

At Oberlin, Commemorating Palestinian Islamic Jihad

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Like many American colleges, Oberlin has among its students a group of those who are obsessively anti-Israel, the Oberlin Students For A Free Palestine, who are long on rage against the Jewish state but short on relevant knowledge. They have just done themselves proud with a display on campus devoted to commemorating the deaths of “34 unarmed Palestinian civilians” by Israel.

The group planted 34 small black flags in the middle of the lawn at Wilder Bowl, a place where students congregate on campus, each flag meant to represent one of the “unarmed Palestinian civilians” that the endlessly malevolent settler state of Israel had killed for no apparent reason.

The display included an accompanying signboard explaining the reason for the flag-planting: “Last week, Israel unleashed

violent airstrikes on the Gaza Strip to assassinate Bahaa Abu al-Atta and his wife on Tuesday, November 12th. In the process, killing 34 unarmed Palestinian civilians, including 8 children. Oberlin Students for a Free Palestine and Oberlin Jewish Voice for Peace have created this installation to commemorate the lives of these 34 Palestinians who died at the hands of Zionist Settler Colonialism. We list the names and ages of those who were lost on each black flag.”

The first thing one notices about this sign is that there is no mention, anywhere, of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, of which Bahaa Abu al-Atta was a leading member; indeed, at the time of his death, Al-Atta had been planning a major operation for PIJ. Palestinian Islamic Jihad is a group that the American government, the E.U., and many other countries have recognized as a terrorist organization. In Gaza itself, the Iran-backed group has long been regarded as even more extreme and violent than its rival Hamas. PIJ has always declared its intention to replace Israel with an Islamic Palestinian state, and has taken responsibility for suicide bombings and other attacks targeting Israeli civilians.

Why did Israel kill Bahaa Abu Al-Atta? Israeli intelligence had learned that he was just about to launch a major terrorist attack. Islamic Jihad’s military wing, Al-Quds Brigades, said in a statement that Abu al-Atta, commander of the northern Gaza Strip, was “martyred while performing heroic jihad (holy war) to thwart conspiracies and defend the land.”

And IDF Spokesperson Brig.-Gen. Hidai Zilberman confirmed that the military had received specific intelligence on his location and targeted the specific room where al-Atta was sleeping, and did not destroy the entire building in order to avoid civilian casualties.

Several points, then.

First, Bahaa Abu al-Atta was not “an unarmed Palestinian

civilian," but a terrorist who, according to what a spokesman of Al-Quds, the military wing of Palestinian Jihad, said, was in the midst of "performing heroic jihad" – an allusion to his planning an imminent attack on Israeli civilians.

Second, Israel did not, as the Oberlin students claim, "unleash violent airstrikes on the Gaza Strip to assassinate Abu al-Atta." It launched a single pinpoint strike against the very room where Abu al-Atta was sleeping. The rest of the building was spared, though some people were wounded from the ensuing collapse of walls. This pinion strike was confirmed both by Israeli photos, and by the testimony of Gazans themselves. Abu al-Atta's wife, who was sleeping beside him, was one casualty that could not be avoided.

Third, the Oberlin students' sign leaves out what happened after the death of Bahaa Abu al-Atta. There were no massive follow-up strikes by Israel at that time. Rather, Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched 450 rockets indiscriminately into Israel. It was only after that massive attack by Palestinian Islamic Jihad on Israeli civilians that the IDF retaliated, targeting only Palestinian Islamic Jihad sites. Hamas was left alone.

Fourth, the Oberlin Students for a Free Palestine claimed to be commemorating what they described as "34 unarmed civilians" who were killed. We have photographs of at least nine of those "unarmed civilians," wearing their Islamic Jihad uniforms and caps with the PIJ insignia. We also know, from the reports by international observers and the parties (Palestinians and Israelis) themselves, that at least 25 of the 34 dead have been confirmed as members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. No one is sure about the remaining nine; the Oberlin Students For a Free Palestine claim, without offering any evidence, that eight children were killed by the Israelis. The Palestinians claim only that "several children" – not eight – were killed. But even if there were children who were killed, the IDF certainly did not target them, for it always tries to minimize

such casualties. Its most important technique is to warn civilians away from a building that is about to be hit, where possible even telephoning a warning, or using the “knock on the roof” technique, that is, the practice devised by Israel of dropping non-explosive or low-yield devices on the roofs of targeted civilian homes in the Palestinian territories as a prior warning of imminent bombing attacks to give the inhabitants time to flee.

