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Hamas Recruited a 15-Year-Old to Fight. Then Gaza's Death Toll Counted Him as a Child

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A 15-year-old is a child.

That remains true even when someone puts an RPG in his hands.

And that is precisely why Hamas's reported celebration of 15-year-old Zahib Labad as one of its fighters is so disturbing.

In material recently published by Hamas's military wing, Labad is presented as a military operative who participated directly in combat against Israeli forces. According to the material, while still just 15, he planted explosive devices and fired an RPG at IDF troops before ultimately being killed in combat.

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Both descriptions can technically be true. He was under 18, and therefore a child under international standards. But if Hamas's own account of his combat role is accurate, simply describing him as a



"child killed by Israel" leaves out an indispensable fact: Hamas had allegedly recruited that child into its armed forces and sent him into combat.

That distinction matters enormously when Gaza casualty figures are presented to audiences around the world.

The tragedy is not merely that a 15-year-old died.

It is that an armed organization reportedly turned a 15-year-old into a combatant in the first place.

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Key Takeaways

- Hamas's military wing has reportedly memorialized^[1] Zahib Labad as one of its own military operatives.
- According to the [Hamis \(https://cognitura.org/blog/hamas-was-never-just-israels-problem-the-west-may-see-the-next-october-](https://cognitura.org/blog/hamas-was-never-just-israels-problem-the-west-may-see-the-next-october-)

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- Because he was under 18, his death can still be recorded^[2] demographically as the death of a child.
- Age-based casualty statistics do not, by themselves, tell audiences whether a minor was a civilian or participating directly in hostilities.
- [Hamis's \(https://cognitura.org/blog/hamas-reign-of-terror-gazas-hospitals-and-schools-turned-into-torture-chambers\)](https://cognitura.org/blog/hamas-reign-of-terror-gazas-hospitals-and-schools-turned-into-torture-chambers)own

portrayal therefore illustrates why "children killed" and "civilian children killed" are not necessarily interchangeable statistical categories.

- The recruitment^[3] or use of children under 15 in hostilities is prohibited under international humanitarian law; international law also provides broader protections against recruitment and use of minors.
- None of this diminishes the deaths of genuinely civilian children in Gaza. Their deaths are tragedies and must not be erased.
- Instead, it raises another serious issue: armed groups that recruit minors endanger children and complicate efforts to accurately distinguish (<https://cognitura.org/blog/when-a-health-worker-is-actually-a-terrorist>) civilians from combatants.

Hamas's Own Propaganda Creates the Problem

This case is significant because the allegation does not simply concern an Israeli claim that a young casualty belonged to Hamas.

Hamas's own military propaganda reportedly celebrates Labad's military activity.

That matters.

If an armed group memorializes someone as its operative, describes him planting explosives and shows or describes him using an RPG against enemy troops, that is fundamentally different evidence from an unsupported claim made after somebody has been killed.

The crucial issue is his age.

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Fifteen.
A teenager who should have been in school was allegedly being used in a battlefield role.
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That should provoke outrage at the organization that placed him there.

A Child Can Also Participate in Combat

This is an uncomfortable but essential distinction.

"Child" is an age category.

"Civilian" is a status governed by different considerations.

They are not synonyms.

A 10-year-old sleeping in an apartment when a bomb strikes is a child and civilian.

A 15-year-old deliberately armed and sent to fire an RPG remains a child because of his age. But if he is directly participating in hostilities, that fact is crucial to understanding the circumstances in which he was killed.

Simply placing both deaths into the category "children killed by Israel" removes that distinction.

It tells audiences how old the casualties were.

It does not necessarily tell them what they were doing when they died.

This Matters When Casualty Figures Are Reported

International audiences regularly encounter statistics describing the number of women and children killed in Gaza.

Those figures carry enormous emotional power, understandably.

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But demographic categories cannot automatically establish civilian status. This website or its third-party tools process personal data. You

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Information" link.

Being under 18 does not necessarily mean being a civilian.

This does not mean that most children killed in Gaza were fighters.

There is no basis for making that sweeping claim, and large numbers of Palestinian children plainly have been killed in circumstances

unrelated to combat participation.

It means something much narrower but extremely important:

The number of people under 18 who died cannot automatically be presented as the number of civilian children killed.

The Labad case demonstrates why.

Hamas Has a Responsibility Toward Gaza's Children

There is also a tendency for responsibility to begin only at the moment an Israeli weapon is fired.

But the chain of responsibility can begin much earlier.

Who recruited the teenager?

Who trained him?

Who gave him explosives?

Who provided the RPG?

Who sent him toward armed soldiers?

