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UPDATED: In 2007, B'Tselem Casualty Count Doesn't Add Up

[Nov. 2, 2008 update follows.](#)

Sept. 4, 2008 -- B'Tselem has pulled it off again, duping the mainstream media into believing it has tallied civilian Palestinian casualties when it has done no such thing. The oft-cited organization bills itself as a human rights group devoted to rigorous documentation of Israeli conduct in the West Bank and Gaza aimed at educating the public and encouraging political action. Yet the so-called documentation continues to be marred by serious flaws that journalists routinely ignore while reporting the group's charges at face value.

B'Tselem, it should be noted, is heavily funded by European entities, including German, British, Irish, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian and Swiss groups, as well as the Ford Foundation and the New Israel Fund.

Among the most deceptive claims by the group are those embedded in its yearly statistical summary of Palestinian fatalities. B'Tselem reported in a Dec. 31, 2007 [press release](#) that in 2007 Israeli security forces killed 373 Palestinians and that “about 35 percent of those killed were civilians who were not taking part in the hostilities when killed.” These claims were reported without caveat in the *New York Times*, Voice of America, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Jewish Week*, among others.

Despite the press release's statement about the percentage of those killed who were civilians, B'Tselem's [data](#) do not actually break down Palestinian casualties according to civilians or combatants. In most but not all cases, the organization's detailed list of Palestinian casualties classifies each person as “Killed when participating in hostilities” or “Did not participate in hostilities when killed.” Clearly, those in the latter category are not necessarily civilians, as a terrorist could be killed while, for instance, not directly in the process of planting a bomb or shooting a soldier. Moreover, B'Tselem almost never includes any reference to terrorist affiliations of Palestinian casualties, making it impossible for readers to know who was genuinely a civilian and who was not.

As CAMERA had done for [2006](#), a detailed review was conducted of B'Tselem's data for the months of November and December 2007. Multiple inconsistencies and irregularities were found, some of which were continuations of last year's questionable methodology, including the organization's discounting of contradictory information from Israeli and Arab sources pointing to individuals' involvement in hostilities at the time of their death as well as the failure to identify terrorist affiliations.

There were also new problems. For example, the death of an 11-year-old boy killed in Fatah-Hamas clashes is blamed on Israel, while B'Tselem leaves out the killing of two Palestinians, who according to even Palestinian sources, were Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades members attempting to infiltrate into Israel.

For the November-December 2007 period, B'Tselem identifies 92 Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, of which 57 (62 percent) are identified as “Killed when participating in hostilities,” and 23 (25 percent) are identified as “did not participate in hostilities when killed.” The rest – 12 (13 percent) – were not labelled as either participating in hostilities or not when killed.

2007 Findings: Executive Summary

CAMERA's in-depth review of November and December casualties reveals how unreliable B'Tselem's characterizations of Palestinian deaths are.

- In total, there are six casualties that B'Tselem claimed were not involved in hostilities when killed but that other sources – Israeli and/or Arab – said were (Hamas member al-Najar, killed Nov. 20; Muhammad Fawzi Muhammad Abu Hasanin, killed Dec. 27; the two a-Nabahin brothers, killed Nov. 9; Muhammad Salah, killed Dec. 5; Majed Matar, killed Dec. 6).
- In addition, three other Palestinian casualties not involved in hostilities when killed but whose terrorist affiliation B'Tselem ignored are Hashem ‘Ein ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Abu Khadurah, killed Nov. 4, and the two Hamas Executive Force (aka “police officers”) killed Dec. 18 .
- Then there are the two Hamas naval officers whose affiliation B'Tselem did note but who were nevertheless classified as not participating in hostilities.
- To these 11 casualties, the death of an 11-year-old boy, which B'Tselem falsely blamed on Israel, must be added. Subtracting these 12 from the 23 counted as not participating in hostilities, leaves at most 11 (12 percent) Palestinian civilian deaths for the months of November - December – less than half the number of Palestinians that B'Tselem claims.

