

THE KHAN YUNIS MASSACRE

Location: Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip

Date: 3 November 1956

Target: Male Arab villagers

Suspected members of the Palestinian fedayeen

Deaths: ≈275+

Perpetrators: Israel Defense Forces

The Khan Yunis massacre took place on 3 November 1956 in the Palestinian town of Khan Yunis and the nearby refugee camp of the same name in the Gaza Strip during the Suez Crisis.

According to Israeli historian Benny Morris, during an Israel Defense Forces operation to reopen the Egyptian-blockaded Straits of Tiran, Israeli soldiers shot two hundred Palestinians in Khan Yunis and Rafah.

According to Noam Chomsky's *The Fateful Triangle*, citing American historian Donald Neff, 275 Palestinians were killed in a brutal house-to-house search for Fedayeen (while a further 111 were reportedly killed in Rafah.)

Israeli authorities say that IDF soldiers ran into local militants and a battle erupted. IDF Colonel Meir Pa'il told the Associated Press, "There was never a killing of such a degree. Nobody was murdered. I was there. I don't know of any massacre."

THE UNITED NATIONS REPORT

On 15 December 1956, the *Special Report of the Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East Covering the Period 1 November 1956 to mid-December 1956* was presented to the General Assembly of the United Nations. The report told both sides of the "Khan Yunis incident." The Director's notes also acknowledge a similar incident, the Rafah massacre, immediately following that city's occupation. According to the UNWRA report, which put together what it considered a credible list of people executed on November 3, some 275 were executed that day.

REFUGEE CAMP

Conflicting reports of skirmishes between the two peoples were also reported in the neighboring Khan Yunis Camp, which housed displaced Palestinian refugees. PLO official Abdullah Al Hourani [one of the eyewitnesses interviewed by Joe Sacco] was in the camp at the time of the killings. He alleged that men were taken from their homes and shot by the Israeli Defense Forces. Hourani himself recalls fleeing from an attempted summary execution without injury.

AFTERMATH

A curfew imposed on the citizens of Gaza prevented them from retrieving the bodies of their fellow villagers, leaving them strewn about the area overnight. Injured victims of the shootings would later be transported to Gaza City by the International Red Cross for medical treatment. Israel, bowing to international pressure, withdrew from Gaza and the Sinai in March 1957. Shortly thereafter, a mass grave was unearthed in the vicinity of Khan Yunis, containing the bound bodies of forty Palestinian men who had been shot in the back of the head.

Palestinian sources list the number at 415 killed, and a further 57 who were unaccounted for, or disappeared. According to the future Hamas leader Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, an 8-year-old child in Khan Yunis at the time who witnessed one of the executions, of his uncle, 525 Gazans were killed by the IDF "in cold blood."



The Khan Yunis Governorate is one of 16 Governorates of Palestine, located in the southern Gaza Strip. Its district capital is Khan Yunis. The governorate has a total population of approximately 280,000.



Khan Younis today, from the UNRWA

Khan Younis refugee camp is located about two kilometers from the Mediterranean coast, north of Rafah. It lies west of the town of Khan Younis, a major commercial center and stop-off point on the ancient trade route to Egypt.

Fleeing their homes during the 148 Arab-Israeli war, 35,000 refugees took shelter in the camp. Most were from the Be'er Sheva area. Today, Khan Younis camp is home to 87,816 refugees.

[Sacco] stands alone as a reporter-cartoonist because his ability to tell a story through his art is combined with investigative reporting of the highest quality” and stated that “it is difficult to imagine how any other form of journalism could make these events so interesting.”

Sacco admits that his work is not unbiased. In an interview for the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, he states, “I don’t believe in objectivity as it’s practiced in American journalism. I’m not anti-Israeli . . . It’s just I very much believe in getting across the Palestinian point of view.” He defends his perspective by framing his work thus: “What I show in the book is that this massacre is just one element of Palestinian history . . . and that people are confused about which event, what year they are talking about.”

In the same *Haaretz* article, Jose Alaniz, an adjunct Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, said that Sacco uses subtle ways to manipulate the reader to make the Palestinian side seem more victimized and the Israelis more menacing.

In his *Los Angeles Times* review of the book, David L. Ulin offers a counterpoint:

Yes, he is on the side of the colonized over the colonizers, and yes, his book is built around a pair of Israeli atrocities, obscured by time though they might be. But his inquiry has more to do with the intractability of the situation than with any ideology or intent.

