**Hamas paid family to claim Gaza baby was killed by Israeli tear gas, says cousin**

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A 20-year-old Palestinian indicted Thursday on terror-related charges told Israeli investigators during his interrogation that Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar paid his relatives to falsely tell the media that his baby cousin died of tear gas inhalation.

The story of baby Layla Ghandour’s death, purportedly from inhaling tear gas fired by Israel at the Gaza border, made headlines around the world last month and intensified global criticism of Israel’s handling of Hamas-spurred violence at the fence.

On May 28, IDF forces arrested Mahmoud Omar along with another member of Fatah’s armed wing, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, after they attempted to infiltrate into Israel and torch an unmanned IDF post, the Southern District Attorney’s indictment against him said.

Omar had been acting as the lookout while two other members of his squad were to cut through the fence and cross into Israel. The group did not manage to carry out the attack as they came under IDF fire. Israeli forces captured Omar and one other accomplice, while the third attacker managed to flee, according to the indictment.

IDF troops found wire-cutters as well as a bottle of gasoline and a video camera at the scene.

During his questioning, Omar told interrogators the details of the planned attack and detailed his involvement in other terror-related activities.

The suspect also disclosed that he was related to Layla Ghandour, the 8-month-old baby whose May 14 death was originally reported to have been caused by inhalation of tear gas sprayed by Israeli forces at Gaza border protesters. The story of the baby’s purported death at the hands of Israel dominated global media at the time, becoming one of the central elements of reporting on Palestinian opposition to the May 14 inauguration of the US embassy in Jerusalem.

According to the indictment, Omar told authorities that two weeks prior to his arrest, he was among the 40,000 Gazans taking part in the May 14 protests at the border when his mother called to inform him that his baby cousin had died.

Upon arriving home shortly thereafter, the suspect was told that Layla had died of a blood disease similar to the one that took the life of the deceased infant’s brother, who succumbed to the condition at the same age in 2017.

However, Omar told authorities, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar paid Layla’s parents, Miriam and Anwar Ghandour, NIS 8,000 ($2,206) to tell the media that the infant had died due to tear gas inhalation at the Gaza protests.

What the family claimed

Members of the family subsequently gave a series of interviews blaming Israel for Layla’s death. In an article published by AFP on May 15, for instance, the baby’s mother, Mariam al-Ghandour, said, “The Israelis killed her.” The baby’s mother was not asked whether the baby had a preexisting medical condition, and the family indicated to the AFP reporter that she had been healthy, The Times of Israel, which was seeking to ascertain precisely what had happened, was told.

Layla’s mother Mariam, herself only 17, and other members of the family precisely detailed to the AFP reporter the purported sequence of events that led to Layla’s death at the hands of Israel. She explained to AFP that she had a dentist appointment “so I left Leila with my brothers at home.” She added: “My little brother took her and went to the border.”

The brother, 11-year-old Ammar, for his part, told AFP he mistakenly thought his sister was at the border with his mother and other family members. “So I took her with me on the bus.” He added: “I feel I am the reason (for her death).” Close to the border he said he eventually found his mother Heyam and handed Leila over to her. They stayed only a few minutes, Heyam insisted, before tear gas rained down on them.

“I could barely breathe,” she said. “We got away from the gas and gave Leila to my sister and went looking for two other children so we could leave. She drank juice but was crying a lot. Then she went silent. I thought she was sleeping.”

It was only when they got off the bus that they noticed her skin had turned blue, the family said. “I rushed to the hospital. They told me she had been dead more than an hour,” Heyam told the AFP reporter.

Charges against Omar

Among the charges filed by the Southern District Attorney’s Office against Omar were allegations of membership in a terror organization, military training for terror purposes, rioting, attempted infiltration, attempted arson and damaging IDF property.

The indictment stated that Omar had been promised financial aid for his family in return for joining the Mujahideen, a branch of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which Israel and the US both deem to be a terror organization.

The suspect had allegedly been active in the Mujahideen throughout the course of 2017 and had carried out guard duty, during which he had been instructed to fire at IDF forces if they approached the border.

The prosecution said that in a hearing Thursday afternoon it would request that Omar be remanded until the end of proceedings against him.

Thursday’s indictment was filed a month after the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry said that Layla’s death remained under investigation. Gaza medical officials had cast doubt on initial claims that she had died from Israeli tear gas.

On the day of Layla’s death on May 14, the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry initially said she died from tear gas fired by Israeli forces.

Overnight that Monday-Tuesday, the ministry spokesman, Dr. Ashraf Al-Qudra, posted a photograph of Ghandour on Facebook, and wrote that she had died due to gas inhalation.

After her funeral Tuesday, a doctor in Gaza, speaking anonymously, told the AP news agency that he believed a serious preexisting medical condition was to blame for her death.

Reports that she had died from tear gas fired by Israeli troops during mass protests on the Gaza border were prominent in global news coverage of the violence at the time. Her funeral the next day was filmed and featured on global TV news broadcasts and newspaper front pages.

The Israeli army disputed the circumstances of her death at the time. An Israeli army spokesperson said that “contrary to the unequivocal Palestinian announcement, we have evidence that undermines the credibility of the Palestinian Ministry of Health’s announcement regarding the death of the baby.”

On that Wednesday, Al-Qudra told The Times of Israel by phone that he did not know the cause of her death, and said it was being investigated.

The health ministry initially included Layla on its list of the 62 people killed during protests on May 14 and 15, before removing it later that month. Almost all of the other fatalities from those protests were acknowledged by Hamas to be its members.

The Gaza ministry said it was referring the case to the forensic medicine department to issue a ruling. Hamas’s Justice Ministry, which controls the forensic medicine department, later said it ended its investigation and referred the file to Gaza’s attorney general. Both authorities have since declined to comment.

The baby was the apparent subject of a cartoon published by a Palestinian newspaper the following week showing an Israeli soldier forcing a baby to drink poison. A picture of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas meant to attest to his recovery in hospital from a health scare showed him reading the newspaper, with the cartoon clearly seen, in what some interpreted as a deliberate message to Israel.