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After Helping Earthquake Victims, This Palestinian Was Killed by an Israeli Rampage

Sameh al-Aqtash had just returned from volunteering in Turkey, when settlers attacked his West Bank village

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Four days ago, Sameh al-Aqtash returned from Turkey, where he had been supporting earthquake victims as a volunteer. On Sunday evening, the 37-year-old Palestinian was killed by Israeli settlers rampaging through his village, Zatara, in the occupied West Bank.

Zatara is located south of Nablus, near an infamous Israeli military checkpoint where, according to residents, soldiers abuse Palestinians on a daily basis. Only 100 people live in Zatara and they are all members of the same family. Most of them are women and children.

The Israeli settler attacks began after a suspected Palestinian gunman killed two settlers near the town of Huwwara on Sunday afternoon. In response, hundreds of Israelis attacked Palestinian towns and villages, wounding nearly 300 and burning homes to the ground.

Despite Zatara being around six kilometres from Huwwara, where the settlers were killed and the mob violence was at its worst, a group of Israelis attacked the village and began trying to remove its main gate.

Abdel Moneim, Aqtash's brother, was with him as they rushed to stop the settlers' vandalism.

"We all hurried, including Sameh, and stopped the settlers at the gate and prevented them from entering," he told Middle East Eye.

"But after a short period of time, the settlers attacked again, this time with the protection of the Israeli soldiers. Gunfire started targeting us, and then Sameh fell to the ground."

With Israeli soldiers and settlers blocking roads, no ambulance was able to access Zatara, so

Aqtash's brothers had to use a private vehicle and transport him via a dirt road to the neighbouring town of Beita.

As they raced down the bumpy road, blood poured out of a bullet hole in Aqtash's abdomen. He began to lose consciousness.

At the Beita medical centre, Aqtash's siblings broke down in tears when the doctor told them that he had died of his wounds. He left behind three children, the youngest a four-month-old girl.

"There were no clashes when the settlers attacked us. Sameh was a kind person who loved helping people, and two days before he was killed, he spoke with the heads of local councils in our region to collect donations for earthquake victims in Turkey and Syria," Abdel Moneim said.

Towns burning

The scars of the unprecedented settler attacks on towns and villages south of Nablus will be difficult to erase. Homes, shops, and cars have been smashed and torched. Settlers slaughtered Palestinians' livestock.

Elias Dmaidi, an eight-year-old resident of Huwwara, said he thought it was going to be the last of his life.

"I have never seen such a major attack, and hundreds of settlers were screaming, insulting, smashing everything in their way, and setting fire to homes while the families were inside," Dmaidi told reporters.

Huwwara, a town divided by a main road frequented by Israeli settlers and soldiers, has had a growing history of friction.

Most of its lands were confiscated by Israel to build illegal Jewish settlements, with various roads exclusively for Israelis that were constructed to serve them and maintain their security.

As chaos engulfed the town, the Israeli military closed all checkpoints surrounding Nablus, stranding Palestinians inside and outside the area. Despite the settler attacks, residents opened their homes to everyone unable to leave.

As morning broke, the sun revealed the extent of the damage. Black-charred streaks stained houses, shops, and trees. Even the school had been attacked. The students stayed in their homes on Monday, fearing for their lives.

During the riots, medical staff and firefighters were prevented from reaching affected areas, resulting in hundreds of wounded Palestinians being treated long after they were attacked.

Ahmed Jibril, director of the ambulance and emergency department at the Palestine Red Crescent, said medics were subjected to many violations during the attack on Huwwara.

"The paramedics were attacked and prevented from entering the town, and even ambulances were fired at. The attack wasn't only at the hands of the soldiers, but also by

the settlers, who attacked the medical staff while trying to transport a wounded person," he said.

Targeted at home

Burin, a neighbouring town that rubs shoulders with settlement blocks, was also subject to frenzied attacks.

Ayman Soufan was at home with his wife and children when settlers attacked them and set their home on fire.

"More than 100 settlers attacked us and they divided themselves into two groups, one smashing windows and doors and the other stealing our stuff and sheep from the front of the house," he told MEE.

"Then they set it on fire. My brother's family and I fled to the other side to protect ourselves. My son was hit by a stone in his shoulder after being thrown by settlers."

Almost every month, they are attacked by settlers who want to take their home and steal their land to expand nearby settlements, and it is under the protection of Israeli soldiers.

"The settlers tried to burn us alive inside our house, and if we hadn't been able to escape, we would have been dead now. Despite the huge fire, the firefighters were unable to reach us because the soldiers prevented them, and the fire remained burning until it extinguished itself. Since 2000, we have been living in the same spiral of aggression," Soufan said.

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Featured image: Sameh al-Aqtash supported earthquake victims in Turkey as a volunteer (social media)

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