



BRIEFING

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GAZA HOSPITAL: HAMAS MANIPULATION FAILS

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An explosion hit Gaza's Ahli Arab hospital on Tuesday evening, killing "several hundred people" according to Hamas. The terrorist organisation immediately accused the Israelis of deliberately bombing the hospital. Thirty-six hours later, it appears that Israel had nothing to do with the strike and that the death toll was probably (very) grossly exaggerated. But the damage is done. Welcome to *Hybrid Warfare*, in which the manipulation of information, *Infowar*, is a (lethal) weapon in its own right.

"The first casualty of war is always the truth" (Rudyard Kipling)

1- The facts

On the evening of Tuesday 17 October, a powerful explosion occurred inside the Ahli Arab hospital - an establishment belonging to the Anglican Church and managed by it from Jerusalem - in the eastern districts of Gaza. The number of victims was clearly high. The Hamas propaganda machine immediately went into action, referring to an "Israeli attack".

At the beginning of the evening, the organisation mentioned 200 dead, while witnesses spoke of 500, 700 and then "more than a thousand" victims. The Israeli army remained cautious, stating on Tuesday evening that it could not comment until it had established exactly what had happened. While it is doubtful that the Tsahal deliberately targeted the hospital, the hypothesis of a mistake during a missile attack or a bombardment is conceivable.

2- The propaganda machine is in full swing

In the minutes following the tragedy, Hamas's communication networks were set in motion, and the propaganda machine was soon running at full speed.

We were of course entitled to official press releases, but **the organisation has the intelligence to quickly take a back seat to simple 'witnesses'** sent to the front line of the media war.

On the French-language channels, we see a succession of "Palestinians from the street" living in Gaza. The **discourse is always the same, stereotyped**: none of these people belongs (obviously) to Hamas, none of them is involved in or interested in politics, each of them is in favour of peace and dialogue, and all of them freely testify to what they have seen and experienced.

But the openness stops there: when questioned on this precise point, none of these witnesses, for example, condemns the atrocious events that took place in Israel between 7 and 9 October and which explain the Israeli response (but obviously could not justify the bombing of a hospital). **No one questioned Hamas**, and from one speaker to the next, the words were virtually the same, ranging from "I don't really know what happened" to "we need to investigate...".

On the bombing of the Ahli Arab hospital, on the other hand, the consensus is unanimous: **Israel is to blame. And it was not an accidental shooting, but a deliberate act.** When a journalist asked, almost timidly, whether the tragedy could not have been caused by a firing error by Hamas or Islamic Jihad, the question was brushed aside: no, it is the Israelis who are responsible; besides, they are used to it, they have destroyed dozens of hospitals and schools, they are used to massacring civilians and have been doing so for years. And no, of course, it is not Hamas that is blocking the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip in the north, preventing them from evacuating to the south, it is, once again, the Israelis.

And throughout the evening, testimony after testimony, the numbers of victims swelled out of all proportion. In an exponential growth, we go from 200 to 300 dead, then to 500 or 700, and finally to "over 1000". On Wednesday, the official death toll from the Gaza Ministry of Health (controlled, of course, by Hamas) was 471.

But curiously, and no one seems surprised by this, **while the victims are countless, we see very little of them.** As a general rule, Hamas is quick to broadcast close-ups of victims and images of bloodied bodies (preferably those of women and children). Here, we mainly see rescue workers busily working, stretchers (sometimes empty) and a crowd of people stamping their feet. Not much blood. Few corpses.

Strangely too, and this causes some unease, **no journalist questions the word of the witnesses**; they are treated as if it were a micro-trottoir conducted on the Place de la Concorde. No one mentions the fact that these witnesses, who fell from the sky in a matter of minutes and some of whom spoke perfect French, may be speaking with a Hamas gun to their heads or are simply willing relays of Hamas propaganda. Miraculously, through the words of these "street people", the very word of the terrorist organisation is rehabilitated: what comes out of the mouth of a Gazan can only be the truth.

3- Dismantling the handling

Throughout the night, the Israeli intelligence services will be working to accumulate the elements needed to "document" the tragedy. And we can suspect that they are not alone: their American, French and British counterparts are doing the same. In addition to their local sources,

they can benefit from satellite imagery and electronic intercepts, which are invaluable sources for studying this type of incident.

And on Wednesday afternoon, a number of disturbing elements were made public, enabling Israel to assert that **the projectile had come from the Gaza Strip (and therefore from the Palestinian side) and that the explosion was due to an error or an accident during the firing of missiles by Islamic Jihad, an organisation closely associated with Hamas**, whose members took part in the murderous expedition on 7 October and which is also armed and financed by Iran.

These factors are now well known, but let's take a quick look at them.

A/ Images from al-Jazeera

Firstly, there are live images filmed by the Arab channel al-Jazeera, which can hardly be accused of playing the Hebrew State's propaganda game (images which, it should be noted, were publicly available from Tuesday evening and which had, quite honestly, been presented by certain European channels). We can see, in real time, the start of a barrage of missiles coming from the south, i.e. from the Gaza Strip towards Israel, with no projectiles coming from the north or east (i.e. from Israel) and no aircraft visible. One of these missiles explodes (or disintegrates) and falls to the ground. A few seconds later we see a huge explosion, and the cameraman's zoom shows that it took place within the perimeter of the hospital.

B/ Map of anti-missile radar systems

Israel then published an image from its missile detection and tracking radars showing the same barrage firing from a location extremely close to the hospital (probably a nearby cemetery), in which the trajectory of one of the projectiles can be seen to change: it stalls and plunges towards the ground above the hospital. This technical document corroborates the al-Jazeera images.

