'It's a Killing Field': IDF Soldiers Ordered to Shoot Deliberately at Unarmed Gazans Waiting for Humanitarian Aid

IDF officers and soldiers told Haaretz they were ordered to fire at unarmed crowds near food distribution sites in Gaza, even when no threat was present. Hundreds of Palestinians have been killed, prompting the military prosecution to call for a review into possible war crimes

Palestinians gather at an aid distributution point set up by the privately-run Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), near the Nuseirat refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip on June 25, 2025. (Photo by Eyad BABA / AFP)Credit: AFP/EYAD BABA

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Israeli soldiers in Gaza told Haaretz that the army has deliberately fired at Palestinians near aid distribution sites over the past month.

Conversations with officers and soldiers reveal that commanders ordered troops to shoot at crowds to drive them away or disperse them, even though it was clear they posed no threat.

One soldier described the situation as a total breakdown of the Israel Defense Forces' ethical codes in Gaza.

According to the Hamas-run Health Ministry in Gaza, 549 people have been killed near aid centers and in areas where residents were waiting for UN food trucks since May 27. Over 4,000 have been wounded, but the exact number of those killed or injured by IDF fire remains unclear.

Haaretz has learned that the Military Advocate General has instructed the IDF General Staff's Fact-Finding Assessment Mechanism – a body tasked with reviewing incidents involving potential violations of the laws of war – to investigate suspected war crimes at these sites.

The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) aid centers began operating in the Strip at the end of May. The circumstances of the foundation's establishment and its funding are murky: it is known to have been set up by Israel in coordination with U.S. evangelicals and private security contractors. Its current CEO is an evangelical leader close to U.S. President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Palestinians gather to receive aid supplies in Beit Lahia, in the northern Gaza Strip, June 25, 2025. REUTERS/Dawoud Abu AlkasCredit: DAWOUD ABU ALKAS/רויטרס

The GHF operates four food distribution sites – three in southern Gaza and one in the center – known in the IDF as "rapid distribution centers" (Mahpazim). They are staffed by American and Palestinian workers and secured by the IDF from a distance of several hundred meters.

Thousands, and at times tens of thousands, of Gazans arrive daily to collect food from these sites.

Contrary to the foundation's initial promises, distribution is chaotic, with crowds rushing the piles of boxes. Since the rapid distribution centers opened, Haaretz has counted 19 shooting incidents near them. While the shooters' identities are not always clear, the IDF does not permit armed individuals in these humanitarian zones without its knowledge.

The distribution centers typically open for just one hour each morning. According to officers and soldiers who served in their areas, the IDF fires at people who arrive before opening hours to prevent them from approaching, or again after the centers close, to disperse them. Since some of the shooting incidents occurred at night – ahead of the opening – it's possible that some civilians couldn't see the boundaries of the designated area.

"It's a killing field," one soldier said. "Where I was stationed, between one and five people were killed every day. They're treated like a hostile force – no crowd-control measures, no tear gas – just live fire with everything imaginable: heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, mortars. Then, once the center opens, the shooting stops, and they know they can approach. Our form of communication is gunfire."

The soldier added, "We open fire early in the morning if someone tries to get in line from a few hundred meters away, and sometimes we just charge at them from close range. But there's no danger to the forces." According to him, "I'm not aware of a single instance of return fire. There's no enemy, no weapons." He also said the activity in his area of service is referred to as Operation Salted Fish – the name of the Israeli version of the children's game "Red light, green light".

IDF officers told Haaretz that the army does not allow the public in Israel or abroad to see footage of what takes place around the food distribution sites. According to them, the army is satisfied that the GHF's operations have prevented a total collapse of international legitimacy for continuing the war. They

believe the IDF has managed to turn Gaza into a "backyard," especially since the war with Iran began.

Palestinians carry humanitarian aid packages distributed by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation operated by the U.S.-backed organization in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, Thursday, June 26, 2025. (AP Photo/Abdel Kareem Hana)Credit: Abdel Kareem Hana/אי־פי

"Gaza doesn't interest anyone anymore," said a reservist who completed another round of duty in the northern Strip this week. "It's become a place with its own set of rules. The loss of human life means nothing. It's not even an 'unfortunate incident,' like they used to say."

An officer serving in the security detail of a distribution center described the IDF's approach as deeply flawed: "Working with a civilian population when your only means of interaction is opening fire – that's highly problematic, to say the least," he told Haaretz. "It's neither ethically nor morally acceptable for people to have to reach, or fail to reach, a [humanitarian zone] under tank fire, snipers and mortar shells."

The officer explained that the security on the sites is organized into several tiers. Inside the distribution centers and the "corridor" leading to them are American

workers, and the IDF is not permitted to operate in that space. A more external layer is made up of Palestinian supervisors, some of them armed and affiliated with the Abu Shabab militia.

The IDF's security perimeter includes tanks, snipers, and mortars whose purpose, according to the officer, is to protect those present and ensure the aid distribution can take place.

