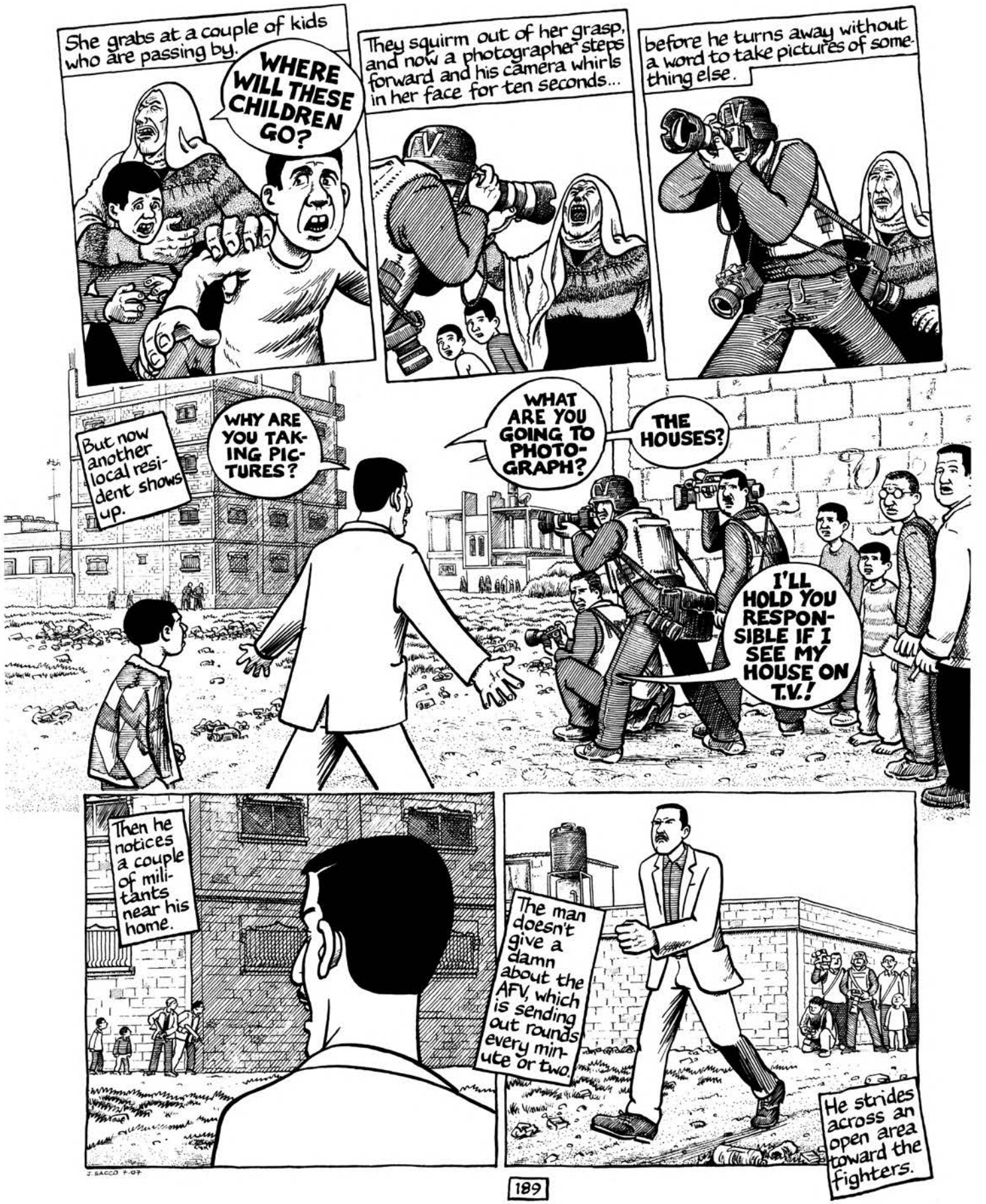
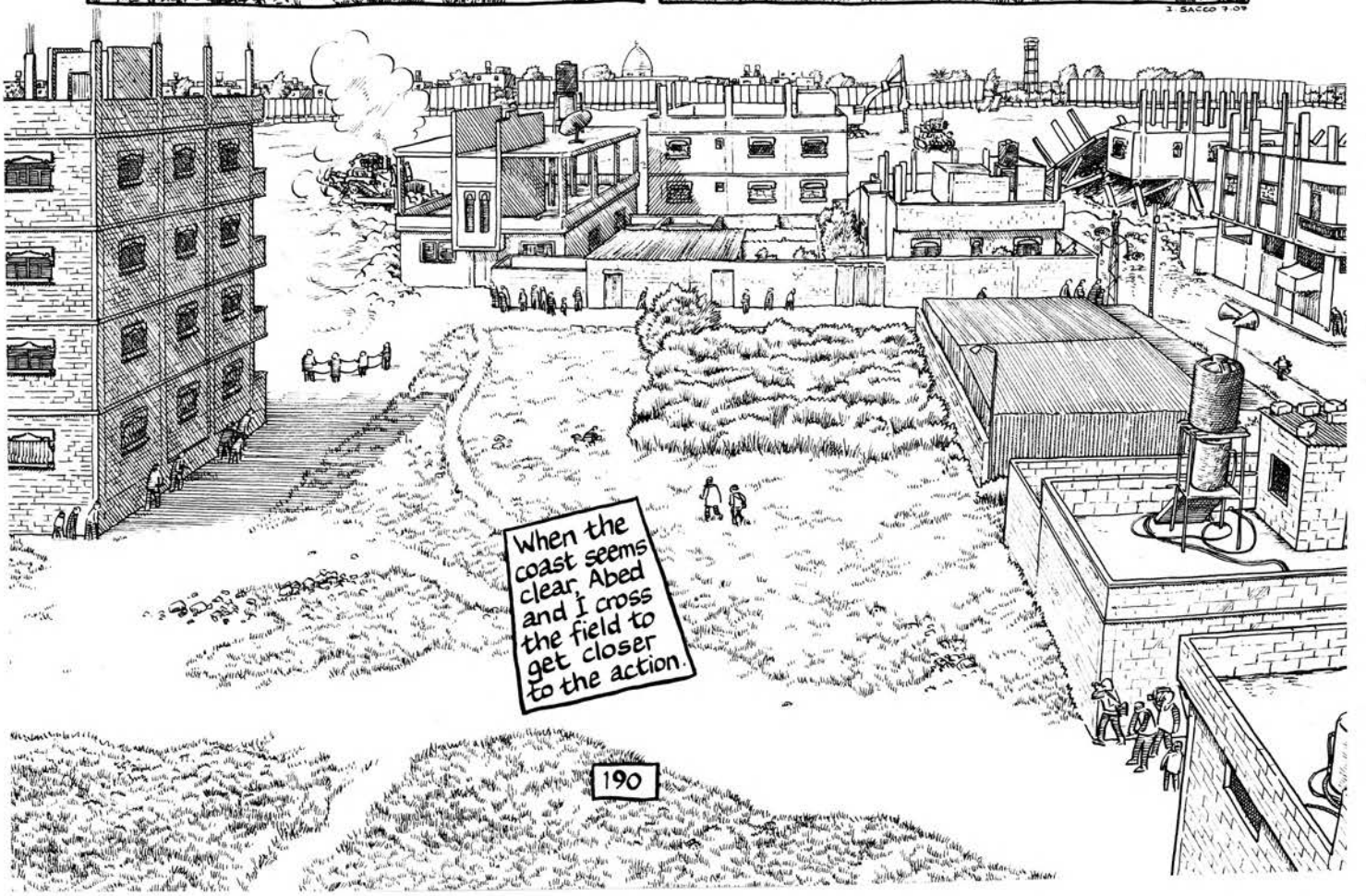
