one hour, preventing the volunteers from delivering medical services.

Left: Soldiers detain 10 medical workers outside an occupied house. After half an hour, the medics were released on condition that they leave the area and stop delivering medicine.

Sometimes the detention was unofficial. Soldiers once demanded at gunpoint the IDs of the four volunteers whom we were accompanying and then refused to give them back for a full hour. Because it's extremely dangerous to be caught breaking curfew without an ID, we were forced to wait. Meanwhile, a diabetic was waiting for his insulin, which we were on our way to deliver. The soldiers said they were checking the IDs, but spent the hour chatting, eating lunch, and taking pictures of us waiting.



A UPMRC doctor delivers medical treatment to a boy with serious burns. Soldiers detained the doctor several times during the invasion.

There were so many stories that I stopped writing them down. But one that stuck with me came from Nova and Yara, who were delivering bread and medicine with three friends from the UPMRC when a group of soldiers called them over. One by one, our UPMRC friends were ordered to open their jackets, pull their pants down, turn around, and put their hands up against the wall. Nova and Yara averted their eyes as the men were forced to strip in front of them. The soldiers let them go afterwards, but we have scarcely seen our friends since—I can only imagine their embarrassment, in a culture where modesty and gender boundaries are so important.

Something about humiliation is worse than physical punishment. I've heard stories of young women detained, photographed naked, and threatened that if they don't collaborate with the army (as spies), their pictures will be distributed, shaming them and their families beyond repair. This can be more effective than bribery and even torture. Many of the detainees are young people, sometimes not more than 13 years old, who say they aren't questioned about the wanted men at all. Instead, soldiers use various techniques to encourage them to collaborate.

It's strategic to target the young and weak. We discovered an 11-year-old girl named Jihan who was taken from her home to serve as a human shield after her father and older sister proved too strong-willed to cooperate. The army came for her at night and made her walk in front of 10 armed soldiers as they went from house to house in the Old City. When she protested, they threatened to arrest her.



Jihan, 11 years old, was used by Israeli soldiers as a human shield.



*A family sits in front of the hole that soldiers broke in the wall to enter the family's home.
The child with the black hat was also used as a human shield.*

Jihan was not the only young human shield used this week. One family told us how the soldiers invaded by breaking a hole through their wall, herding 27 family members into one room, and forcing two young men to open doors in front of them as they raided the rest of the neighborhood. After 6 hours, the women and older men were released while the young men being used as human shields and all the other men were handcuffed and taken away. One of those men, Abdallah, told us what happened:

We were five in total, ages 17 to 30. They led us away from our home through the hole that they'd made in our wall. It was hard to climb through the hole without the use of our hands. Then we had to walk up the steep and rocky hill behind our house, which was also very difficult with our hands behind our backs.

The soldiers brought us to a home in the Raas Al-Ain quarter. We were not allowed to use the toilet at all for the next 10 hours, but my need was very urgent during most of that time. After the first couple of hours, we asked when our hands would be untied—we were having pain in our shoulders, especially my brother who is overweight so he cannot remain so long with his hands stretched behind. A soldier came behind us and instead of opening our hands he tied the handcuffs tighter as punishment for asking. It was very painful for us. Soon I could not feel my hands and I asked another soldier if he would loosen the cuffs. He said we would be released soon.

Instead, we were taken into jeeps, blindfolded, and driven to Huwwara military base south of Nablus. The *Mukhabarat* (Israeli Intelligence) were waiting there and when we arrived they took off our blindfolds, looked at our IDs, checked them, and asked a few questions: What's your name? Where are you from? What do you do? We answered their questions in 2 minutes, and then they put the blindfolds back on for 6 more hours. You cannot know the feeling of being detained, handcuffed, and blindfolded for 17 hours. Try closing your eyes and tying your hands for just one hour—it will feel like an eternity, and you will begin to feel you are losing your mind.

Between 9 p.m. and 3 a.m. they led us around to different jeeps. We kept tripping because we could not see anything or use our hands. At 3 a.m. they took off our blindfolds and handcuffs, gave us a paper saying in Hebrew that we'd been at Huwwara, and told us we could go. We could not understand the logic of detaining and handcuffing us all that time without food, water, or access to a toilet just to ask us a couple silly questions that they probably already know the answers to.

Because of the curfew there was no transportation so we had to walk the 8 km [5 miles] back to Nablus. Actually, we ran part of the way because we were scared—there are many dogs on the road, plus we were afraid of being caught in clashes between Palestinians and the army. We arrived at home almost 2 hours later, around five in the morning.

The soldiers returned twice more to Abdallah's house during the invasions, and they will probably be back. The third time they destroyed many things in the house, turning over furniture and breaking glasses and windows. As illustrated by Abdallah's story, it's not clear whether the raids and detention are so much about getting information as general harassment, or at best callous disregard for residents' rights.

We documented another raid that took place at a student dormitory of Al-Najaa University. The soldiers arrived at 4:15 a.m., threw sound bombs, and threatened that unless everyone evacuated the building, it would be destroyed on top of them. Students and family residents fled outside in their pajamas and were brought to the basement of a nearby building. Women and children were kept in one room, while all of the men—some as young as 14—were handcuffed and made to sit in another room. For the next 6 hours, the 30 men were forbidden to speak, open a window for fresh air, or even lean against a wall to sleep.

When the soldiers left after 10 a.m. (without undoing the men's plastic handcuffs—neighbors came to help free them), the students and families returned to find their



Hussein, a vegetable seller, 2 days after he was used by soldiers as a human shield



A graduate student and her family describe their experience being woken up and detained from 4 a.m. to 10 a.m. with other students from an Al-Najaa University dormitory.



The Al-Najaa student dormitory's doors, windows, light fixtures, and elevator were left in shambles after an army raid.



Student dorm rooms were turned upside-down by soldiers looking for wanted men.

homes in shambles. Each flat had been raided: soldiers had used bombs to blast open doors, windows were shattered, light fixtures were dangling from their sockets, and the elevator had been blown apart. Bedrooms were turned upside-down, textbooks and assignments strewn across the floor, pictures and pop-star posters ripped from the walls. Like every other raid throughout the invasion, no wanted people were found in the building. But how many more fighters were created?

These reports of detention, raids, human shields, and the obstruction of medical treatment may seem repetitive. I record them here not only because I believe they each deserve to be heard, but more crucially because, with enough reports, these seemingly arbitrary instances of harassment can no longer be dismissed as isolated incidents or unfortunate side effects of conflict, but must be recognized as unspoken policies of the Israeli army. If the intention is security for Israeli citizens, these policies are not only ineffective but, in my opinion, severely counterproductive. If the intention is to frighten the people of Nablus, then this is terrorism and should be recognized and condemned as such.

