



In the 'Fog of War' in Gaza, a Rain of Fire

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Farah Abu Halima (center) with her father, Mohammed Abu Halima and sister Aya in their home in Beit Lahiya, Gaza Strip. (Photo by Gary Fields)

Although the primary UN investigator for war crimes in Gaza, Richard Goldstone now admits to some doubt about whether Israel targeted civilians in its 2009 invasion, there is no doubt about what happened on January 4th of that year to Farah Abu Halima, a 2-year old girl from Beit Lahiya in the north of Gaza. Farah fell victim to the "fog of war."

At 3:30 in the afternoon of that fateful first day of the ground assault known as Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli army began shelling the area near the home of the Abu Halima family. Thirty minutes later, the family of modest farmers would be consumed by tragedy but in a surprising turn of fate their ordeal would bring people in San Diego into direct contact with Farah's misfortune and the horrors of the conflict in Gaza.

On that afternoon, Israeli forces fired a tank shell that hit the Abu Halima house and set much of the structure on fire. Five members of the family including four young children were killed immediately. Moments later, Mohammad Abu Halima, the 25-year old father of Farah emerged from the house with his 2-year-old daughter in his arms. The girl was severely burned on her face, chest, abdomen and legs. Mohammad's wife, Ghada, who had shielded Farah, was even more badly burned.

Grieving and in shock, Mohammed placed his wife and daughter in a cart attached to the family's tractor in what would be a harrowing journey in search of emergency care. While en route, Israeli soldiers stopped the tractor and forced the family to go on foot.

Eventually, they reached Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City where doctors examined Farah and Ghada but admitted that they had never before encountered burns of this type.

Farah and her mother were among the first victims of white phosphorous munitions used extensively by the Israeli military during Operation Cast Lead.

Although legal as camouflage for other weapons, white phosphorous causes horrific burns when it comes into contact with skin. Its use is condemned by human rights groups as a war crime when shot into civilian areas.

Farah, Ghada and Mohammed remained at Al-Shifa Hospital for one week before being taken to the Egyptian border where they were transferred to a Cairo hospital after enduring an arduous 10-hour ride. "Farah was in terrible pain and crying for the entire trip,"

Mohammed recalls. In March, Farah's mother died from her injuries while Farah remained in serious condition. It was at this point that a heroic organization, the Palestine Children's Relief Fund (PCRF) intervened on Farah's behalf.

The PCRF helps child victims of the Israel/Palestinian conflict obtain medical care otherwise unavailable in the West Bank and especially in Gaza where the health system is increasingly constrained by the Israeli blockade. By November, 2009, PCRF had arranged for Farah to travel to San Diego for burn treatment.

PCRF enlists doctors willing to donate their services among them Dr. Munish Batra and Dr. Michael Halls, reconstructive plastic surgeons with practices in Del Mar and San Diego who performed several critical surgeries on Farah at Palomar Hospital.

According to Dr. Batra, the most urgent problem facing Farah was the burned tissue inside her abdominal wall, compromising the child's growth. In the course of four operations over six months, Dr. Batra and Dr. Halls were able to excise burn scars and rearrange abdominal tissue facilitating the development of normal skin and body growth. The doctors also operated on Farah's badly burned legs. Their efforts, in concert with PCRF, enabled Farah to return home in November, 2010 where she now strikes an image of an animated child incomparably better than when she arrived in San Diego for treatment.

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If, however, Farah is physically more robust, her psychological condition is more problematic. Farah exhibits certain symptoms associated with child post-traumatic stress disorder. Obviously losing her mother and other members of her family created enormous stress on her young psyche but perhaps the most troubling sign of her inner suffering is the way Farah senses that she is somehow damaged and incapable of doing certain types of activities. Mohammed reveals that his daughter is often reluctant to do chores and sometimes uncomfortable playing with other children because, as Farah explains, it "I can not do these things because I am *burned*."

Dr. Eyad Serraj, President of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program and arguably the most well-known psychiatrist in Palestine places Farah's case in context. "Everyone in Gaza is traumatized to some extent," he emphasizes, "but the most traumatized are children." He tells me that 10-15 % of all children in Gaza are suffering from PTSD while parents are affected by feeling unable to protect their kids. Compounding this stress is the isolation of life in Gaza. "With the blockade still in place and no functioning economy," he continues, "all of us in Gaza have a sense of being locked in a prison, terrified of another invasion."

Although controversy raged from the beginning of Operation Cast Lead as to whether the Israeli military deliberately targeted civilians, the debate is in some way beside the point. Deliberate or not, the Israeli military killed 1417 people in Gaza including 350 children. Tens of thousands were wounded, many burned by Israel's deployment of phosphorous munitions during the invasion.

Even if one assumes that Palestinian civilians were not targeted in Operation Cast Lead, the question persists as to what the state of Israel intended by using white phosphorous in the densely populated geography of the Gaza Strip? While we in San Diego have forged a bond of compassion with Farah Abu Halima, her ordeal and that of her family suggest that it does not matter what Israel intended. They must be judged by what they did.

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