Detailed analyses of each of the above cases appear below.

Israeli Forces Falsely Blamed in Boy's Death

B'Tselem blames Israel for the death of a Palestinian boy who was in reality killed in Fatah-Hamas clashes. According to B'Tselem, 11-year-old Muhammad Ayman 'Ali Abu al-Wafa was killed Dec. 31, 2007 in Khan Yunis by Israeli security forces while he was not participating in hostilities. Yet, according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, Israeli forces had nothing at all to do with al-Wafa's death. [PCHR reports:](#)

Regarding armed clashes, the most serious incidents occurred at approximately 18:30 on Monday, 31 December 2007, when clashes broke out between dozens of Fatah supporters in the El-Amal Quarter in Khan Yunis and Hamas supporters near El-Rahma Mosque. Both sides threw rocks, and shots were fired.

Two people died during the clash. Mahmoud Shaker Abu Taha, age 58, was shot in the abdomen and killed. Twelve year old Mohammad Ayman Abu El-Wafa was killed after he was shot in the head. (Jan. 3, 2008 press release)

Hamis Fighter 'Did Not Participate in Hostilities'

In another case, B'Tselem writes that Muhammad Zaki Jum'ah al-Najar, killed Nov. 20, 2007 in Khan Yunis, "Did not participate in hostilities when killed. Additional information: Killed when he was near his house while soldiers were in the area."

Yet, Hamas claims al-Najar as one of its own, killed in battle. Its English [Web site](#) mourns him:

As Al Aqsa intifada against the occupation assault on the Gaza Strip continues, Ezzedeem Al-Qassam Brigades has its best men to be in the playground of death to defend their people from any attack by the enemy.. Today , Al-Qassam Brigades mourns the death of the mujahid: Mohammed Zaki Al Najjar

The mujahid was martyred during a clash with the Zionist occupation forces in Khuza'a area east of Khanyounis city.

Terrorist Affiliations Ignored

As in 2006, B'Tselem almost always fails to include the fatalities' affiliations with terror groups. Thus, in some cases, leading terrorists are misleadingly labelled as "did not participate in hostilities when killed." Omitting the terrorist affiliation of a casualty who "did not participate in hostilities when killed" can obviously lead journalists and other researchers to falsely conclude the slain individual was a civilian.

For example, according to B'Tselem, Muhammad Ahmad Suliman Abu Hasanin, 42, and Muhammad Fawzi Muhammad Abu Hasanin, 30, were both killed Dec. 27, 2007 "in al-Bureij Refugee Camp, Dir al-Balah district, by gunfire, from a helicopter." The latter reportedly "Did not participate in hostilities when killed," while the former's involvement in hostilities is not indicated one way or another. Additional information is provided for both men: "Killed while traveling in a car with a relative."

Yet, Palestinian Ma'an News Agency [reported](#) Dec. 27:

Yet another Israeli strike targeted a car in the Al-Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip in which three Al-Quds Brigades activists were traveling. Two were killed and the third was wounded.

Al Quds Brigades spokesperson Abu Ahmad named the deceased as Muhammad Ahmad Abu Hassanain and Muhammad Fawzi Abu Hassanain, both from An-Nuseirat refugee camp.

Thus, for some reason, while B'Tselem researchers finds it noteworthy that the men were relatives, they do not consider their status in Islamic Jihad's Al Quds Brigades terror organization relevant.

This reticence to identify terrorist affiliation occurs in other fatality categories; B'Tselem notes the Dec. 17, 2007 deaths of six different men in Gaza City but does not specify for any of them whether or not they were killed while participating in hostilities. B'Tselem does note for each of them, however, that: "He was the object of a targeted killing." Yet, B'Tselem again fails to identify them as members of Islamic Jihad's Al Quds Brigades. In contrast, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights notes their affiliations and identifies one of them, Majed Yousef al-Harazin, 35, as "commander of the al-Quds Brigades."