"At night, we open fire to signal to the population that this is a combat zone and they mustn't come near," the officer said. "Once," he recounted, "the mortars stopped firing, and we saw people starting to approach. So we resumed fire to make it clear they weren't allowed to. In the end, one of the shells landed on a group of people."

In other cases, he said, "We fired machine guns from tanks and threw grenades. There was one incident where a group of civilians was hit while advancing under the cover of fog. It wasn't intentional, but these things happen."

He noted that there were also casualties and injuries among IDF soldiers in these incidents. "A combat brigade doesn't have the tools to handle a civilian population in a war zone. Firing mortars to keep hungry people away is neither professional nor humane. I know there are Hamas operatives among them, but there are also people who simply want to receive aid. As a country, we have a responsibility to ensure that happens safely," the officer said.

The officer pointed to another issue with the distribution centers – their lack of consistency. Residents don't know when each center will open, which adds to the pressure on the sites and contributes to harm to civilians.

I don't know who's making the decisions, but we give instructions to the population and then either don't follow through with them or change them," he said.

"Earlier this month, there were cases where we were notified a message had gone out saying the center would open in the afternoon, and people showed up early in the morning to be first in line for food. Because they arrived too early, the distribution was canceled that day."

Contractors as sheriffs

According to accounts from commanders and fighters, the IDF was supposed to maintain a safe distance from Palestinian population areas and food distribution points. However, the actions of the forces on the ground do not align with the operational plans.

"Today, any private contractor working in Gaza with engineering equipment receives 5,000 [roughly $1,500] shekels for every house they demolish," said a veteran fighter. "They're making a fortune. From their perspective, any moment where they don't demolish houses is a loss of money, and the forces have to secure their work. The contractors, who act like a kind of sheriff, demolish wherever they want along the entire front."

As a result, the fighter added, the contractors' demolition campaign brings them, along with their relatively small security details, close to distribution points or along the routes used by aid trucks.

A Palestinian carries a sack of flour as people gather to receive aid supplies in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, June 26, 2025. REUTERS/Hatem KhaledCredit: Hatem Khaled/רויטרס

In order [for the contractors] to protect themselves, a shooting incident breaks out, and people are killed," he said. "These are areas where Palestinians are allowed to be – we're the ones who moved closer and decided [they] endangered us. So, for a contractor to make another 5,000 shekels and take down a house, it's deemed acceptable to kill people who are only looking for food."

A senior officer whose name repeatedly comes up in testimonies about the shootings near aid sites is Brigadier General Yehuda Vach, commander of the IDF's Division 252. Haaretz previously reported how Vach turned the Netzarim corridor into a deadly route, endangered soldiers on the ground, and was suspected of ordering the destruction of a hospital in Gaza without authorization.

Now, an officer in the division says Vach decided to disperse gatherings of Palestinians waiting for UN aid trucks by opening fire. "This is Vach's policy," the officer said, "but many of the commanders and soldiers accepted it without question. [The Palestinians] are not supposed to be there, so the idea is to make sure they clear out, even if they're just there for food."

Vach's division is not the only one operating in the area, and it's possible that other officers also gave orders to fire at people seeking aid.

Watch on X

A reserve tank soldier who recently served with Division 252 in northern Gaza confirmed the reports and explained the IDF's "deterrence procedure" for dispersing civilians who gather in violation of military orders.

"The teenagers waiting for the trucks hide behind dirt mounds and rush them as they pass or stop at distribution points," he said. "We usually see them from hundreds of meters away; it's not a situation where they pose a threat to us."

In one incident, the soldier was instructed to fire a shell toward a crowd gathered near the coastline. "Technically, it's supposed to be warning fire – either to push people back or stop them from advancing," he said. "But lately, firing shells has just become standard practice. Every time we fire, there are casualties and deaths, and when someone asks why a shell is necessary, there's never a good answer. Sometimes, merely asking the question annoys the commanders."

In that case, some people began to flee after the shell was fired, and according to the soldier, other forces subsequently opened fire on them. "If it's meant to be a warning shot, and we see them running back to Gaza, why shoot at them?" he asked. "Sometimes we're told they're still hiding, and we need to fire in their direction because they haven't left. But it's obvious they can't leave if the moment they get up and run, we open fire."

Watch on X

The soldier said this has become routine. "You know it's not right. You feel it's not right – that the commanders here are taking the law into their own hands. But Gaza is a parallel universe. You move on quickly. The truth is, most people don't even stop to think about it."

Earlier this week, soldiers from Division 252 opened fire at an intersection where civilians were waiting for aid trucks. A commander on the ground gave the order to fire directly at the center of the junction, resulting in the deaths of eight civilians, including teenagers. The incident was brought to the attention of former Southern Command chief Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman, but so far, aside from a preliminary review, he has taken no action and has not demanded an explanation from Vach regarding the high number of fatalities in his sector.