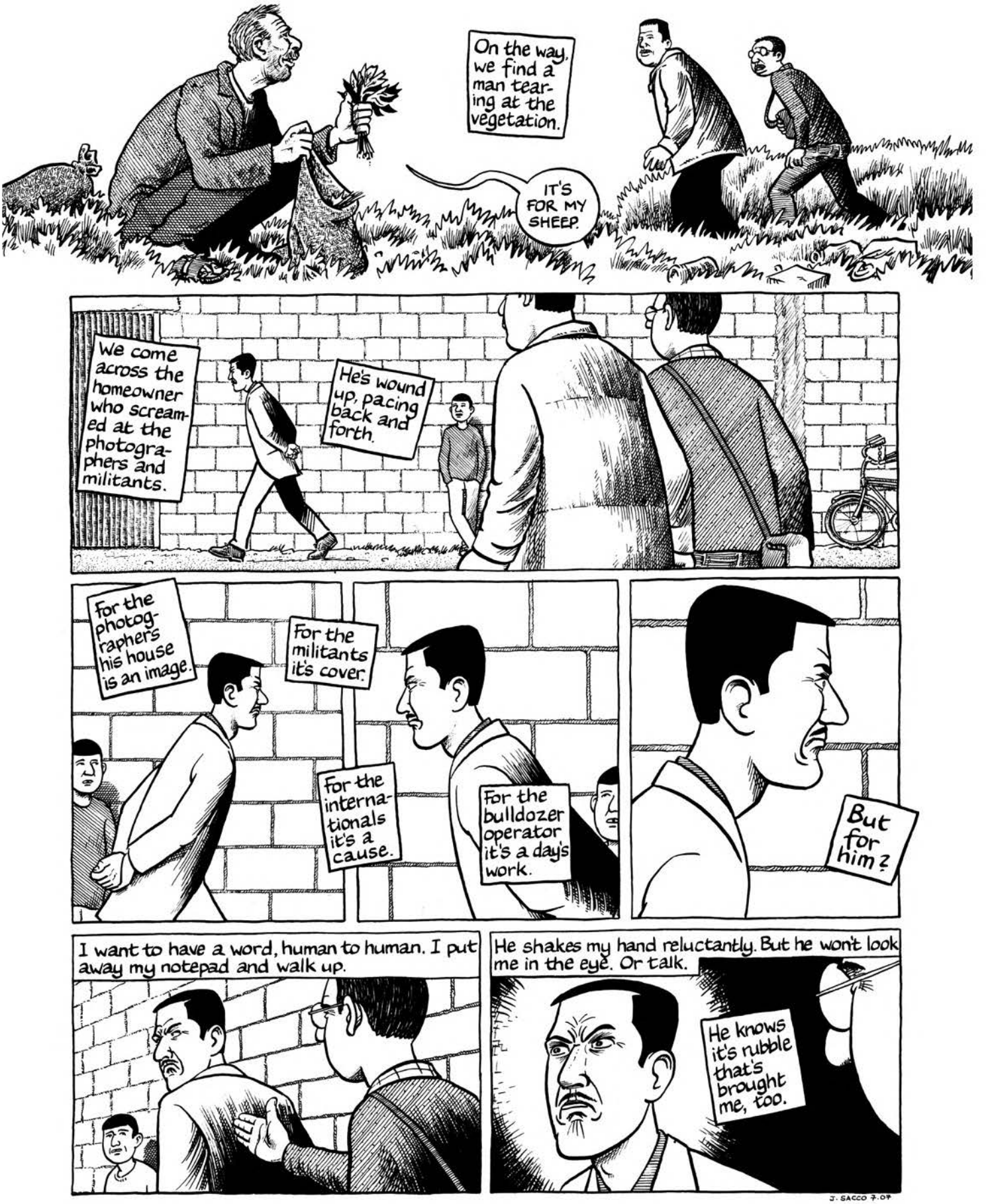