Similarly, B'Tselem does not note the terrorist affiliations of Naser Khalil Khalil al-Masar'i, Sami Fadel Hussein Tafesh, and Salman Muhammad Salman Yasin, killed together on Dec. 13 in Gaza City "while travelling in Taxi." (B'Tselem also does not specify whether or not they were participating in hostilities when killed.) Yet, both Israeli and Palestinian sources state that the three were members of a terror group. As Ibrahim Barzak of the Associated Press reported Dec. 13:

Israeli aircraft targeted a car in Gaza City after nightfall Thursday, killing three militants, a Palestinian hospital official and the Israeli military said. . .

Islamic Jihad said they were members of that militant group, but Palestinians identifying the bodies at the hospital said they belonged to the Fatah offshoot that fired rockets at the Israeli town of Sderot hours earlier, seriously wounding a woman.

Another slain Islamic Jihad member whose affiliation B'Tselem ignored was Hashem 'Ein 'Abd al-'Aziz Abu Khadurah, killed Nov. 4 in Beit Lahiya. B'Tselem notes that he "did not participate in hostilities when killed" and was "Killed when he approached the area in which three factory guards were killed." According to AFP and AP (but not B'Tselem), Khadurah is an Islamic Jihad member. For example, AFP's Sakher Abu El Oun wrote:

An Israeli air strike killed Baseem Khadura, 25, from the armed wing of Islamic Jihad, and critically wounded another militant from the radical faction in the same

area, medical officials and witnesses said.

Two exceptions to B'Tselem's decision not to report terrorist affiliations are 'Issam Sa'di Sbiyh Hamdan and Rami Hussein Sa'id Abu a-Rus, both killed Nov. 28 in Khan Yunis. About the two, B'Tselem writes: "Did not participate in hostilities when killed. Additional information: Hamas naval police officer, killed when the police were bombed in response to mortar fire at Israel."

In contrast, when Hamas Executive Force members Hani Najeh Muhammad Barhum and Muhammad Khaled Hassan a-Sharif were killed at police headquarters in the Rafah Refugee Camp on Dec. 18, B'Tselem noted only that they were "Police officer[s]."

Israeli Information Ignored

Continuing the trend documented last year, B'Tselem still ignores Israeli sources pointing to Palestinians' involvement in hostilities at the time of their deaths.

Thus, while Israeli sources said that the aforementioned Abu Hasanin relatives were on their way to a terror attack when killed Dec. 27, B'Tselem insisted that one "did not participate in hostilities" when killed and gave no indication of the other's involvement. Yet, according to [Ha'aretz](#), on Dec. 27:

an IAF aircraft fired at a car containing a large quantity of munitions in the Al-Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza, killing two Islamic Jihad operatives. A security source said they were on their way to a terror attack.

Similarly, Israeli security forces said that Sami Tafesh, and his two friends, killed Dec. 13 while in the taxi as described above, had just launched rockets that hit a woman's house in Sderot. As [Ha'aretz](#) [reported](#) Dec. 14 ("IAF strike kills three Palestinians detected launching Qassam"):

An Israel Air Force strike killed three Palestinian militants in Gaza City on Thursday evening, after they were detected firing a Qassam rocket at Israel.

The IAF targeted a car in the Zaytoun section of Gaza City, a Palestinian hospital official and the Israel Defense Forces said. The three militants belonged to the Islamic Jihad militant group.

The Islamic Jihad said one of the dead was Sami Tafesh, a commander of its rocket crews.

