

Israel military operation destroys a Gaza cemetery. Israel says Hamas used the site to hide a tunnel

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Online Desk: The Islamic cemetery in southern Gaza was demolished, graves excised from the earth. A skull with no teeth rested atop the sandy, churned rubble.

The neighborhood of Bani Suheila in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis, which soldiers showed foreign journalists Saturday, was obliterated, transformed by the military's search for underground Hamas tunnels. An Associated Press journalist saw a destroyed mosque and — where the cemetery had once been — a 140-meter-(yard)-wide pit that gave way to what the army called a Hamas attack tunnel underneath. The military said Monday that combat engineers had demolished part of the network, releasing a video showing massive explosions in the area.

As Israel moves forward with a ground and air campaign in Gaza that health officials in the besieged enclave say has claimed over 26,000 Palestinian lives, the military's destruction of holy sites has drawn staunch criticism from Palestinians and rights groups, who say the offensive is also an assault on cultural heritage. Under international law, cemeteries and religious sites receive special protection — and destroying them could be considered a war crime.

Israel says Hamas uses such sites as military cover, removing them of these protections. It says there is no way to accomplish its military goal of defeating Hamas without finding the tunnels, where they say the militants have built command and control centers, transported weapons and hidden some of the 130 hostages it is believed to be holding. They say digging up the tunnels involves unavoidable collateral damage to sacrosanct spaces.

"We're not naive anymore," said Israeli Brig. Gen. Dan Goldfus, who led journalists around the site Saturday.

Israel has made similar arguments in operations in and around Gaza hospitals.

Goldfus brought journalists inside a tunnel shaft he said stretched underneath the mosque and the cemetery. The journalists walked down a long concrete tunnel that branched in multiple directions and arrived at a small collection of rooms soldiers alleged were used by Hamas militants as a command and control center.

It included three domed rooms — one with four chairs, one with a desk, and a kitchen with empty cans of beans and a spice rack. A military commander said the tunnel, which contained a power transformer, fans, piping with wires and light switches, stretched 800 meters (yards) and was connected to a larger tunnel network in southern Gaza.

The army says it has found similar warrens of rooms in tunnels all over the Gaza Strip. It alleged the quarters shown to journalists Saturday included the office of a Hamas commander, an operations room, and living quarters for senior members of Hamas. It said the tunnel was used to plan attacks against the military.

The demolished cemetery, according to a satellite analysis, appears to have been the Shuhadaa Bani Suheila graveyard.

Since Israel declared war against Hamas on Oct. 7, it has repeatedly accused the Islamic militant group of using Gaza's civilian sites as cover for military use. It says that military operations — from raiding hospitals

to digging up cemeteries and destroying holy sites — are necessary to dismantle the militants' command centers and bunkers.

On Oct. 7, Hamas militants poured into southern Israel, killing 1,200 people and dragging some 250 hostages back to Gaza. Over 100 hostages were exchanged for Palestinian prisoners during a weeklong cease-fire in November.

Israel's retaliatory offensive on Gaza has displaced most of the 2.3 million population. According to a U.N. monitor, the military has damaged 161 mosques in the course of its operations. The agency said it has not tracked the number of cemeteries that were damaged.

On Saturday, Goldfus swept his gloved hand across the moonscape surrounding him. The golden dome of the mosque was cracked and off-kilter, slumping down onto its shattered walls.

Goldfus said that Israeli forces destroyed the mosque after militants fired at them from within its grounds. Footage circulated on Israeli media showed soldiers using explosives to blow out the mosque's first floor walls, collapsing it.

UNESCO has called on both Hamas and Israel to refrain from attacking culturally important sites.

Under the Rome Statute, the 1998 treaty that established the International Criminal Court, cemeteries and mosques receive special protection as "civilian property." The destruction of these sites can be considered a war crime, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Israel argues the sites lose their protection when they are used for military purposes, and when the operational gain from targeting them outweighs the loss of civilian life and infrastructure.

Goldfus said that forces had found other traces of Hamas activity in the area, from confiscated AK-47s to a map of the border between Gaza and Israel that he said Hamas might have used for the Oct. 7 attack.

He said destroying the mosque and digging up the cemetery was integral to locating some 60 tunnel shafts in the area. The journalists were shown only one shaft.

Dismantling the tunnel network, Goldfus said, posed a "riddle" to forces. He said it is difficult to operate in the area without harming sacred sites and even human remains.

"We try to move them aside as much as possible," he said when asked about the excavated bodies. "But remember, when we are fighting in this place, and your enemy is flanking you again and again and again, and using these compounds to hide in, there's not much you can do."