She grabs at a couple of kids who are passing by.
WHERE WILL THESE CHILDREN GO?
They squirm out of her grasp, and now a photographer steps forward and his camera whirls in her face for ten seconds...
before he turns away without a word to take pictures of something else.
But now another local resident shows up.
WHY ARE YOU TAKING PICTURES?
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO PHOTOGRAPH?
THE HOUSES?
I'LL HOLD YOU RESPONSIBLE IF I SEE MY HOUSE ON T.V.!
Then he notices a couple of militants near his home.
The man doesn't give a damn about the AFV, which is sending out rounds every minute or two.
He strides across an open area toward the fighters.
J. SACCO 1-07


He yells at them!
He doesn't want them shooting at the Israelis from anywhere close to his house.
(The Israeli policy, remember, is to flatten any home from where they say they've taken fire.)


And now the party is joined by a new group, foreign activists with the International Solidarity Movement.
There are a handful in Rafah—Europeans and Americans—and they stay in those homes that seem most at risk of getting demolished.
While everyone else is taking cover, they stand in the open, unfurl a banner, and start shouting at the bulldozer.
J. SACCO 7.09


When the coast seems clear, Abed and I cross the field to get closer to the action.


On the way, we find a man tearing at the vegetation.
IT'S FOR MY SHEEP.
We come across the homeowner who screamed at the photographers and militants.
He's wound up, pacing back and forth.
For the photographers his house is an image.
For the militants it's cover.
For the internationals it's a cause.
For the bulldozer operator it's a day's work.
But for him?
I want to have a word, human to human. I put away my notepad and walk up.
He shakes my hand reluctantly. But he won't look me in the eye. Or talk.
He knows it's rubble that's brought me, too.
J. SACCO 7.07


It's time for a smoke.
For now we're more or less pinned down.
The AFV is stitching holes in houses on one side of us...
and sometimes races around to fire a burst on the other side, too.
The activists keep trying to impose their peaceful demonstration on the situation.
WE ARE INTERNATIONALS!
STOP DEMOLITIONS!
The militants keep angling for a shot.
They snap at the kids:
Stop following!
Y'know what'll happen if your path crosses a bullet's?
YOU'LL BE ROLLING ON THE GROUND LIKE A FOOTBALL!
192

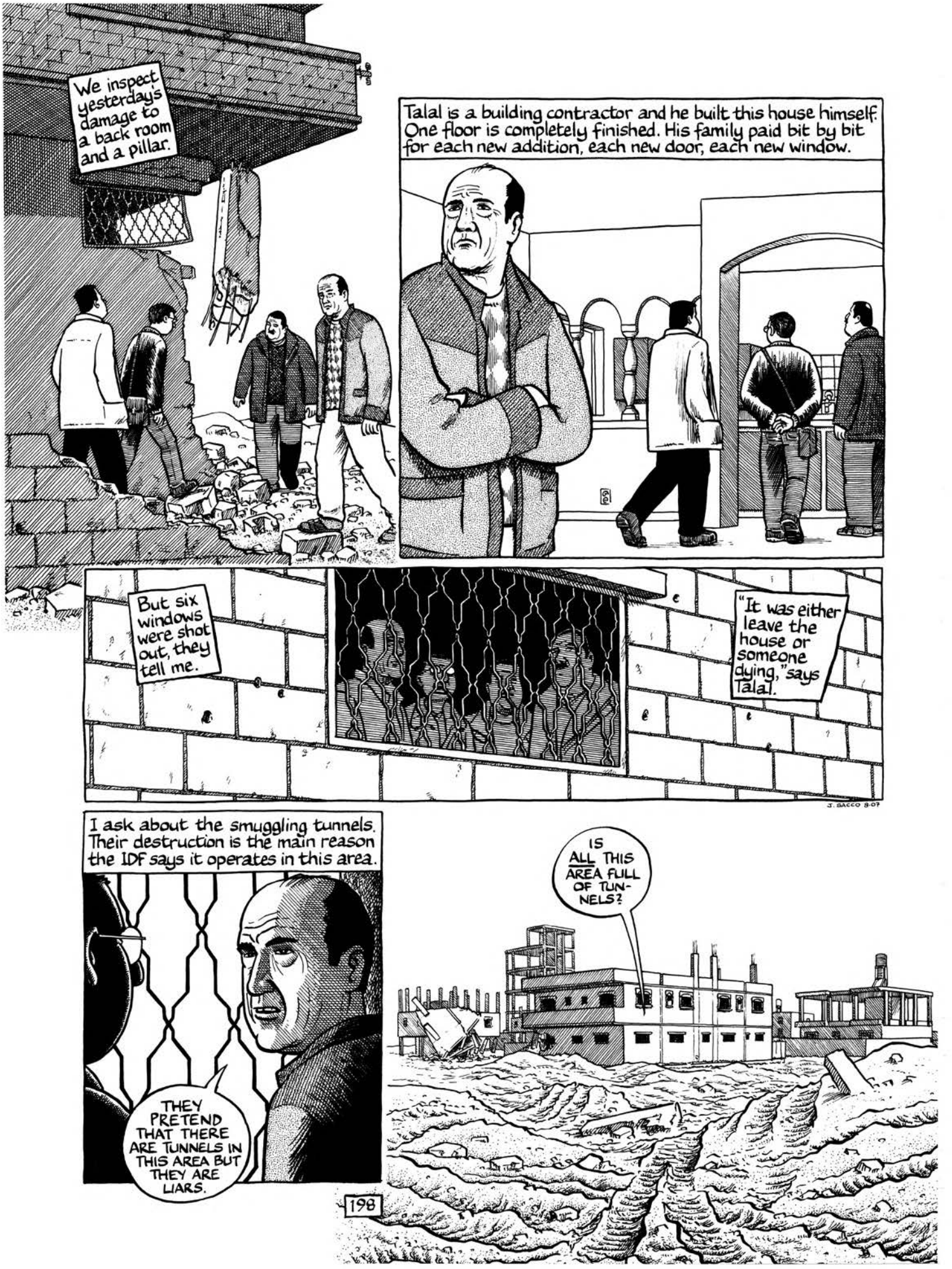

Oh, shit!
Don't look now!
Teen-aged boys headed our way!
Before they can start hassling me I ask them what they think of the internationals.
I DON'T LIKE THEM. THEY'RE NOT MUSLIMS. AND GOD KNOWS IF THEY ARE WITH US OR AGAINST US.
WE ARE INTERN
He asks if I happen to be a Muslim.
NO, I'M NOT A MUSLIM.
THEN YOU'RE GOING TO HELL.
DOES IT MAKE YOU ANGRY THAT I'M NOT A MUSLIM?
He has to think about it.
NO... YOU'RE NOT MY ENEMY.
BUT I'M NOT YOUR FRIEND, RIGHT?
THAT'S RIGHT.
We shake on our accord.
I ask the other boy what he thinks of the internationals.
I'D LIKE TO BE AN INTERNATIONAL.
Good one!
REALLY, THOUGH, I THINK IT'S GOOD THEY'RE AROUND.
J. SACCO 7.07