The allegation about “34 unarmed civilians” does not accord with casualty tolls shared by international observers and the involved parties, including those in the Gaza Strip, which largely acknowledge that a majority of fatalities were members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The Oberlin students deliberately chose to describe the total figure of those killed, 34, as all being “unarmed civilians,” though we know, again from the Palestinians, that at least 20 of those killed belonged to PIJ, and some Palestinian informants – not members of PIJ – agree with the Israelis that at least 25 of the dead were members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Israel has recognized that nine civilians were killed in a single airstrike, apparently all members of the same family, with one of them a brother of an Islamic Jihad member. What most likely happened is that these family members were staying in the house of that Islamic Jihad member, presumably high ranking enough for Israel to target him, and his house. The IDF in this instance remained unaware of the civilians present. In Israel’s response, after the PIJ fired 450 rockets into Israel as retaliation for Abu Al-Atta’s assassination, there was only this one case in which, because of insufficient information on Israel’s part, a building with civilians was hit. Israel promises a full investigation.

Palestinian sources have said 34 people were killed in the fighting, 16 of whom were civilians (other Palestinians not in PIJ, and international observers in Gaza, claim that at most nine of the 34 were civilians), including “several children.”

“Several children”? The Oberlin Students for a Free Palestine claim there were not “several,” but eight children killed. Whom should we believe? Though we have long been inured to exaggerated claims by the Palestinians about their civilian casualties (so many of whom turn out, upon investigation, to have been members of terrorist groups), here they have been outdone, in their claims about the numbers of civilians killed, and numbers of children killed, by the Oberlin Students for a Free Palestine. The students claim all 34 killed were civilians – no Palestinian group has said that – and that eight of them were children, again a claim never made by the Palestinians themselves.

The Oberlin Students for a Free Palestine are no doubt counting on the ignorance of their fellow students, who may have heard about the killing of “some guy” (Abu Al-Atta), but know nothing about Palestinian Islamic Jihad and its openly-stated goal of destroying Israel, nor about Al-Atta himself, one of PIJ’s most dangerous leaders. They certainly are unlikely to have been keeping a tally of civilian casualties in the latest exchange between the IDF and PIJ.

Perhaps some students, who are disinclined to swallow the claims of the Oberlin Students For a Free Palestine in the matter of civilian casualties, will post their findings and queries on a different sign, placed near that put up by the Free Palestine fanatics. It could serve as a useful corrective to the nonsense and lies that are already on display. They might include the following numbered points:

1. Palestinian Islamic Jihad is recognized as a terrorist group by the United States, the E.U., and many other countries. Its stated goal is the total destruction of Israel. Even Hamas finds it too violent and extreme. The Oberlin Students for a Free Palestine nowhere mention Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which was the only Palestinian group involved in the latest fighting with Israel. Why was that important fact left out?

2. Alaa Abu Al-Atta, a leader in PIJ, was in the process of planning jihad attacks against Israel when the Israelis decided to take him out first. The Free Palestine sign claims that Israel “unleashed violent airstrikes on the Gaza Strip to assassinate Abu al-Atta.” Not at all. There was exactly one pinpoint strike on Al-Atta’s bedroom, killing only him and his wife.
3. Following Al-Atta’s killing, Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched 450 rockets into civilian areas of Israel, injuring 60, and damaging numbers homes, shops, and farms. Why was this fact not mentioned?
4. After hundreds of those rockets had landed, Israel – which had wanted only to kill Al-Atta and was not looking for a more extensive fight with PIJ – decided it had to retaliate in order to end the incessant rocket fire from Gaza.
5. The IDF took care to hit only PIJ bases, avoiding those of Hamas. Israel was trying to avoid a major flare-up.
6. It is agreed on both sides that there were a total of 34 people killed in Gaza. The Israelis, and some Palestinian informants, also agree that of those 34, at least 25 were members of PIJ. Other Palestinians have claimed there were 20 members of PIJ killed. The Palestinian officials claim that “several” children were killed. The display now up at Oberlin insists that, despite what the Palestinians themselves say, all 34 of those killed were “unarmed civilians.” Further, the display insists that eight children were killed, which again contradicts the Palestinians themselves. No evidence is presented for these claims. But if you are against the “colonial settler state of Israel,” the Oberlin Students For a Free Palestine apparently believe, you are under no obligation to offer any evidence for your claims. Let those benighted students find out quite otherwise.

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