B'Tselem also alleged brothers Bilal Ahmad 'Alian a-Nabahin (14) and Jihad 'Alian Muhammad a-Nabahin (17), killed Nov. 9 in the al-Bureij Refugee Camp "did not participate in hostilities when killed." Yet, AFP reports:

The Israeli army said one of its units along the border with central Gaza on Friday shot two Palestinians "who were crawling in the directions of the security fence with the apparent intention of placing an explosive charge." (Nov. 10, "Gunfire kills

two Gazans”)

Likewise, about 22-year-old Mu'atasem Rafiq Saleh a-Sharif, killed Dec. 27 in Ramallah, B'Tselem writes that he was “Killed while driving his car a few minutes after leaving his house.” B'Tselem does not note whether or not he was participating in hostilities at the time he was killed, although the aforementioned detail that he was driving from his house suggests he wasn't. Yet, Israeli sources painted an entirely different picture of the death of a-Sharif, a body guard for negotiator Ahmed Qureia:

But late Thursday, the Israeli military sent a team into a suburb of Ramallah, the seat of Abbas' government, to arrest one of Qureia's bodyguards, a member of the Palestinian security forces who the military said was implicated in armed activity against Israel and had provided weapons to other militants.

“He opened fire at troops and they fired back, killing him,” the IDF said.

Palestinian security officials denied that the bodyguard, 23-year-old Mu'tasem Sharif fired at troops. Qureia, a former Palestinian prime minister, had no immediate comment. (*Ha'aretz*, Dec. 28, 2007)

Also in the West Bank, according to B'Tselem, Muhammad Zaki Muhammad Quzah, “Wanted by Israel” and “Killed by undercover until while [sic] standing and drinking coffee with friends,” died Nov. 25 in Tulkarem. According to a Nov. 25 IDF press release, the IDF shot Quzah when he fled an arrest attempt:

During an IDF arrest operation in the Tulkarem R.C. an IDF force identified two wanted Palestinians. When the force called on them to stop the men began to run away from the scene. The force fired at them and identified killing one of them, Muhamad Zaki Muhamad Kuzah, and injuring the other.

The IDF reported that he was involved in planning terror attacks on the Israeli homefront and was responsible for shooting and bombing attack on IDF troops in the Tulkarem area. He also built ties with Hezbollah and other terror groups.

The story repeats itself in the case of Muhammad Khalil Muhammad Salah, killed Dec. 5 in Bethlehem. B'Tselem reported that he “Did not participate in hostilities when killed,” and added: “A policeman, he was shot and killed by Israeli undercover forces riding in a commercial vehicle when he ordered them to stop for inspection.” Yet, according to an IDF press release that day, the policeman was involved in an exchange of fire with the Israeli soldiers: “This afternoon, armed gunmen opened fire at an IDF force, during an arrest operation in Bethlehem. The force returned fire at the gunmen and identified hitting them. After the incident, it was discovered that Palestinian security personnel were involved.”

Again, B'Tselem reported that Majed 'Awad Matar Matar killed the next day (Dec. 6) “Did not participate in hostilities when killed. Additional information: Killed while hunting birds with his brother and others about one kilometer from the Israeli border.”

Yet, the *Jerusalem Post* reported Dec. 7: “The army said it opened fire at two men next to the border fence after they were spotted planting an explosive device.” One was killed, the other wounded, reported the *Post*.

Regarding two brothers, Ra'fat Salamah ‘Abdallah Abu Shagheibah and Talal Salamah ‘Abdallah Abu Shagheibah of Beit Hanun, killed Nov. 23, 2007, B'Tselem reports for each of them that he “did not participate in hostilities when killed” and that he was “Killed while on his way home during an army incursion into the area.” Yet, various press accounts about the brothers are conflicting. Palestinian hospital workers told Agence France Presse a different story. AFP reported Nov. 24:

Two Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces overnight in the north of the Gaza Strip, Palestinian hospital sources said Saturday.

They said the two brothers in their forties, Talal and Rafat Abu Shrena, were trying to cross into Israel in search of work.

The Palestinian medical staff likewise told AP that the men were approaching the border fence, and did not mention that they were on their way home, as B'Tselem claims. AP's Ibrahim Barzak reported Nov. 24:

Israeli troops shot dead two Palestinian men who approached the border fence separating Gaza from Israel overnight, Palestinian medical staff said.

