

Israeli Raids and Violence: Crowded West Bank Refugee Camp Is the Most Tear-gassed Place in the World

Berkeley Law School Study

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Global Research, January 03, 2018

[Mondoweiss](#) 30 December 2017

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
[Militarization and WMD](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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UC Berkeley School of Law released a [study](#) that named Aida refugee camp in the occupied West Bank the most tear gassed community in the world. For anyone who has spent time in Aida, the findings are not so surprising.

While refugee camps across the occupied West Bank are inundated with Israeli raids and political violence, Aida is in a special position, as Israel's separation wall hems the northern edge of the camp. Just behind the wall is an Israeli military base with two large gates in the wall that open wide enough for two military jeeps to exit at once. One gate opens into one of the main streets in Bethlehem, right by the main entrance to Aida, while another opens directly into the camp.

Tear gas is Israel's go-to crowd control method, but there need be no crowd or protest in Aida for Israeli forces to shoot gas through its streets, saturating the resident's air.

"Residents have alleged that tear gas utilization by [Israeli forces] is not directly correlated to political tensions, non-violent or violent protests, or stone throwing incidents," states the Berkeley study, which is entitled, "No Safe Space: Health Consequences of Tear Gas Exposure Among Palestine Refugees."

Even if there are indeed protests being led along the streets of the camp, it is impossible to control where the gas goes once released into the air.

As the study found, "Aida camp has the appearance of a densely populated urban slum," with an area of about 17 acres (roughly the size of the White House grounds) and about 6,400 resident living in small apartments.

The study analyzed that on average the numbers translate into a density figure of 90,000 people per square kilometer, "exceeding the figures of even the most densely populated cities in the world," meaning just a bit of tear gas in a small area has a major impact on a disproportionate number of people living in the camp.

What Is Tear Gas?

Tear gas is not actually a gas at all, but rather a solid chemical irritant released like an aerosol.

The study explained that the “gas” is usually made up of synthetic CN (chloracetophenone), CS (2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile) or naturally occurring OC (oleoresin capsicum, also known as pepper spray and made from potent capsaicins inside hot peppers).

The problem is little to no studies have been done on the long term effects of tear gas. Since the substance was created for crowd control, it is also unknown what effects it could have on people and communities that are exposed to it on a weekly or even daily basis, as in Aida.

In addition, newer forms of CS, such as CS1 and CS2 have been “siliconized to increase the half-life and potency of the chemical,” the Berkeley study explained. Even less is known about these new strains.

Berkeley was unable to determine what specific chemicals are being utilized inside the gas shot by Israeli forces in recent years.

What we do know is “chemical irritants” were banned for use in war and international conflict by the 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention. While civil law enforcement forces are allowed to use them for certain measures “as long as the types and quantities are consistent with such purposes,” the forces shooting gas in West Bank refugee camps are nearly always soldiers, not border police forces.

Mass, Frequent Exposure

In polling for the study, researchers found that 100% of residents surveyed reported being exposed to tear gas in the past year.

Many residents say Aida is used as training grounds for new soldiers on how to use Israel’s crowd control techniques.

“Many interviewees remarked early in the interviews that ‘this is normal’ or ‘we are used to this,’” researchers documented. “But as the interviews went on, they noted that while they have gotten accustomed to frequent tear gas exposure, they were deeply concerned about the long term impacts of this exposure.”

One woman interviewed in the study told researchers that she was concerned that

“if it can hurt this bad within seconds, what does it do over years?” Another man asked, “We don’t know if it causes cancer or chronic asthma. I am sure we will die young because of this.”

One mother noted she was most concerned for her young children.

“My baby was exposed by the time she was 2 months old,” the woman was quoted as saying. “By the time she is my age, what will happen? Her skin is so delicate and her lungs are so small and thin, I’m sure she will suffer bad effects

for years.”

Of those polled, 55 percent of respondents describe between three and ten tear gas exposures — both indoors and outdoors — in the one month period before the poll was taken.

Over the same period, 84.3 percent of people said they were exposed to the gas while inside their home, 9.4 percent at work, 10.7 percent in school, and 8.5 percent elsewhere, like in a car for instance. Meanwhile 22.5 percent of people polled said that they had been hit directly with a tear gas canister in the past — which has the potential to be a deadly projectile on its own.

More than 75 percent of people polled told researchers they experienced “eye-related complaints” (pain, burning, tearing), skin irritation, pain and respiratory problems that lasted more than 24 hours after the exposure to the gas.

In addition, 20 percent of people reported ongoing symptoms such as “headache, difficulty concentrating, eye irritation, sweating, difficulty breathing, coughing, dizziness and loss of balance were attributed to chronic tear gas exposure.”

Researchers reported in the study that “the community’s sense of injustice about these attacks was profound, and it has deeply impacted their lives day to day,” from students being gassed while in class, studying or trying to sleep, to parents frantically attempting to ensure infants and young children have some sort of protection against the gas.

The study found that

“virtually everyone we interviewed or surveyed in Aida reported that they had some medical or psychological symptoms attributed to tear gas.”

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