

Shireen Abu Akleh was executed to send a message to Palestinians

Jonathan Cook, middleeasteye.net, 12.05.22

During 20 years of reporting on the conflict, I learned first-hand that Israel's version of events around the deaths of Palestinians or foreigners can never be trusted.

The execution of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by an Israeli soldier in the Palestinian city of Jenin, along with Israel's immediate efforts to muddy the waters about who was responsible and the feeble expressions of concern from western capitals, brought memories flooding back from 20 years of reporting from the region.

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Unlike Abu Akleh, I found myself far less often on the front lines in the occupied territories. I was not a war correspondent, and when I ended up close to the action it was invariably by accident - such as when, also in Jenin, my Palestinian taxi turned into a street only to find ourselves staring down the barrel of an Israeli tank. Judging by the speed and skill with which my driver navigated in reverse, it was not his first time dealing with that kind of roadblock.

Abu Akleh reported on far too many killings of Palestinians not to have known the risks she faced as a journalist every time she donned a flak jacket. It was a kind of nerve I did not share.

According to a recent report by Reporters Without Borders, at least 144 Palestinian journalists have been wounded by Israeli forces in the occupied territories since 2018. Three, including Abu Akleh, have been killed in the same period.

I spent part of my time in the region visiting the scenes of Palestinian deaths, trying to pick through the conflicting Palestinian and Israeli narratives to get a clearer understanding of what had actually happened. Abu Akleh's killing, and Israel's response, fit a pattern consistent with what I discovered when carrying out those investigations.

It was no surprise, then, to hear Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett immediately blame Palestinians for her death. There was, he said, "a considerable chance that armed Palestinians, who fired wildly, were the ones who brought about the journalist's unfortunate death".

Settling scores

Abu Akleh was a face familiar not only to the Arab world that devours news from Palestine, but to most of the Israeli combat soldiers who "raid" - a euphemism for attack - Palestinian communities such as Jenin. The soldiers who shot at her and the group of Palestinian journalists she was with knew they were firing at

members of the media. But there also appears to be evidence suggesting that one or more of the soldiers identified her specifically as a target.

Palestinians are rightly suspicious that the bullet hole just below the edge of her metal helmet was not a one-in-a-million chance event. It looked like a precision shot intended to kill her - the reason why Palestinian officials are calling her death "deliberate".

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Indeed, Abu Akleh was most likely shot precisely because she was a high-profile Al Jazeera reporter, known for her fearless reporting of Israeli crimes. Both the army and its soldiers bear grudges, and they have lethal weapons with which to settle scores.

'Friendly fire'

Israel's suggestion that she was targeted by, or was collateral damage from, Palestinian gunfire should be treated with the disdain it deserves. At least with the advantage of modern GPS and satellite imagery, this kind of standard-issue dissembling is becoming easier to rebut.

The "friendly fire" defence is straight out of the playbook Israel uses whenever it cannot resort to its preferred retrospective rationalisation for killing Palestinians: that they were armed and "posed an immediate danger to soldiers".

That was a lesson I learned in my first months in the region. I arrived in 2001 to investigate events during the first days of the [Second Intifada](#), or Palestinian uprising, when Israeli police killed 13 protesters. Those killings, unlike parallel events taking place in the occupied territories, targeted members of a large [Palestinian minority](#) that lives inside Israel and has a very inferior citizenship.

At the outbreak of the Intifada in late 2000, Palestinian citizens had taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers to protest the Israeli army's killing of their compatriots in the occupied territories.

They were enraged, in particular, by footage from Gaza captured by France 2 TV. It showed a father desperately trying to shield his 12-year-old son, Muhammad al-Durrah, as they were trapped by Israeli gunfire at a road intersection. Muhammad was killed and his father, Jamal, seriously wounded.

On that occasion too, Israel tried its best to cloud what had happened - and carried on doing so for many years. It variously blamed Palestinians for killing Durrah, claimed the scene had been staged, or suggested the boy was actually alive and unharmed. It did so even over the protests of the French TV crew.