A couple more boys join our conversation.
They want to know what I'm doing in Rafah so I describe my 1956 research.
WHAT GOOD DOES IT DO?
HE CAME FROM ABROAD. WHAT DOES HE KNOW ABOUT PALESTINE?
One of them motions to the sound of the Israeli vehicles.
WHY DO THEY COME HERE AND DO THIS?
THEY DEMOLISHED MY HOME A MONTH AND A HALF AGO.
WHERE ARE YOU LIVING NOW?
WE RENTED A FLAT. IT'S NOT FAR FROM HERE.
WHY IS OUR COUNTRY LIKE THIS?
BECAUSE WE'RE NOT CLOSE TO GOD
I ask what they think is the best way to resist.
GET CLOSE TO GOD.
WITH BOMBS.
DO YOU LIKE US?
J. SACCO 8-07


ASHRAF
Early the next day we're heading back to the site of the Israeli attack when we're stopped by a shout of recognition.
We've run into one of Abed's long-lost pals.
A loud greeting!
Kisses on this and that cheek!
And bear hugs!
Then Abed endures an ear-bashing.
Why haven't you stayed in touch?
Your behavior is shameful!
You don't know I'm married?
That I have a daughter?
This one's name is Ashraf.
He teaches English in Khan Younis.
Abed explains that we're on our way to check on Munir, the man whose home was damaged yesterday.
MY HOME WAS DAMAGED, TOO.
In fact, it turns out Ashraf's house was the very one we saw being crashed into by the bulldozer.
I'M GOING THERE NOW MYSELF.
I've seen this scenario repeated half a dozen times in Rafah, where Abed, apparently, has lost touch with some old friends.
J. SACCO 8-03
195


Abed and Ashraf do some catching up on our way to Munir's.
Munir invites us in.
We greet his mother.
THE SONS OF DOGS.
THEY'VE DESTROYED IT.
Well, not quite. The master bedroom has taken some large caliber rounds, and the bathroom wall has been cracked open by the bulldozer.
Most of the damage is around back where rubble from previously destroyed houses has been pushed against and broken the wall.
J. SACCO 8-09
Munir says he's been hanging on to his house despite the constant Israeli operations.
His family has been sleeping in the rooms which don't face the Philadelphi Route to put some walls between them and Israeli gunfire.
A neighbor encourages him to continue holding out.
But for Munir this is the end of the line.
I'LL LOOK FOR A NEW HOME AND RENT.
I'VE BEEN UNEMPLOYED A LONG TIME.
I'LL GET LOANS TILL UNRWA PROVIDES ME WITH FUNDS.
WE'LL MOVE THE FURNITURE OUT AND LEAVE IT WITH OUR NEIGHBORS.
196


THERE USED TO BE 20 HOUSES IN THIS AREA.
I tell Munir I want to follow his "story."
I SUGGEST YOU GET A TENT AND LIVE NEXT TO ME.
But I won't follow Munir's story. Soon I'm swamped by stories like his and Ashraf's.
We walk over to Ashraf's place a little further down.
Whatever dwellings stood between his house and the Philadelphi Route have been returned to the sand.
Israeli bullets started striking the house soon after the intifada began, Ashraf says. He and his wife left and rented in Block J. The rest of the family eventually followed.
BUT MY FATHER COMES HERE EVERY DAY.
We meet his father, Talal, at the side entrance. His sons are coming and going, removing light fixtures and flourescent lamps.
J. SACCO 8-07


We inspect yesterdays damage to a back room and a pillar.
Talal is a building contractor and he built this house himself. One floor is completely finished. His family paid bit by bit for each new addition, each new door, each new window.
But six windows were shot out, they tell me.
"It was either leave the house or someone dying," says Talal.
J. SACCO 8-07
I ask about the smuggling tunnels. Their destruction is the main reason the IDF says it operates in this area.
THEY PRETEND THAT THERE ARE TUNNELS IN THIS AREA BUT THEY ARE LIARS.
IS ALL THIS AREA FULL OF TUNNELS?
198

