Gaza health ministry removes baby from border clash death toll

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The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/gaza-health-ministry-removes-baby-from-border-clash-death-toll/>

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“Layla al-Ghandour is not listed among the martyrs, because we are still waiting for the report,” Dr. Ashraf Al-Qidra, director of public relations for the ministry, [told The Guardian newspaper](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/24/gaza-ministry-removes-baby-from-list-of-people-killed-by-israeli-army?CMP=twt_gu&__twitter_impression=true) according to a Thursday report.

“The baby arrived to the hospital dead, and the family said she was there at the border and she inhaled tear gas,” he added. “It wasn’t clear in the beginning whether she died because of that or not. That’s why we referred the case.”

(AFP / MAHMUD HAMS)

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Al-Qidra [earlier told The Times of Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/gazas-health-ministry-now-says-it-doesnt-know-cause-of-babys-death-at-border/) that the baby’s death was being investigated, but refused to commit to removing her from the list of those killed.

Instead, he said at the time that the numbers of dead had not yet been matched with the names.

On May 15, [Al-Qidra posted a photograph of Ghandour on Facebook, and wrote that she had died due to gas inhalation](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=977379965772933&set=a.581682348676032.1073741829.100005028168199&type=3&theater).

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

Later on May 15, however, a Gazan doctor told The Associated Press that Ghandour had a preexisting medical condition and that he did not believe her death was caused by tear gas. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not allowed to disclose medical information to the media.

The Guardian said an initial hospital report listed “heart defects since birth” in the infant and that she suffered a “severe stop in blood circulation and respiration.” The hospital report did not say if tear gas had or had not contributed to her death.

Al-Qidra told the British newspaper the issue was “sensitive” because of Israel’s desire to prove it did not kill Ghandour.

“I am not saying she was, but this needs more investigation,” he said.

An Israeli army spokesperson said earlier this week 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.”

In an article published by AFP on May 15, 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 was told.

However, a [New York Times report on Thursday](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/world/middleeast/layla-ghandour-gaza.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIsrael) said the family acknowledged the baby was not healthy. “The Ghandour family acknowledged that Layla suffered from patent ductus arteriosus, a congenital heart disease commonly described as a hole in the heart,” that report said.

Despite questions surrounding her death, the baby was apparently the subject of a cartoon published by a newspaper this week showing an Israeli soldier forcing a baby to drink poison. [A picture of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas meant](https://www.timesofisrael.com/from-hospital-abbas-shown-reading-newspaper-with-anti-israel-cartoon/) to attest to his recovery from a health scare earlier this week showed him reading the newspaper, with the cartoon clearly seen, in what some interpreted as a deliberate message to Israel.

Tensions along the Gaza border have been high since March 30, which marked the start of a series of violent protests along the security fence, known collectively as the “March of Return.”

A total of at least 120 Palestinians have been killed by Israel since the protests started, according to authorities in Gaza, which is run by the Islamist terror movement Hamas.

The violence reached a peak on May 14, when over 40,000 Palestinians took part in an “unprecedentedly” violent riot along the border, according to the army, as well as smaller protests the next day.

The health ministry initially said at least 62 people were killed over the two days and a Hamas official said at least 50 of them were members of the terror group.

During the clashes thousands of demonstrators burned tires, threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at Israeli troops across the fence and, in a few cases, engaged in armed battles with the IDF.

Israel says its actions — and in particular the use of live ammunition — are necessary to defend the border and stop mass infiltrations from the territory. Israel accused the Hamas terror group of encouraging the protests and using them as cover to attempt to carry out terror attacks, including firing at troops and attempting to breach the border fence.

Mariam Ghandour, herself only 17, told AFP the day her daughter died she had a dentist appointment “so I left Layla with my brothers at home.”

“My little brother took her and went to the border,” she said.

The brother, 11-year-old Ammar, said 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 eventually found his mother Heyam and handed Layla 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 said.