Palestinian children were being killed elsewhere in the occupied territories, but those deaths were rarely captured so viscerally on film. And when they were, it was usually on the primitive personal digital cameras of the time. Israel and its apologists casually dismissed such grainy footage as "Pallywood" - a conflation of Palestinian and Hollywood - to suggest it was faked.

Shot from behind

The Israeli deceptions over Durrah's death echoed what was happening inside Israel. Police there were also shooting recklessly at the large demonstrations erupting, even though protesters were unarmed and had Israeli citizenship. Not only were 13 Palestinians killed, but hundreds more were wounded, with some horrifically maimed.

In one incident, Israeli Jews from Upper Nazareth - some of them armed, off-duty police officers - marched on the neighbouring Palestinian city of Nazareth, where I was based. Mosque loudspeakers called on Nazareth's residents to come out and protect their homes. There followed a long, tense stand-off between the two sides at a road junction between the communities.

Police stood alongside the invaders, watched over by Israeli snipers positioned atop a tall building in Upper Nazareth, facing Nazareth residents massed below.

The police insisted that the Palestinians leave first. Faced with so many weapons, the crowds from Nazareth eventually relented and headed back home. At that point, police snipers opened fire, shooting several men in the back. Two, who were hit in the head, were killed instantly.

Those executions were witnessed by the hundreds of Palestinians there, as well as by police and by all those who had tried to invade Nazareth. And yet, the official police story ignored the sequence of events. Police said the fact that the two Palestinian men had been shot in the back of the head was proof they had been killed by other Palestinians, not police snipers.

Commanders claimed, without producing any evidence or conducting a forensic investigation, that Palestinian gunmen had been hiding behind the men and shot them by mistake while aiming for police. It was a blatant lie, but one that the authorities held to through a subsequent judicial-led inquiry.

Balance of power

As was the case with Abu Akleh, those two men's deaths were not - as Israel would like us to believe - an unfortunate incident, with innocents caught in the crossfire.

Like Abu Akleh, those Nazareth men were executed in cold blood by Israel. It was intended as a stark message to all Palestinians about where the balance of power resides, and as a warning to submit, to keep quiet, to know their place.

The people of Nazareth defied those strictures in coming out to protect their city. Abu Akleh did the same by turning up day after day for more than two decades to report on the injustices, crimes and horrors of living under Israeli occupation. Both were acts of peaceful resistance to oppression, and both were viewed by Israel as equivalent to terrorism.

We will never be able to conclude whether Abu Akleh or those two men died because of the actions of a hot-headed Israeli soldier, or because the shooter was given an instruction by senior officers to use an execution as a teaching moment for other Palestinians. But we do not need to know which it is. Because it keeps on happening, and because Israel keeps on doing nothing to stop it, or to identify and punish those responsible.

Because killing Palestinians - unpredictably, even randomly - fits perfectly with the goals of an occupying power intent on eroding any sense of safety or normality for Palestinians, an occupier determined to terrorise them into departure, bit by bit, from their homeland.

Taught a lesson

Abu Akleh was one of a small number of Palestinians from the occupied territories who have American citizenship. That, and her fame in the Arab world, are two reasons why officials in Washington felt duty-bound to express sadness at her killing and issue a formulaic call for a "thorough investigation".

The truth is that a decades-long occupation can only survive through wanton - sometimes random, sometimes carefully calibrated - acts of terror to keep the subject population fearful and subdued. When the occupation is sponsored by the main global superpower, there is absolute impunity for those who oversee that reign of terror.

But Abu Akleh's US passport was no more able to save her from Israeli retribution than that of Rachel Corrie, [murdered in 2003](#) by an Israeli bulldozer driver as she tried to protect Palestinian homes in Gaza. Similarly, Tom Hurndall's British passport did not stop him from being shot in the head as he tried to protect Palestinian children in Gaza from Israeli gunfire. Nor did filmmaker James Miller's British passport prevent an Israeli soldier from executing him in 2003 in Gaza, as he documented Israel's assault on the tiny, overcrowded enclave.

All were seen as having taken a side by acting as witnesses and by refusing to remain quiet as Palestinians suffered - and for that reason, they and those who thought like them had to be taught a lesson.

