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The missing entries from 'A Gaza Diary' By Tom Palaima

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"Every reporter struggles with how malleable and inaccurate memory can be when faced with trauma and stress. Witnesses to war, even moments after a killing or atrocity, often cannot remember what took place in front of them." - (Chris Hedges, War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning).

On the back cover of Chris Hedges' controversial book War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning (Public Affairs 2002), Prof. Michael Ignatieff of the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, assures us, "You can trust Chris Hedges. He has been to the worst places and seen the worst things human beings can do."

In June 2001, Hedges traveled to one of those worst places, the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian refugee settlement of Khan Yunis. He then wrote "A Gaza Diary: Scenes from a Palestinian Uprising," published in Harper's magazine (October 2001). Hedges explained the methods he used in "Gaza Diary" to journalist Uriah Shavit (Haaretz, November 2, 2001):

"The article was written... in first person, present tense; it was done on purpose. Had I written for The New York Times I would have requested a comment, but I wrote journal-style... nothing other than what I saw. I did not interview officials of the [Palestinian] Authority or of Israel. The whole idea was to write without rhetoric. I know the territories well enough to realize that something that you have not seen with your own eyes is not the truth."

Hedges claims he relied entirely on what he saw, and therefore did not follow his normal procedures for fact-checking and seeking and weighing alternative viewpoints. But his writing has credibility because he is a correspondent for The New York Times and a member of a team that won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting. He is identified with such credentials on the first page of "Gaza Diary" and on the cover of his book. There is no indication in "Gaza Diary" that he is not using his normal reportorial methods.

"Gaza Diary" has gained notoriety because of Hedges' highly rhetorical description of how Israeli Defense Force troops opened fire upon Palestinian demonstrators at Khan Yunis on June 17, 2001, killing two. One, Ali Murad, age 12, died that very day. During this period of unrest in the Gaza Strip, Palestinians were using petrol bombs, mortar attacks, anti-tank grenades, and sniper fire against IDF troops.

Hundreds of demonstrators were dispersed by gunfire at Khan Yunis on June 16. Eight were wounded. But Hedges does not mention this disturbance until after he starts describing the incident of June 17. He does report beforehand a Palestinian father's reluctance to approve of his sons becoming suicide bombers.

According to "Gaza Diary," the refugee camp in the late afternoon of June 17 is still and peaceful. Children play with scrap-paper kites and ragged soccer balls. Hedges sits, wearily sipping a cool drink under the awning of a hut at the edge of the dunes. Suddenly two IDF jeeps with loudspeakers pull up. They immediately taunt the boys with obscenities, luring them up to the fence.

Then "[a] percussion grenade explodes. The boys, most no more than 10 or 11 years old, scatter, running clumsily across the heavy sand. They descend out of sight behind a sandbank in front of me. There are no sounds of gunfire. The soldiers shoot with silencers. The bullets from the M-16s tumble end over end through the children's slight bodies. Children have been shot in other conflicts I have covered but I have never before watched soldiers entice children like mice into a trap and murder them for sport."

This description is the basis, on many web sites of pro-Palestinian organizations and worldwide news sources, for asserting that IDF troops intentionally lure children to death and use silencers on their M-16s to shoot children "for sport."

But according to an IDF spokesperson quoted in The New York Times (June 18, 2001), "soldiers had been under attack with stones and bottles when they fired low-caliber bullets at the legs of some demonstrators to stop the crowd."

Another spokesperson, interviewed in Haaretz (November 2, 2001), asserts that Harper's never sought comment on Hedges' incendiary allegations, and that the IDF troops acted with restraint for hours before deciding that the crowd had to be dispersed.

PRO-ISRAELI web sites deny that riot-control forces use silencers. Some argue that Hedges mistook rubber-bullet adapters on the M-16s for silencers.

"The story about silencers on assault rifles is counterintuitive: If the purpose of the exercise was to kill Palestinians it would stand to reason that the IDF would manage to kill considerably more Palestinians than they do," says Dr. Aaron Lerner, director of the pro-Israeli Independent Media Review and Analysis. "On the other hand, if the shooting takes place within the context of IDF efforts to push back a threat, they would want the mob to hear the sound of the shots."