The two brothers, in their forties, had walked close to an Israel-Gaza border terminal late on Friday night. Local residents said the men often scoured the area for cement and other building materials to sell. . . .

An army statement said the two men were suspicious and were shot as they moved in darkness toward troops at the border fence, which is an area off limits to Palestinians.

Finally, an AFP photo of the two men's bodies on display show them clearly draped in Hamas flags, signifying that they are members of the terrorist organization – a detail which B'Tselem habitually considers irrelevant, but which is key to any count of “civilian” versus “non-civilian” casualties.

In some of the cases described above, it may be difficult for CAMERA or B'Tselem to determine whether the events happened as the Israeli forces described them or as Palestinians did. Nevertheless, it is indefensible that B'Tselem routinely ignores the Israeli position. At the very least, if the circumstances of death are disputed, B'Tselem has an obligation to say so.

Two Terrorists Not Listed

B'Tselem fails to report the death of two Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades terrorists, killed Nov. 20. The Palestinian Center for Human Rights reports their death, which occurred as they attempted to infiltrate into Israel, as follows:

At approximately 01:30, IOF [Israeli Occupation Forces] troops positioned at the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel, north of Beit Lahia, opened fire at a number of members of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (an armed wing of Fatah movement), who were attempting to infiltrate through the border. Two members of the group were killed. At approximately 11:30, IOF informed the Palestinian liaison that there were two bodies to the north of Beit Lahia. An ambulance went to the area and found the bodies only at approximately 16:00, a few meters away from the border. IOF troops asked the medical crew to gather the weapons, which were near the body, put them in a plastic sac and hand them to the troops. The two bodies were taken to Kamal 'Edwan Hospital in Beit Lahia, and the two victims were identified as: Ahmed 'Ali Abu Sitta, 22, from Khan Yunis; and Guevara Ahmed Saleh, 21, from al-Zaytoun neighborhood in Gaza City.

B'Tselem entirely omits Sitta and Saleh, who were unquestionably involved in hostilities at the time of their death

The Al Dura Litmus Test

But if this detailed analysis is too long or tedious for the time-strapped journalist or other skeptic to absorb, here's one quick fact which should raise serious question marks about B'Tselem's credibility on Palestinian casualties: the organization still lists Mohammad Al-Dura as killed by Israeli security forces.

Nov. 2, 2008 Update

Since the initial publication of this report in September 2008, there have been some noteworthy developments to the story.

1) Sometime after the publication of this report on Sept. 4, 2008, in an apparent admission of error, B'Tselem quietly recategorized 11-year-old Muhammad Ayman 'Ali Abu al-Wafa as killed by Palestinians. B'Tselem did not, however, print a correction acknowledging the earlier falsehood in which Israel was falsely blamed for the boy's Dec. 31, 2007 death. Nor did the organization explain how that error found its way into B'Tselem's statistics.

2) Jonathan Dahoah-Halevi, a lieutenant colonel (res.) who served in Military Intelligence, published a [full analysis](#) of all of B'Tselem's statistics for the entire year of 2007. The study, published in Hebrew by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, confirmed CAMERA's findings. The Hebrew edition of *Ha'aretz* carried an article about Dahoah-Halevi's study. JCPA's translation of the [Oct. 26, 2008 article](#) by military correspondent Amos Harel follows ("Study: B'Tselem Publishes False Information and Leaves Out Essential Details"):

The reasons are many and varied. The decline in media interest in the ongoing fighting in the territories, the fatigue of the journalists on this beat, and the IDF's prohibition from about two years ago on Israeli reporters entering the Gaza Strip.

All this has a clear outcome: when the Israeli media covers incidents in which Palestinians are killed, the report usually takes the form of "version versus version." If no exceptional drama has occurred, the media settles for the official Israeli version, which usually will claim that the dead are terrorists, while in the Palestinian version they not infrequently are innocent civilians.