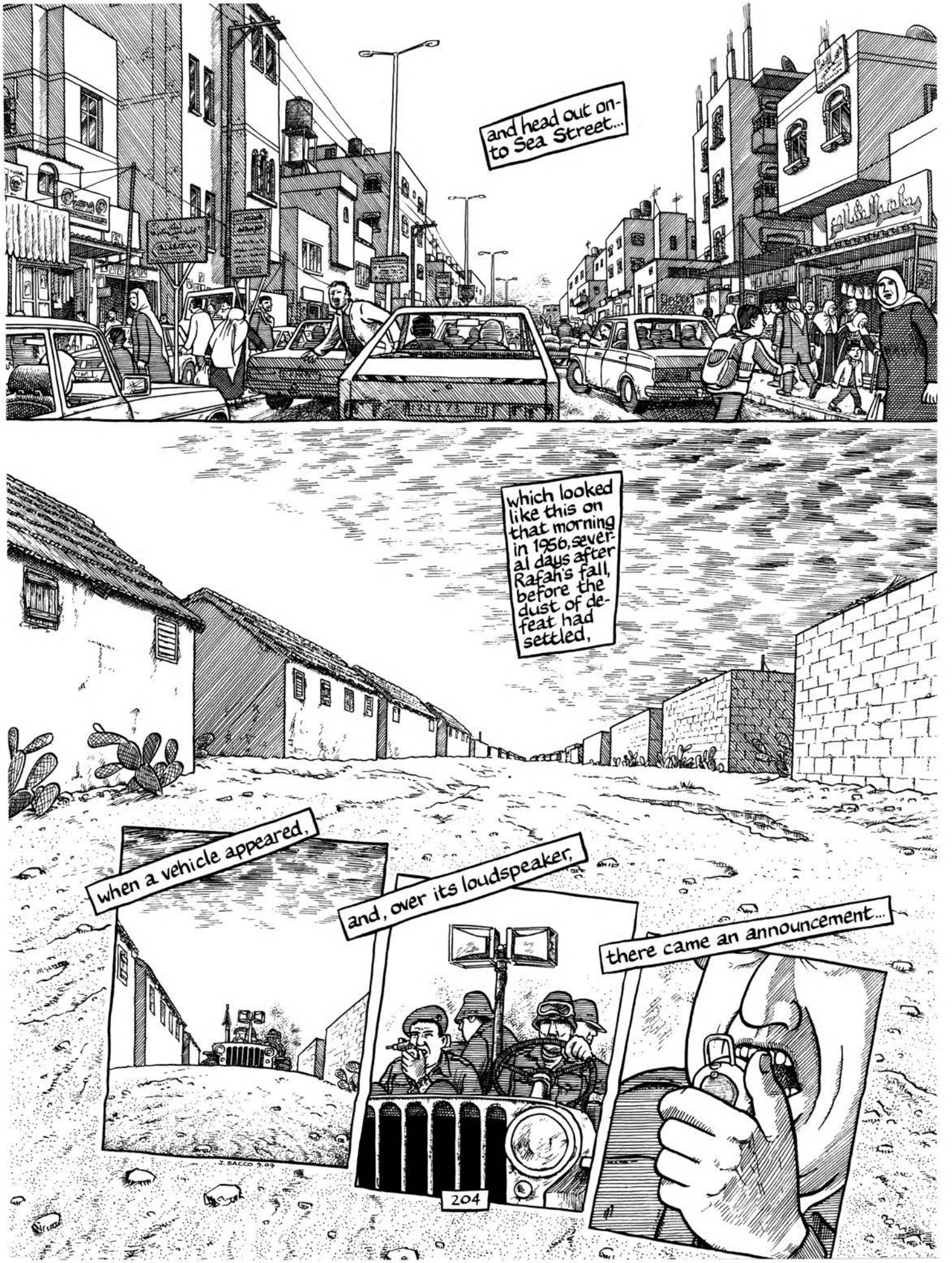

I ask about the militants I saw yesterday. Do they think their actions are effective resistance against the bulldozers.
THOSE GUNMEN HAVE DESTROYED EVERYTHING.
THEY'RE USELESS.
THE JEWS USE THEM AS A PRETEXT TO DEMOLISH THE HOUSES.
Yesterday, Talal says, he had a long argument with some militants before they moved away from his home.
I ask if they intend to repair the pillar.
THIS HOUSE IS GOING TO BE DEMOLISHED.
THE WHOLE AREA!
Ashraf gives us a short tour of the unfinished rooms that make up the second floor.
THIS WAS GOING TO BE MY FLAT WITH MY WIFE AND CHILD.
MAYBE IN PARADISE I'LL GET A GOOD FLAT.
As we leave, two young men negotiate a bed frame out the door.
J. SACCO 8.04
Yesterday was the first time Ashraf's house and Munir's were hit by a bulldozer.
Both houses received minor damage, essentially a grazing.
But perhaps this was a message from the IDF.
A warning.
A way of saying, it's time to take out everything you can.
199


TIME MANAGE-MENT
Every week or so, Abed and I stop by the neighborhood confectionary to stock up on pastries, especially the honey-drenched variety that so well compliment our morning-noon-and-night coffee fixes.
The kid behind the counter has seen me in here a bunch of times. Finally, he asks what's up?
Abed, good fellow, explains my '56 project once again.
The kid is not impressed.
FORGET THE PAST. WHAT ABOUT NOW?
"One day," I tell him, "50 years from now, they'll forget about you, too."
But that's the way it goes: The young ones don't want to hear about '56; and the old ones—
— as witnesses, the old ones are not always very professional.
THE JEWS ENTERED BUREIJ...
This woman, for example, can't keep anything straight.
J SACCO 8.07
She tells us about Egyptian soldiers killed in the schoolyard, but her daughter-in-law interjects.
SHE'S TALKING ABOUT 1967.
THE EGYPTIAN ARMY CAME TO DEFEND PALESTINE.
Her grandson tries to keep her focused.
WE'RE TALKING ABOUT '56.
AFTER THEY KILLED THEM THEY LEFT THEM.
Her tower of memories has collapsed. She gropes around to offer us a piece of her rubble.
HE WAS SHOT IN THE HEAD.
Hunh?


But she's referring to one of her sons, killed during an Israeli raid in 1954.
I SAID, 'FOR GOD'S SAKE LET ME SEE HIM.'
THEY REFUSED TO LET ME SEE MY SON.
HE USED TO ASK ME, 'WHAT DO YOU NEED MOTHER?
'SHALL I BRING YOU FISH?'
If other old-timers are sharper, they might have just as little to offer. We're often referred to this one or that one,
but this one wasn't even in Rafah during the period in question...
and that one was hiding in the dunes and didn't see a thing.
J SACCO 8 01
Eventually, worn out by fruitless chases to Rafah's far corners, Abed and I screen potential subjects whenever possible.
YES, COME IN, COME IN...
Nothing doing!
Before someone puts the kettle on and we're trapped for another half hour, we require a quickie synopsis of your story here at the threshold.
201


But often enough we enter a small room or a family diwan, and after Abed truncates the pleasantries, we get right to the point.
We want to talk to you about a certain day in 1956 that you here call The Day of the School.
Can you tell us what happened?
IT'S VERY HARD TO TALK ABOUT.
J. SACCO 9.04
OKAY, I'LL TELL YOU.
He tells us, and we come away smiling.