Nowhere is this as clear as when Sacco reproduces a eulogy for a kibbutznik killed by Palestinian infiltrators, delivered in 1956 by Moshe Dayan. “Let us not today cast blame on the murderers,” Dayan notes. “What can we say against their terrible hatred of us? For eight years now they have sat in the refugee camps of Gaza, and have watched how, before their very eyes, we have turned their lands and villages, where they and their forefathers previously dwelled, into our home.” It’s a stunningly empathetic statement -- perhaps the most empathetic statement in the book -- and it stands as an epitaph, not just for the dead of Rafah or Khan Younis, but also for everyone caught up in the endless turmoil of the Gaza Strip.

THE HISTORY BEHIND *FOOTNOTES IN GAZA*

In 1956 Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to nationalize the Suez Canal, an important waterway that allowed trade to flow to and from Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, via the Red Sea. In a secret meeting at Sèvres on October 24, Britain, France and Israel agreed to launch a three-pronged offensive against Egypt. The

Israeli soldier Marek Gefen was serving in Gaza during the Suez Crisis. In 1982, Gefen, having become a journalist, published his observations of walking through the town shortly following the killings. In his account of post-occupation Khan Younis for Sacco’s *Footnotes in Gaza*, he said, “In a few alleyways we found bodies strewn on the ground, covered in blood, their heads shattered. No one had taken care of moving them. It was dreadful. I stopped at a corner and threw up. I couldn’t get used to the sight of a human slaughterhouse.”

FOOTNOTES IN GAZA

In 2009, journalist/graphic novelist Joe Sacco published a 418-page account of the killings in Khan Younis and Rafah, entitled *Footnotes in Gaza*. The graphic novel relies heavily on mostly directly-retrieved eyewitness accounts. The New York Times review of the work noted that “He

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attack began with an Israeli strike on Egyptian positions in the Sinai Peninsula on October 29. A day afterwards, Britain and France served an ultimatum on both Israel and Egypt, which was to function as a pretext for the subsequent operation by both powers to intervene and protect the Suez Canal. Both the United States and the Soviet Union demanded on October 30 that hostilities cease, and that Israel withdraw its forces back to the armistice line.

The day after, French naval forces bombarded Rafah, while the RAF made bombing raids on Egyptian airfields. Israel claimed it had conquered Rafah by November 1, and began shelling the Gaza Strip itself. Given the exercise of their veto rights in the UN Security Council by France and Britain, the two great powers were forced to obtain a resolution to that effect before the General Assembly, which duly passed a ceasefire motion on November 2, the same day that Egypt lost control of the Sinai peninsula and Israel made incursions into Egyptian-occupied Gaza via the city of Rafah. In the early hours of that day the IDF broadcast that it knew of the identities of the fedayeen and would punish them for raiding Israel and that the civilian population would be held collectively responsible for such attacks. As a result, around 1,500 fedayeen fled the Strip with relatives for sanctuary the West Bank, to Hebron and other places, or by skiffs across to Egypt. After killing or capturing all hostile militants in the latter two population centers, forces from the two ends of the Strip met in Khan Yunis on November 3. As opposed to the swift surrender of Egyptian forces in Gaza, the garrison in Khan Yunis under the command of General Yusuf al-Agrudi put up stiff resistance. Israel replied with bombing raids and artillery shelling on the town, which exacted heavy losses in civilian lives, and troops accompanied by an armored column took the town on November 3.

Men suspected of having borne arms were executed on the spot, in their homes or places of employment, while all males from 15 years to 60 years of age were forced to muster. Two massacres of civilians then took place. The first occurred when citizens were machine-gunned down after being forced to line up against the wall of the old Ottoman caravanserai in the city's central square. Local residents claim that the number of Palestinians shot dead in this action amounted to 100, according to oral memories collected by Joe Sacco. The other massacre took place in the Khan Yunis refugee camp. Israel's purpose was to root out the fedayeen from Gaza, though the massacres were largely wrought on civilians. According to Jean-Pierre Filiu, a specialist in Middle East Studies at the Paris School of International Affairs, the process of identifying fedayeen was inexact. It was sufficient to have a picture of Nasser on one's wall to become suspect, or be arrested because one had a similar name to someone on Shin Bet's suspect list. Occasionally the IDF used local children as human shields in areas where snipers were suspected of lying in wait, or where sites were thought have been booby-trapped.

According to one account from a fleeing fedayee, Saleh Shiblaq, Israeli forces walked through the town on the morning of 3 November, forcing men out of their homes or shooting them where they were found. In 2003, Shiblaq told Sacco that all the old men, women, and children were removed from his household. Upon their departure, the remaining young men were sprayed with bursts of gunfire by Israeli soldiers. Adult male residents of Jalal Street, in the center of Khan Yunis, were allegedly lined up and fired upon from fixed positions with Bren light machine guns, firing extraneously to the point that a stench of cordite filled the air.

Much of this is taken from *عماد الدين المقدسي*'s information here: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Khan_Yunis_massacre