People carrying aid parcels, walk along the Salah al-Din road near the Nusseirat refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, used by food-seeking Palestinians to reach an aid distributution point set up by the privately-run Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), on June 25, 2025. (Photo by Eyad BABA / AFP)Credit: AFP/EYAD BABA

"I was at a similar event. From what we heard, more than ten people were killed there," said another senior reserve officer commanding forces in the area. "When we asked why they opened fire, we were told it was an order from above and that the civilians had posed a threat to the troops. I can say with certainty that the people were not close to the forces and did not endanger them. It was pointless – they were just killed, for nothing. This thing called killing innocent people – it's been normalized. We were constantly told there are no noncombatants in Gaza, and apparently that message sank in among the troops."

A senior officer familiar with the fighting in Gaza believes this marks a further deterioration in the IDF's moral standards. "The power that senior field commanders wield in relation to General Staff leadership threatens the chain of command," he said.

According to him, "My greatest fear is that the shooting and harm to civilians in Gaza aren't the result of operational necessity or poor judgment, but rather the product of an ideology held by field commanders, which they pass down to the troops as an operational plan."

Shelling civilians

In recent weeks, the number of fatalities near food distribution areas has risen sharply – 57 on June 11, 59 on June 17, and around 50 on June 24, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. In response, a discussion was held at Southern Command, where it emerged that troops had begun dispersing crowds using artillery shells.

"They talk about using artillery on a junction full of civilians as if it's normal," said a military source who attended the meeting. "An entire conversation about whether it's right or wrong to use artillery, without even asking why that weapon was needed in the first place. What concerns everyone is whether it'll hurt our legitimacy to keep operating in Gaza. The moral aspect is practically nonexistent. No one stops to ask why dozens of civilians looking for food are being killed every day."

Watch on X

Another senior officer familiar with the fighting in Gaza said the normalization of killing civilians has often encouraged firing at them near the aid distribution centers.

"The fact that live fire is directed at a civilian population – whether with artillery, tanks, snipers, or drones – goes against everything the army is supposed to stand for," he said, criticizing the decisions made on the ground. "Why are people collecting food being killed just because they stepped out of line, or because some commander doesn't like that they're cutting in? Why have we reached a point where a teenager is willing to risk his life just to pull a sack of rice off a truck? And that's who we're firing artillery at?"

In addition to IDF fire, military sources say some of the fatalities near the aid distribution centers were caused by gunfire from militias that the army supports and arms. According to one officer, the IDF continues to back the Abu Shabab group and other factions.

"There are many groups that oppose Hamas – Abu Shabab went several steps further," he said. "They control territory that Hamas doesn't enter, and the IDF encourages that."

Another officer remarked, "I'm stationed there, and even I no longer know who's shooting at whom."

In a closed-door meeting this week with senior officials from the Military Advocate General's Office, held in light of the daily deaths of dozens of civilians near aid zones, the legal officials instructed that the incidents be investigated by the IDF General Staff's Fact-Finding Assessment Mechanism. This body, established after the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, is tasked with examining cases where there is suspected violation of the laws of war, to fend off international demands to investigate IDF soldiers for alleged war crimes.

During the meeting, senior legal officials said global criticism over the killing of civilians is mounting. Senior officers in the IDF and Southern Command, however, claimed the cases are isolated and that the gunfire was directed at suspects who posed a threat to the troops.

A youth carries an empty box of relief supplies from the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), on Sunday.Credit: AFP

A source who attended the meeting told Haaretz that representatives of the Military Advocate General's Office rejected the IDF's claims. According to them, the arguments do not hold up against the facts on the ground. "The claim that these are isolated cases doesn't align with incidents in which grenades were dropped from the air and mortars and artillery were fired at civilians," said one legal official. "This isn't about a few people being killed – we're talking about dozens of casualties every day."

Although the Military Advocate General instructed the Fact-Finding Assessment Mechanism to examine recent shooting incidents, these represent only a small portion of the cases in which hundreds of uninvolved civilians were killed.

Senior IDF officials expressed frustration that the Southern Command has failed to investigate these incidents thoroughly and is disregarding civilian deaths in Gaza. According to military sources, Southern Command chief Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman typically conducts only preliminary inquiries, relying mostly on the accounts of field commanders. He has not taken disciplinary action against officers whose soldiers harmed civilians, despite clear violations of IDF orders and the laws of war.

An IDF spokesperson responded: "Hamas is a brutal terrorist organization that starves the Gazan population and endangers them to maintain its rule in the Gaza Strip. Hamas does everything in its power to prevent the successful

distribution of food in Gaza and to disrupt humanitarian aid. The IDF allows the American civil society organization (GHF) to operate independently and distribute aid to Gaza residents. The IDF operates near the new distribution areas to enable distribution while continuing operational activities in the Strip."

"As part of their operational conduct in the vicinity of the main access roads to the distribution centers, IDF forces are conducting systematic learning processes to improve their operational response in the area and minimize, as much as possible, potential friction between the population and IDF forces. Recently, forces worked to reorganize the area by placing new fences, signage, opening additional routes, and more. Following incidents where there were reports of harm to civilians arriving at distribution centers, in-depth investigations were conducted, and instructions were given to forces on the ground based on lessons learned. These incidents were referred for examination by the General Staff's debriefing mechanism."