At home Abed and I drink coffee and eat those honey-drenched pastries while we go over the interviews.
How did this last story compare with Number 19's?
Number 20's?
Speaking of Number 20 — and, by the way, I've numbered all the interviewees because I can hardly keep anyone's name straight — what did you think of his story?
ABOUT HIS FRIENDS BEING KILLED?
The more we hear, the more we fill in our picture of that day in '56, the more critical we become of each tale we hear.
I THINK HE'S EXAGGERATING.
Abed is getting as sucked into this as I am.
We light up another Cleopatra, and perhaps I mark more details on the chart.
I enter name...
residence...
and then I jot down brief notes into columns labelled "announcement"...
"moving to the school"...
"entrance"...
"waiting"...
"screening"...
etc.
Abed and I are running a very organized investigation over here, and we've broken down the main event into its component parts.
The chart allows us to make quick comparisons between the testimony of each witness.
J. SACCO 9-09
And so,
once again,
refreshed and recharged,
we don our shoes,
walk downstairs,


and head out onto Sea Street...
which looked like this on that morning in 1956, several days after Rafah's fall, before the dust of defeat had settled,
when a vehicle appeared,
and, over its loudspeaker,
there came an announcement...
J. SACCO 9.93
204

"It was an unforgettable day."

"November 12, 1956."

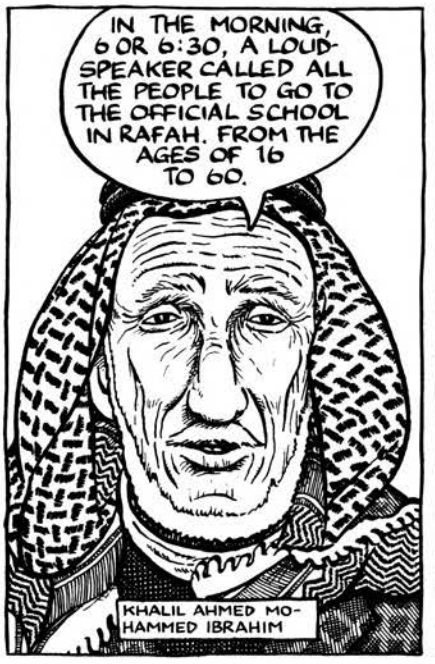
"It is written in my brain."

"It was a Monday...

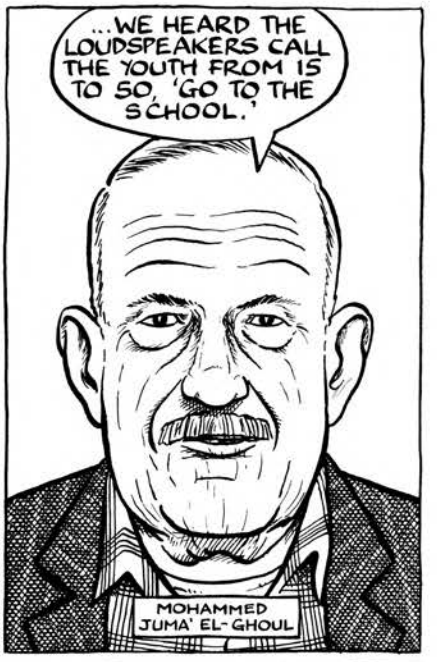
"The Jews called through the loudspeaker for men between 15 and 60 to go to the school."