Who decided that a 15-year-old should participate in a war?

If Hamas's account of Labad is accurate, those questions deserve answers.

A movement claiming to defend Palestinian children should not be turning those children into fighters.

We value your privacy. International Law Recognizes the Problem

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clicking on the "Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Information" link in the footer of this page. We have spent decades attempting to prevent children from being used in warfare.

The Rome Statute identifies conscripting or enlisting children under 15, or using them to participate actively in hostilities, as a war crime in relevant circumstances. Other international instruments, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on

involvement of children in armed conflict, establish broader protections and obligations concerning the recruitment and use of people under 18.

There is a reason these protections exist.

Children are particularly vulnerable to indoctrination and manipulation.

They are less capable of assessing consequences.

They can be encouraged to view death and "martyrdom" romantically.

Armed organizations have a responsibility to keep them away from battlefields.

If Hamas instead celebrates a teenager for planting explosives and firing an RPG, the message to other Palestinian teenagers is potentially devastating.

Hamas Cannot Have It Both Ways

There is also a profound contradiction in the propaganda surrounding such deaths.

Internally, an armed teenager can be celebrated as a heroic fighter.

Externally, the same person can become another child in the casualty statistics.

The first narrative emphasizes military participation.

The second can omit it entirely.

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Both use the same death for different audiences.

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That is why Hamas's own announcements and memorial notices are potentially important evidence when evaluating casualty data. Previous research has already identified cases where individuals publicly described as journalists, health workers or other civilians were subsequently acknowledged by Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad (<https://cognitura.org/blog/why-the-northern-ireland-model-does-not-apply-to-disarming-hamas-and-islamic-jihad>) as members of their military structures. (Terrorism Information Center^[4])

Casualty analysis needs to account for those disclosures rather than treating demographic labels as the final word.

This Does Not Erase Gaza's Civilian Children

This point must be equally clear.

There are children in Gaza who had nothing whatsoever to do with Hamas and have been killed.

Babies.

Toddlers.

Schoolchildren.

Teenagers who never carried weapons.

Their deaths should not be minimized because Hamas has used other minors in combat.

Nor should every teenage boy killed in Gaza automatically be labeled a Hamas fighter.

That would simply replace one misleading generalization with another.

Each case should be assessed according to evidence.

That principle protects the integrity of the casualty figures in both directions.

The Real Scandal Is What Happened Before His Death

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The most disturbing question surrounding Zahib Labad should therefore not simply be why a 15-year-old appears among Gaza's child casualties. This website or its third party tools process personal data. You can opt out of the sale of your personal information by clicking on the "Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Information" link.

Of course he does.

He was 15.

The deeper question is why a 15-year-old was allegedly carrying out military operations at all.

There should be nothing heroic about that.

An organization genuinely concerned about Palestinian children should be keeping them as far away from RPGs, explosives, tunnels and military positions as possible.

Hamas's reported celebration of Labad suggests precisely the opposite.

Conclusion

Zahib Labad was a child.

That is exactly why his story matters.

If Hamas's own account is accurate, somebody recruited a 15-year-old, trained him for war, gave him explosives and an RPG, and sent him into combat against professional soldiers.

When he died, his age meant that he could subsequently be counted among Gaza's children killed during the conflict.

The statistic is demographically accurate.

But without the accompanying information about his alleged combat role, it is incomplete.

This distinction should never be used to dismiss the genuine suffering of Gaza's children. Thousands of minors have endured death, injury, displacement and trauma through a war they did not choose.

It should instead force another uncomfortable question into the international discussion:

What responsibility does Hamas bear for exposing Palestinian children to war?

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Information" link. If a 15-year-old is recruited, armed and sent to fire an RPG, the world should still mourn.

But it should also condemn those who put the weapon in his hands.

Because protecting Gaza's children must mean more than counting them after they die.

It must mean refusing to let Hamas turn them into soldiers while they are still alive.

Footnotes

1. <https://abualiexpress.com/en/en77827/>
(<https://abualiexpress.com/en/en77827/>). ↑
2. <https://www.jfeed.com/latest-news/hamas-military-wing-publishes-video-confirming-recruitment-of-15-year-old-fighte-49494> (<https://www.jfeed.com/latest-news/hamas-military-wing-publishes-video-confirming-recruitment-of-15-year-old-fighte-49494>). ↑
3. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule137>
(<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule137>). ↑
4. <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-on-terrorism-june-2026/> (<https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-on-terrorism-june-2026/>). ↑

(<https://cognitura.org>)

Research and education platform exploring radicalization prevention through truth and moral resilience.

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