

Warmth and Courage in the Jenin Refugee Camp



[A cafe in Jenin](#). Credit: Nir Kafri

[Gideon Levy](#) - Jan 12, 2023

In the Jenin refugee camp, I saw many beautiful things. Not books of poetry by Rachel or by Natan Alterman, as the narrator of a Naomi Shemer song once described finding at Israeli army outposts in Sinai, but a courageous, determined, well-organized camp imbued with fighting spirit perhaps unparalleled in history.

It had been four years since my last visit. For a year now, the Israel Defense Forces haven't dared invade the camp itself, but only its outskirts. For years, the Palestinian Authority has been unable to enter it. Nor has any Israeli journalist, aside from [Amira Hass](#), visited here or been wanted here, following all the disappointments Israeli reporters dealt the camp's residents.

But this week, I returned with photographer [Alex Levac](#). It was a very emotional visit – personal, moving, but also instructive.

The city of Jenin has had 60 residents killed in the last year alone. Of these, 38 were residents of the camp, the place most like the Gaza Strip in both its spirit and its suffering; one finds the same human warmth and the same courage at this camp in Jenin.

The third section of the martyrs' cemetery is already full, and another section must be found for the casualties to come. If the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) invades the camp, people here say, there will be a massacre. They say it without a hint of either fear or boastfulness.

The owner of the hummus joint at the camp's entrance underwent bypass surgery since my last visit. The wife of Hamas' top official in the camp, who is imprisoned in Israel, has gone blind. A modern hospital has opened near the camp, and [Jamal Zubeidi](#), the bravest and noblest of them all, lost both his son Naeem and his son-in-law Daoud over the last year. Daoud was both the brother and the nephew of Zakaria Zubeidi.

- **The government wants to expropriate land in the north for the 'Afula-Jenin railroad'**
- **And if the 16-year-old girl shot dead in Jenin had been a boy?**
- **The first rule of Israeli cinema club is: you do not talk about this**

We visited the camp on the 40th day of mourning for Naeem. Jamal sat alone in a room receiving guests, in the very spot where the IDF has already demolished his home twice, surrounded by pictures and posters of the six slain members of his family. A delegation from the Jewish Neturei Karta sect that was visiting Jenin also made its way here to offer its condolences, but armed men from the camp ran them off with gunshots.

Jamal's youngest son, Hamoudi, whom we first met as a mischievous young child, is now Israel's most wanted man in the camp; he is a member of Islamic Jihad. The children of the men who fought for the secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine are now fighting for Islamic Jihad, the most powerful organization in the camp. And that is the whole story in a nutshell.

The armed men have a secret number on their cellphones that they call whenever someone sees [IDF forces](#) moving toward the city or the refugee camp. This phone number automatically sounds an alarm throughout the camp. It usually happens at night. The entire camp is woken up, and dozens of armed men leave their homes and quickly head for the entrances to the camp and the city. That's how 38 residents of the camp were killed.

The distinctions between the different militant organizations are blurred here; they cooperate with each other more than they do anywhere else in the West Bank and Gaza. Camouflage nets cover some of the alleys to prevent IDF drones from monitoring what is happening.

One young man pulled out an aerial photograph of the camp that was most likely left behind by soldiers in the city, though according to local legend, it was stolen from a soldier's pocket. The photo was taken during the World Cup, and the IDF labeled some of the camp's alleys with the names of the countries competing in it – Portugal Alley, France Alley and Brazil Alley. One home in the photo was labeled "habira"; the young men thought it referred to the home of a "friend" ("haver" in Hebrew, which derives from same the Hebrew root) – in other words, a collaborator.

The most popular car in the camp is Toyota's C-HR hybrid SUV. We saw several of them racing through the alleys. They were stolen from Israel, almost brand new. After everything Israel has stolen from the Palestinians, from the remnants of their lands to the remnants of their honor, there is poetic justice in these stolen Toyotas of which the young men are so proud.

There's not a home here that hasn't suffered bereavement, not a family that hasn't had a member permanently disabled or jailed. At the camp's entrances, young men have erected blue iron barricades "like in Ukraine." It isn't yet Ukraine, but the Jenin refugee camp may well become a new version of the Ukrainian town of Bucha one day, perhaps quite soon. No Israeli should rejoice over that.

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