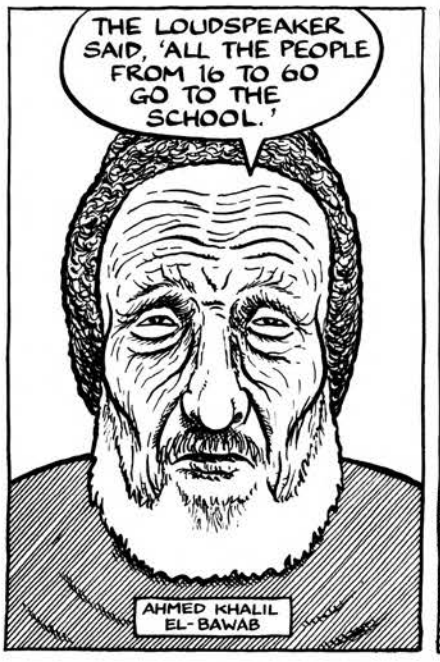
AWADALLAH AHMED AWADALLAH

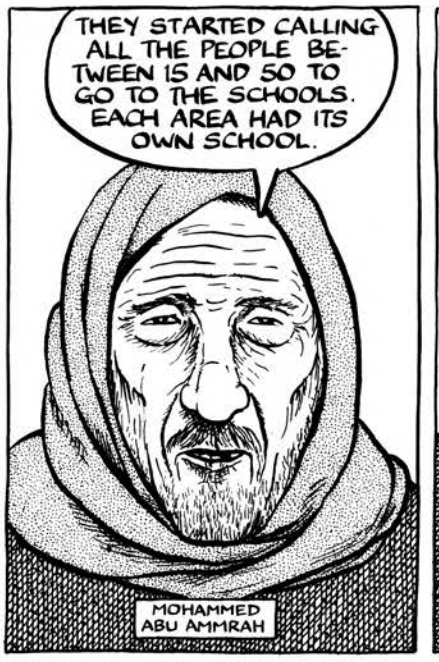
ANNOUNCEMENT

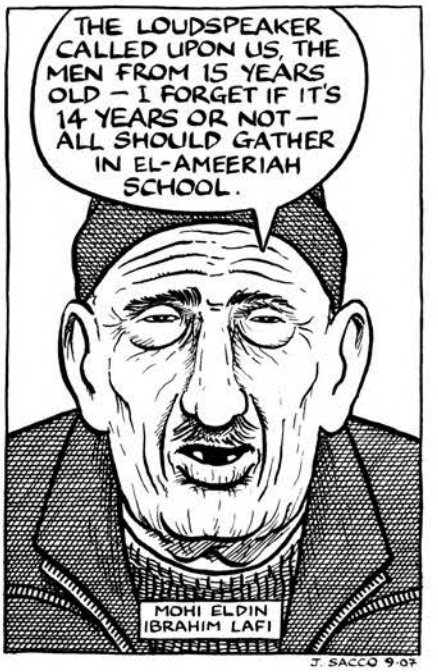




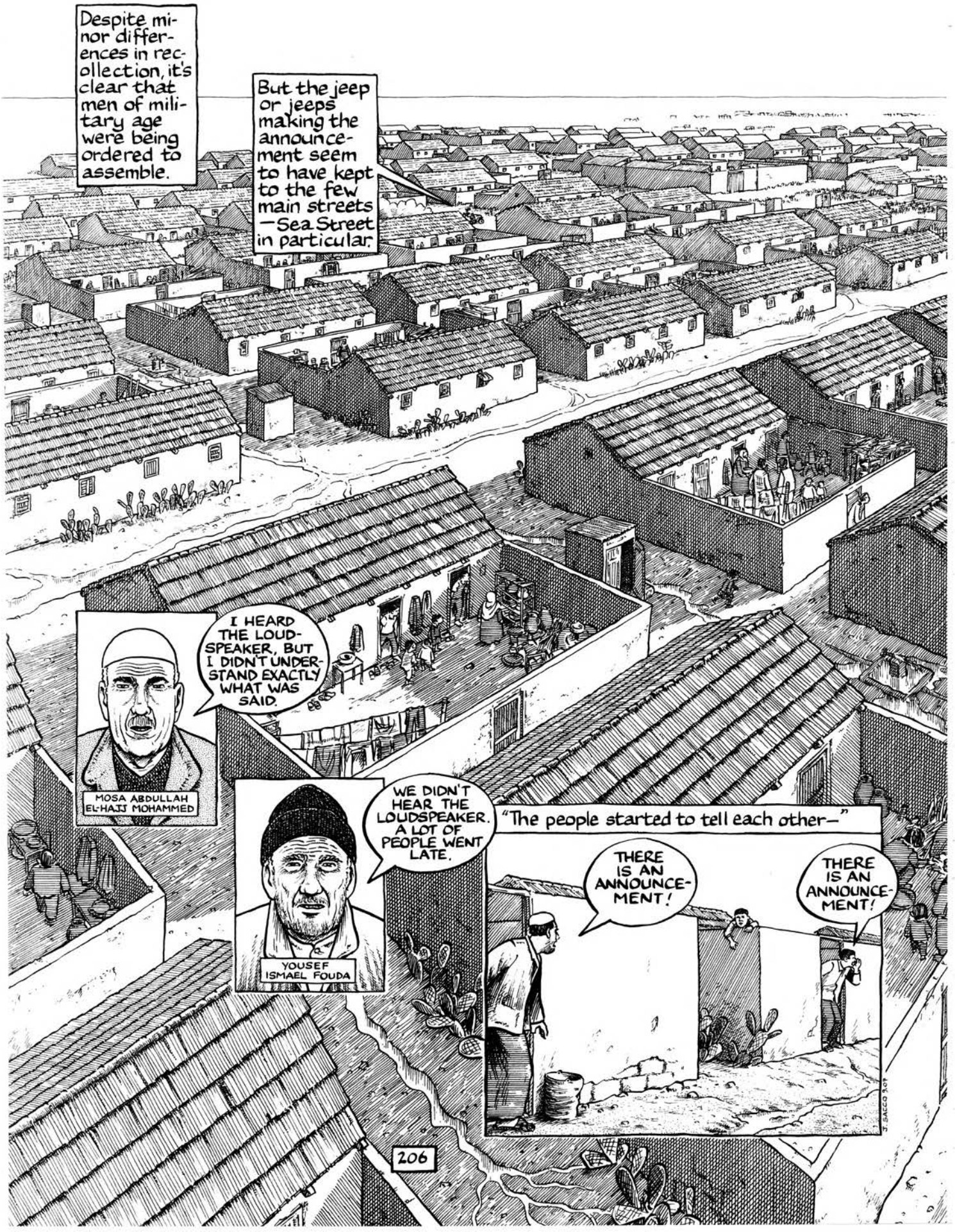








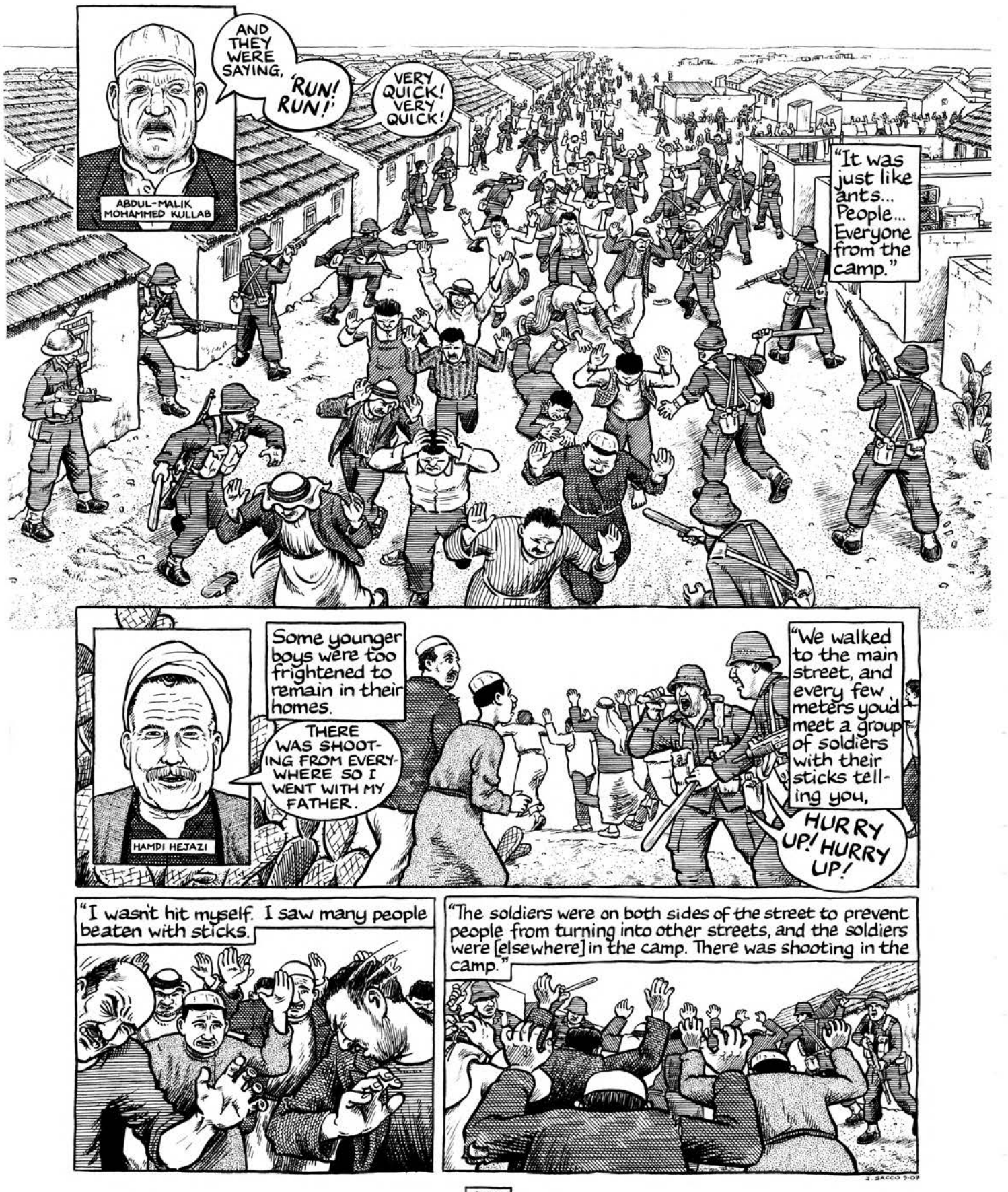
J. SACCO 9-07


Despite minor differences in recollection, it's clear that men of military age were being ordered to assemble.
But the jeep or jeeps making the announcement seem to have kept to the few main streets —Sea Street in particular.
I HEARD THE LOUDSPEAKER, BUT I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND EXACTLY WHAT WAS SAID.
MOSA ABDULLAH EL-HAJJ MOHAMMED
WE DIDN'T HEAR THE LOUDSPEAKER. A LOT OF PEOPLE WENT LATE.
YOUSEF ISMAEL FOUDA
"The people started to tell each other—"
THERE IS AN ANNOUNCEMENT!
THERE IS AN ANNOUNCEMENT!
J. SACCO 9.01
206


I WAS IN MY HOME. I HEARD SOMEONE RUNNING.
ZAKI HASSAN EDWAN
WHAT HAPPENED?
THERE'S A LOUDSPEAKER CALLING.
YOU HAVE TO GO TO THE SCHOOL.
IN TEN MINUTES YOU MUST BE THERE.
GHANIM MAHMOUD SHA'AT: "[My cousin] Elabed told me to wait until my brothers came.
...AND WE'LL GO TOGETHER.
"We saw my brothers coming with wood on their backs. People were already walking in the streets.
"Elabed shaved.
"He dressed...
LET'S GO.
"We didn't panic. We didn't know what was going to happen."
J. SACCO 9-07


SEA STREET
Ayesh Abdel-Khalik Younis has been hard to pin down.
First he was away on a hajj, and then he needed several days to receive guests and distribute small gifts as is customary after the pilgrimage to Mecca.
After that he required a few days' rest.
Now, finally, we are sitting in his cold front room, and he is telling us about that November morning.
THE SUN SHINED THAT DAY WITH YELLOW RAYS WHICH DECLARED THE RAYS OF DEATH WERE COMING.
But we're not interested in rhetorical flourishes honed by his years as a mukhtar counseling his clan and resolving disputes.
We want to see those hours through the eyes of the 21-year-old UNRWA teacher he once was.
