

Gabrielle Giffords, Tom Hurndall and Palestinian Children

Shot in the Head

By **Alison Weir**, Executive Director of If Americans Knew, January 14, 2011

There is something particularly horrifying when someone is shot in the head. Perhaps it's the gruesome image, the destruction of the brain, the clear intent to kill. The recent shooting of Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords is made even more nightmarish by the location of her devastating injury.

Those of us who focus on Israel-Palestine are acutely aware of this horror.

Several years ago, I was researching the cause of death of Palestinian children killed by Israeli forces during the first months of the Second Intifadah, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation. As I counted up the numbers, I was chilled to discover that the single most frequent cause of death in those beginning months was "gunfire to the head."

In the past 10 years Israeli forces have killed at least 255 Palestinian minors by fire to the head, and the number may actually be greater, since in many instances the specific bodily location of the lethal trauma is unlisted. In addition, this statistic does not include the many more Palestinian youngsters shot in the head by Israeli soldiers who survived, in one form or another.

Below is a small sampling of those who died. (The term IDF stands for "Israeli Defense Forces," although these forces are, in reality, an occupation army and are almost always deployed offensively; the incidents below took place on Palestinian territory):

Sami, 12, died of head wounds from IDF gunfire during a demonstration. Abdul, 9, was killed by IDF gunfire to his head during a funeral. Ala, 14, died of head wounds from IDF gunfire while on the terrace of his home one hour after injuring an Israeli soldier with a stone. Omar, 11, died of head wounds from IDF gunfire during a demonstration. Diya, 3 months, was killed, along with her older brother, by Israeli settler gunfire to her head and back. Bara, 10, was killed by IDF gunfire to his head while near his home. Ayman, 15, was killed by IDF tank fire to his head while farming. Khalil, 11, was killed by IDF tank fire to his head while playing with a friend. Rami, 13, was killed by IDF helicopter fire to his head while playing in front of his

house. Yaser, 11, died of head wounds from an IDF rubber-coated bullet fired at close range during a demonstration...¹

Imagine if these names were Bobby... Michael... Susan... Melissa... Jimmy... and that the foreign troops killing them were invading Arizona, Connecticut, Ohio...

I remember seeing one little brain-dead boy when I was in Gaza in February of 2001; long before any rockets had been fired out of this already assaulted enclave. It's not a sight you forget, regardless of the name or nationality.

A 2009 article in the UK Telegraph entitled "Bullets in the brain, shrapnel in the spine: the terrible injuries suffered by children of Gaza," investigated a situation in which doctors at a hospital near Gaza were "almost overwhelmed by the number of Palestinian children needing treatment for bullet wounds to their heads."²

The article began: "On just one day last week staff at the El-Arish hospital in Sinai were called to perform sophisticated CAT brain scans on a nine-year-old, two 10-year-olds and a 14-year-old – each of whom had a bullet still lodged in their brain, after coming under fire during the Israeli ground assault on Gaza."

Asked about the nature of these shootings, a physician replied:

"I can't precisely decide whether these children are being shot at as a target, but in some cases the bullet comes from the front of the head and goes towards the back, so I think the gun has been directly pointed at the child."

Israeli soldiers in a group called "Breaking the Silence" have provided chilling testimonies about Israeli military culture; the titles alone tell a great deal. Following are a few:

"The battalion commander ordered us to shoot anyone trying to remove the bodies", "The commander of the navy commandos put the muzzle of the rifle into the man's mouth", "They told us to shoot at anybody moving in the street", "You can do whatever you feel like, nobody is going to question it."³

Another person shot in the head by Israeli forces was 21-year-old Tom Hurndall. The anniversary of his death is this week. Hurndall, a student and photographer, had wanted to



“make a difference” with his life. In 2003 he went to Gaza to join the nonviolence movement against Israeli aggression and to photograph what he saw.⁴

On April 11th he was nearby when a group of children who had been playing suddenly came under Israeli rifle fire. Most of the children fled, but three, aged four to seven, froze with fear. Hurndall dashed over, rushed one small boy to safety and returned for two little girls. Just as he was reaching to lift one up, an Israeli sniper shot him in the head.