But even these counter-arguments miss a key point. Hedges is given credibility because he is a prominent veteran journalist and he was there. Even pro-Israeli sources assume he saw the rifles and mistook their attachments for silencers. But what did Hedges see?

Eyewitnessing in times of stress, danger and violence is problematic. Hedges acknowledges this in his book. But in "Gaza Diary" there is no hint that this might be a problem, especially for a reporter long exposed to war trauma. Vietnam veteran and author Tim O'Brien observes that in a true war story "it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. You tend to miss a lot."
What did Hedges miss?

Hedges gives three accounts of what happened at Khan Yunis: "Gaza Diary" (October 2001), a "Fresh Air" interview on National Public Radio (NPR, October 30, 2001), and his book War is a Force (September 2002).

His NPR interview is excerpted on the pro-Palestinian web site Palestine Media Watch (www.fairnews.org).

Hedges begins by explaining why he wrote the Harper's article: "I wanted to write a story that tried to explain why... Palestinian young men are so willing to go into shopping malls in Israel and blow themselves up."

The interviewer then asks, "What did you see of this fighting while you were there? How did this shooting go down?"

Hedges explains: "And I walked out toward the dunes and they were... over the loudspeaker from an Israeli army Jeep on the other side of the electric fence they were taunting these kids. And these kids started to throw rocks. And most of these kids were 10, 11, 12 years old. And, first of all, the rocks were the size of a fist. They were being hurled toward a Jeep that was armor-plated. I doubt they could even hit the Jeep.

"And then I watched the soldiers open fire. And it was I mean, I've seen kids shot in Sarajevo. I mean, snipers would shoot kids in Sarajevo. I've seen death squads kill families in Algeria or El Salvador. But I'd never seen soldiers bait or taunt kids like this and then shoot them for sport."

THIS DESCRIPTION is important because it differs in significant ways from his other two accounts of the day.

Most troublesome is that in "Gaza Diary" and War Is a Force the boys are behind the dunes and out of Hedges' view. But on NPR Hedges walks out to the dunes, where he sees the troops open fire and the youngsters get shot.

Secondly, in "Gaza Diary" Hedges flatly declares that the soldiers used silencers on their rifles. Yet a year later in War Is a Force he admits, by inserting three little words, that the M-16 rifles were "unseen by me."

Thirdly, on NPR and in War Is a Force there is only one jeep. In "Gaza Diary" two Israeli armor-clad jeeps with loudspeakers pull up.

It is impossible, then, to know what exactly Hedges saw. He did not respond to my request for clarification of these points. Yet "Gaza Diary" is cited as proof that IDF troops, without provocation, lure peaceful young Palestinian boys forward and immediately shoot them with silencer-equipped M-16s.

Listeners to NPR believe that an experienced reporter saw everything. They would not know that in his published accounts he claims he did not see the boys shot. And only very close readers of Hedges' book would notice his three-word retraction concerning his seeing silencers. The web sites that have long posted his Harper's account have not notified their readers of this fact.

Hedges also never tells us many things we would want to know. How many troops were there? Where were they situated in relation to the jeep or jeeps? How many shots were fired? What kinds of bullets were used? Might there be other explanations in the din of conflict for why a short burst of rubber-bullet fire was not heard by frightened, shouting boys and a weary reporter who contradicts himself on what he witnessed?

Hedges' self-declared non-rhetorical accounts are also archly rhetorical. All is calm at Khan Yunis on the day of the incident. There is no mention of the violence-punctuated tension of the previous days.

Then things happen in ruthlessly quick succession. A jeep or jeeps pull up. It or they immediately incite innocent young boys to riot. Then they directly fire upon the boys with silencers. No hint is given that IDF soldiers were for several hours under assault by a large crowd, which they then attempted to disperse.

There is one fixed truth about June 17, 2001 at Khan Yunis. Ali Murad Abu Shawish died at age 12. Hedges reports his death in such a way as to increase misunderstanding, anger and hatred.

He received the 2002 Amnesty International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism. But his much-cited and highly questionable account of Khan Yunis works against any hopes for a peace that could guarantee human rights and dignity for Palestinians and Israelis.

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