

Human Rights Watch delivers report on “apparent” Israeli war crimes in the May conflict



Reuters

Last Monday the Human Rights Watch published its third report on the fighting that occurred in May’s clashes between Palestinian and Israeli forces, this time targeting Israel’s bombing of high-rises in Gaza.

The airstrikes, which occurred between 11 and 15 May, destroyed the Hanadi, Jawhara, Shorouk and al-Jalaa towers in central Gaza City.

The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) has claimed that the airstrikes were conducted because Palestinian militant groups were using the towers for their operations and were therefore of “particularly high military value”, according to the IDF, and were using the civilians inside as human shields. To date Israel has not provided any evidence to support these allegations.

The HRW’s investigation consisted of interviews with 18 Palestinians who witnessed the strikes or were affected by them, as well as analysing associated video and photographic evidence. It was unable to uncover proof that members of any militant groups had a short or long-term presence any in the four towers. However, even if there was evidence to support such allegations, the HRW reported, the airstrikes caused such disproportionate damage to civilian property that they would defy international law.

Whilst no-one was injured in the attacks the HRW reported that dozens of families were subsequently left homeless as well as numerous business destroyed. Nihad Abdellatif Taha, a computer engineer, said that he had sustained \$30,000 in damages to his programming and digital marketing company, Portals, based in the Hanadi tower. “I had 36 employees and we were renting two apartments – 360 square meters with furniture, offices, meeting rooms, surveillance cameras – all of this is gone, in addition to very important documents, all the company’s papers are gone, including stamps and the employees’ contracts – all gone”.

The report mentioned another business-owner, Mohammed Qadada, founder and chief executive officer of Planet for Digital Solutions, who said that he had invested \$40,000 in renovations, equipment, and other such additions to his business when it moved into the tower in 2017. All of it, including the jobs of his 30 employees, were destroyed in the May 11 airstrikes: “Everything was gone, I saw rubble, I saw remnants of an office, I saw people’s stuff strewn around, I saw people’s memories, I saw everything fallen.”

Neighbouring buildings also sustained considerable damage in the airstrikes. Satellite imagery shows significant damage to the Gaza International Hotel to the west of the Hanadi tower as well as to the Handouqa apartment building to the south. Imad Handouqa, owner of the 10-story, \$1.3 million Handouqa apartment building, said the structure was now uninhabitable due to part of the Hanadi tower falling onto the apartment building, causing ceilings to collapse and the foundations to become insecure.

The owner of the Gaza International Hotel, Abu Ahmed Jaber, reported similar damages amounting to nearly half a million dollars. Considering the fact that the reasons for the airstrikes were unfounded to begin with, this level of collateral damage makes these attacks especially distressing.

The airstrike on the 15-storey al-Jalaa tower, which housed the offices of the Associated Press and the Al Jazeera broadcasting network, provoked particular outrage from many who condemned it as an attack on press freedom.

Mostefa Souag, acting director general of Al Jazeera, described the airstrikes at the time as “a blatant violation of human rights” and a war crime, calling for Israel to be held “accountable for its deliberate targeting of journalists and the media institutions”.

However, it is interesting to note that the HRW seems reluctant to squarely accuse Israel of war crimes in the same way that it has done with a previous report from August 12 on Hamas’s role in the May fighting. Whilst Israel’s attacks have been hesitantly labelled as “apparent war crimes”, the HRW has reacted with more forceful words towards Palestinian armed groups, describing their actions as having “flagrantly violated the laws-of-war prohibition on indiscriminate attacks”.

This difference in categorisation is likely due to Hamas and other associated militant groups having been relatively open about their intentions to target urban population centres, whilst the IDF attempted to disguise their identical intentions under the hitherto unproven pretence of targeting military objectives.

Nevertheless, whilst the reports, two against the IDF and one against Palestinian militants, conclude that war crimes were committed on both sides to varying degrees, it would be misguided to say that the fighting should be remembered as things being all square. Israel, a supposedly civilised, democratic state that has recently attempted to associate itself more with Europe than the Middle East through competitions like the Euros and Eurovision, would do well not to take part in a tit-for-tat conflict with Hamas. To do so would only enhance Hamas’s legitimacy or erode their own.