Despite the urgency of his injury, Israeli officials delayed his transport to specialized medical care for over two and a half hours. A British television crew in the area filmed a powerful on-the-scene report that was aired on England’s Channel 4⁵ but has never, to my knowledge, been shown on American television. Tom remained in a vegetative state for nine months, finally dying on Jan. 13th, 2004.

From the end of 2002 to the spring of 2003, Israeli forces killed four internationals and shot another in the face. One of the dead was a UN official, Iain Hook. As with Hurndall, Israeli forces retarded efforts to provide critical medical care.⁶ Another was filmmaker James Miller, who had been waving a white flag. He was shot in the throat.⁷

Two recent non-Palestinian victims shot in the head, in this case by high velocity tear gas canisters, are 37-year-old Tristan Anderson⁸ and 21-year-old Emily Henochoicz.⁹ Both have survived, Emily without an eye and Tristan in a wheelchair. Part of his right frontal lobe has been removed, he is partially paralyzed, blind in one eye, and it is unclear to what degree his cognitive abilities will return. After shooting him at close range, Israeli forces twice delayed his ambulance to a hospital.

It is difficult to know how many of the 45,000 Palestinian men, women, and children killed or injured by Israeli forces since September 29, 2000¹⁰ have been shot in the head. Quite likely the number is staggering. Former Yale professor and author Mazin Qumsiyeh describes one:

[Mohammed] was 12 years old when Israeli soldiers shot him in the head with a rubber coated steel bullet, fragmenting his skull and damaging part of his brain. Ten years later, Israeli army officers severely beat and tortured him. He got married... the young couple received a blessing in the form of a donation of a very small plot of land from their uncle and they built a humble one room house... they lived in this house for 3 years... Then the Israeli army demolished the home saying that it was built without permit (Israel gave no permits for any houses in the village since the occupation began in 1967.) The family rebuilt the house but Israeli threats forced them to not live in it (Israel wants also some NIS 20,000 for the cost of destroying the home and wants to levy other fines on the fam-

ily.) So the young family came to live in a small dwelling underground...¹¹

A Dec. 23rd news story by the International Middle East Middle Center mentions another:

“After being brought to the hospital, 22-year old Salamah Abu Hashish succumbed to his wounds. He had been shot in the back by Israeli troops stationed at the border. Another of the victims was a 14-year old boy who was critically injured when he was shot in the head while collecting rubble near where Abu Hashish was tending his sheep.”¹²

The stories go on and on.

Gabrielle Giffords

Ironically, the American Congresswoman recently so tragically shot in the head has been extremely close to the Israel lobby, which has played a critical role in enabling the tragedies sketched above. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) works year after year to ensure that the approximately \$7-8 million per day of American tax to Israel¹³ keeps flowing regardless of how many civilians its troops kill.¹⁴

Giffords has been known as “a safe pro-Israel vote in the House”¹⁵ and could be counted on to support AIPAC’s various initiatives to shield Israel from negative consequences for its ruthless and illegal use of American weaponry.¹⁶

She called a 2001 visit to Israel a turning point in her life (Israeli forces killed 103 children that year, 31 of them shot in the head) and wrote in 2006 (a year in which Israeli forces killed 665 Palestinians, 139 of them children, and Palestinians killed 23 Israelis, two of them children) that “the United States must do everything possible to secure Israel’s long-term security.”¹⁷ Palestinian victims – killed first and in far greater numbers – seem to have been invisible to her.¹⁸

Giffords, of course, wasn’t the only victim of the Tucson shooting; 14 were injured and six were killed. It is deeply saddening to read about the dead and to imagine the unending grief for their survivors.¹⁹ It is particularly difficult to view the sweet, smiling picture of nine-year-old Christina Taylor Green, knowing that her bright life is no longer before her.

It is equally tragic to read of nine-year-old Akaber, killed by Israeli gunfire to her head while riding in her uncle’s car to get medical stitches removed, and of the 29 other nine-year-olds killed by Israeli forces in the past decade, eight of them by Israeli gunfire to the head.

It is too late for Akabar, Diya, Mohammed, Tom, and the multitude of others. But there is hope that Gabrielle Giffords is going to survive. Let us pray that she recovers fully, that she is able to return to Congress, and that she then works to prevent others – including Palestinians – from being shot in the head.

We have better uses for our money than to fund atrocities.