It worked. Soon, the contingent of foreign volunteers - those who had come to Palestine to record Israel's atrocities and serve, when necessary, as human shields to protect Palestinians from a trigger-happy Israeli army - were gone. Israel denounced the International Solidarity Movement for supporting terrorism, and given the clear threat to their lives, the pool of volunteers gradually dried up.

The executions - whether committed by hot-headed soldiers or approved by the army - served their purpose once again.

Error of judgment

I was the only journalist to investigate the first in this spate of executions of foreigners early in the Second Intifada. Iain Hook, a Briton working for UNRWA, the United Nations refugee agency, was shot dead in late 2002 by an Israeli sniper in Jenin - the same northern West Bank city where Abu Akleh would be executed 20 years later.

Just as with Abu Akleh, the official Israeli story was designed to turn the focus away from what was clearly an Israeli execution to shift the blame to Palestinians.

During yet another of Israel's "raids" into Jenin, Hook and his staff, along with Palestinian children attending an Unrwa school, had taken shelter inside the sealed compound.

Israel's story was a concoction of lies that could be easily disproven, though no foreign journalist apart from me ever bothered to go to the site to check. And with more limited opportunities in those days, I struggled to find an outlet willing to publish my investigation.

Israel claimed its sniper, overlooking the compound from a third-floor window, had seen Palestinians break into the compound. According to this version, the sniper mistook the distinctive, tall, pale, red-headed, 54-year-old Hook for a Palestinian gunman, even though the sniper had been watching the UN official through telescopic sights for more than an hour.

To bolster its preposterous story, Israel also claimed the sniper had mistaken Hook's mobile phone for a hand grenade, and was worried he was about to throw it out of the compound towards the Israeli soldiers on the street outside.

Except, as the sniper would have known, that was impossible. The compound was sealed, with a high concrete wall, a petrol station forecourt-style awning as a roof, and thick chicken wire covering the space between. Had Hook thrown his phone-grenade at the street outside, it would have bounced right back at him. If it were really a grenade, he would have blown himself up.

The truth was that Hook had made an error of judgment. Surrounded by Israeli troops and Palestinian fighters hidden in alleyways nearby, and exasperated by Israel's refusal to allow his staff and the children safe passage out, he opened the gate and tried to plead with the soldiers outside. As he did so, a Palestinian gunman emerged from an alley close by and fired towards an Israeli armoured vehicle. No one was hurt. Hook fled back into the compound and sealed it again.

But the Israeli soldiers outside now had a grudge against the UN official. One of them decided to use a bullet to Hook's head to settle the score.

Bad faith

The UN was obliged to carry out a detailed investigation into Hook's killing. Abu Akleh's loved ones will be unlikely to have the same advantage. In fact, Israeli police made a point of "raiding" her home in occupied East Jerusalem to disrupt the family's mourning, demanding that a Palestinian flag be taken down. Another message sent.

Israel is already insisting on access to the forensic evidence - as though a murderer has a right to be the one to investigate his own crime.

But in fact, even in Hook's case, the UN investigation was quietly shelved. Accusing Israel of executing a UN official would have forced the international body into a dangerous confrontation both with Israel and with the United States. Hook's killing was hushed up and no one was brought to book.

Nothing better can be expected for Abu Akleh. There will be noises about an investigation. Israel will blame the Palestinian Authority for not cooperating, as it is already doing. Washington will express tepid concern but do nothing. Behind the scenes, the US will help Israel block any meaningful investigation.

For the US and Europe, routine statements of "sadness" and calls for investigation are not intended to ensure light is shed on what happened. That could only embarrass a strategic ally needed to project western power into the oil-rich Middle East.

No, these half-hearted declarations from western capitals are meant to defuse and confuse. They are intended to take the wind out any backlash; indicate western impartiality, and save the blushes of complicit Arab regimes; suggest there is a legal process that Israel adheres to; and subvert efforts by Palestinians and the human rights community to refer these war crimes to international bodies, such as the Hague court.

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Abu Akleh is the latest victim. But these executions will continue so long as Israel and its soldiers are shielded from accountability.

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