Into the vacuum created by the "War of the Versions" come "information mediators": Palestinian journalists and left-wing and human rights organizations, among which the most famous and seasoned is B'Tselem. B'Tselem not only provides detailed testimonies of Palestinian eyewitnesses (recently videos as well, particularly of violence by settlers) but also sends out statistical reports on the number of Palestinian fatalities and specifies which of them were involved in hostilities. B'Tselem's annual summaries are regularly published in the Israeli press. But more importantly they're virtually regarded as Torah from Sinai by the international media and the United Nations.

An article published today by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, headed by Dr. Dore Gold, sharply questions the credibility of B'Tselem's data. The article's author, Jonathan Dahoah-Halevi, a lieutenant colonel (res.) who served in Military Intelligence, claims that a thorough check of B'Tselem's reports reveals "many flaws in information gathering, omission of essential items of information, failure to include relevant information, bias and false information."

Yet, he writes, given the lack of detailed data published by Israel, "exclusivity turns into reliability. When official Israel does not exercise its right to defend itself against its adversaries and critics, it grants them the right to establish the 'historical truth' even if it is inaccurate or twists the data tendentiously."

There's no mistaking Dahoah-Halevi's ideological affiliation. Though not a member of any party, he writes regularly for sites identified with the Right. In 2001, while still in Military Intelligence, he wrote a document accusing Arafat and the senior figures of the Palestinian Authority of deliberately initiating the Second Intifada and never having intended to reach a real compromise with Zionism. Shaul Mofaz awarded him the Chief of Staff's Prize for Writing on Military and Defense Matters. Lately, along with research on radical Islam, he has intensively analyzed the fence riots in Bilin and Na'alim. At the same time, Dahoah-Halevi is a systematic and thorough researcher of the Palestinian side and it is worth paying attention to his claims about the quality of the information that B'Tselem supplies.

In 2007 B'Tselem tallied 373 Palestinian deaths. A count of the names, says Dahoah-Halevi, shows 380 fatalities. These are divided into categories (195 participated in fighting, 119 did not participate in fighting, and 66 are uncategorized; that is, at least 31.3% of the fatalities are uninvolved civilians). Dahoah-Halevi, who surveyed reports in the Palestinian press, websites of the Palestinian Authority, municipalities and councils, and announcements of organizational affiliation by the terrorist organizations, comes to completely different conclusions.

In his view, B'Tselem's definition of "participation in fighting" is too rigid. It doesn't

include terror operatives who were not at the frontline of battle, who were killed from the air while in moving vehicles, transporting ammunition or serving in the security forces. For example, it was reported about six operatives of the radical Army of Islam organization that they were "residents of Gaza who were killed while in a moving vehicle in the center of the city."

Dahoah-Halevi's analysis comes up with completely different data: among the 119 Palestinians who according to B'Tselem did not participate in the fighting, 55 were terror operatives (and one was an operative in the Authority's national-security services), 60 were uninvolved civilians and three were not killed by Israel at all. Out of the 66 "uncategorized," he found 60 terror operatives and six civilians. His total: 66 civilian deaths (17.5% and not 31.3%). Dahoah-Halevi also points a finger of blame at the Israeli defense and information establishments, which do not systematically collect and publish data on the fighting and do not challenge B'Tselem's data.

In response, B'Tselem stated that its publications are based on "field investigations and cross-checking with different sources, including IDF announcements. B'Tselem's readiness to question the army's version has led to the exposure of cases of killing, torture and abuse. B'Tselem affirms that the inclusion of a Palestinian in the list of fatalities is not evidence of his innocence or guilt. The only way to clarify that matter is through independent and effective investigation. B'Tselem is subject to thorough monitoring and welcomes this. In the rare cases where errors were discovered, they were corrected immediately."