C/ A conversation between two members of Hamas

Finally, the recording of a conversation supposedly held between two members of Hamas (not identified by the Israelis) after the explosion reveals their astonishment. One of the two men mentions "a mistake" by Islamic Jihad.

D/ The BBC's contribution

The BBC, whose objectivity is proverbial, has carried out its own research, via its specialist "*BBC Verify*" service. Firstly, it "*was able to compare the details of the buildings and the layout of the Al Ahli Hospital site with publicly available satellite imagery to establish that the hospital was the site of the explosion.*" Second: "*BBC Verify has shown the evidence to a number of weapons experts, some of whom say it does not match what you would expect from a typical Israeli air strike.*" For example, "*J Andres Gannon, an assistant professor at Vanderbilt University in the US, says that the explosion appears to be small, meaning that the heat generated by the impact may have been caused by leftover rocket fuel rather than the explosion of a warhead.*" Another researcher, Justin Bronk, Senior Research Fellow at the *Royal United Services Institute* (Rusi) in the UK, agrees: "*The evidence suggests that the explosion was caused by a defective rocket section hitting the car park and causing a fuel and propellant fire*" (propellant is an additive to rocket fuel).

On its website, the BBC publishes a satellite image from the EPA showing around fifteen vehicles on fire in the hospital car park. The nearby buildings do not appear to have been affected or damaged by the shockwave.

E/ The balance sheet itself is strongly questioned

A French arms expert we spoke to pointed out that the absence of a crater at the epicentre of what appears to have been the point of impact proves that it was not an air-dropped bomb. The same expert stresses that the limited extent of the damage makes him doubt the death toll announced by Hamas. *"The head of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem, Canon Richard Sewell, dean of St George's College, said that a thousand displaced people had taken refuge in the courtyard at the time of the strike, and that around 600 patients and staff were inside the building. **If we stick to the announced figure of 471 dead, this would mean a fatality rate of around 30%, and even 50% if we confine ourselves to those present in the courtyard, which does not seem very compatible with the perimeter of the explosion, where the damage was relatively insignificant...**"*

Echoing our interviewee's comments, on Wednesday evening, a "senior official from a European intelligence service" told Agence France Presse: **"There are not 200 or even 500 dead [in hospital] but rather a few dozen, probably between 10 and 50..."**.

F/ Joe Biden's position

US President Joe Biden, on a visit to Tel Aviv on Wednesday, also blamed the strike on an "out-of-control rocket" fired by a "terrorist group" in the Palestinian territory: "Based on the information we've had so far, it appears that (the strike) was the result of an out-of-control rocket fired by a terrorist group in Gaza".

Two points need to be made here. Firstly, Biden stated that he was basing his opinion on "American data" (which was confirmed from Washington by his National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan), which means that he formed his opinion after being "briefed" by his intelligence services, who collected their data independently of the Israelis. Secondly, we can assume that **if the US administration had the slightest doubt, Joe Biden would never have gone so far in his statements**. The situation is volatile, American interests have been (and remain) threatened, and if he were to blunder, he would no longer have any chance of playing, at any time, an intermediary role between Israel and the Arab world.

Of course (and this is what some will say), **one might think that all the elements we have just mentioned were fabricated by the Israeli war machine**, and that Joe Biden's statements are simply an illustration of the complicity that exists between the United States and the Jewish state. But **these are factual elements, which to date have not been contradicted by other elements of the same order**. "All we have on the other side are statements by Hamas and "testimonies". No material evidence, no fragments of Israeli bombs or missiles, no conclusive images. **On the one hand facts, on the other words**.

4- A proven lie, but the damage is done

In such a complex and sensitive matter, it is dangerous to say that we hold a 100% proven truth. Nevertheless, the accumulation of facts that we have just recalled allows us to conclude, with an extremely small margin of error, that Israel did not bomb the Gaza hospital.

On the other hand, it is more difficult to decide whether Hamas or Islamic Jihad was responsible for the accidental shooting, but that is not the main issue here.

But the damage is done.

5- The result of this manipulation: increased tensions in the Arab street and the threat of terrorism everywhere.

The tensions that have been building up in the "Arab street" since 7 October are at their height, and the accusation made by Hamas against Israel has only added fuel to the fire.

On Tuesday night, Hamas and then Hezbollah called for a "day of rage" on Wednesday and for demonstrations "all over the world". Just hours after the tragedy, riots broke out in the West Bank (where President Mahmoud Abbas is increasingly challenged), Turkey, Lebanon, Tunisia, Iran, Jordan and Libya. Significantly, where there are no Israeli embassies, it is those of the United States, the United Kingdom or France that have been besieged, these three countries being openly accused of supporting the Jewish state.

On Wednesday, while Jerusalem was announcing the closure of its embassy in Morocco and its relocation to Madrid, pro-Iranian factions fired rockets at a military base housing American troops in Iraq.

The same demonstrations, sometimes violent, were repeated early on Wednesday evening in several countries.

It can be just a short step from violent protest to terrorism. All our sources in intelligence circles estimated on Wednesday that the terrorist threat in Europe and the rest of the Western world had risen sharply since 7 October, and that it had increased still further after Tuesday night's tragedy.

One day or another, somewhere in the world, **terrorists will kill in the name of victims (most of them imaginary) who were not killed by Israel but who have nevertheless become "icons" of Palestinian martyrology.**

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