I WAS WOKEN BY THE VOICE OF MY COUSIN TELLING ME, 'WAKE UP OR THEY'LL KILL YOU!'
J. SACCO 9.01


"I felt it was shameful for me as a teacher to go through the door and into the street in my pajamas.
LEAVE!
THERE ISN'T ANY TIME!
"But I changed my clothes and then went out.
"My house was exactly on Sea Street.
"I found some soldiers in the street. They were shooting, firing from all sides.
"And I started running with all my strength."
WE WALKED TO THE SCHOOL IN A GROUP.
ANONYMOUS 1
"I reached Sea Street, where the fire station is today.
"I was walking normally.
HURRY UP! HURRY UP!
"And he fired at me...
"He told me to raise my hands, and I started to run,
"and the people behind me started to run."
J SACCO 9.07


ABDUL-MALIK MOHAMMED KULLAB
AND THEY WERE SAYING, 'RUN! RUN!'
VERY QUICK! VERY QUICK!
"It was just like ants... People... Everyone from the camp."
HAMDI HEJAZI
Some younger boys were too frightened to remain in their homes.
THERE WAS SHOOTING FROM EVERYWHERE SO I WENT WITH MY FATHER.
"We walked to the main street, and every few meters you'd meet a group of soldiers with their sticks telling you,
HURRY UP! HURRY UP!
"I wasn't hit myself. I saw many people beaten with sticks.
"The soldiers were on both sides of the street to prevent people from turning into other streets, and the soldiers were [elsewhere] in the camp. There was shooting in the camp."
J. SACCO 9-07


Khalil Ahmed Mohammed Ibrahim, a policeman at the time, left for the school dressed in his uniform.
WHEN THEY SAW ME IN MY UNIFORM, THE PEOPLE CAME TO ME AND SURROUNDED ME BECAUSE THEY WERE AFRAID.
"We met the army. They were firing arbitrarily...
WHAT SHOULD WE DO? WHAT SHOULD WE DO?
GOD WILL HELP US.
JUST WALK AND WE WILL SEE.
"One of the Israelis spoke to me in Arabic.
GO BACK AND BRING THOSE PEOPLE WITH YOU!
"I thought when I turned my back he'd shoot me. My left side froze.
COME!
COME!
"The people who had been with me at first kept on walking.
"And now a different group of people walked with me."
J. SACCO '93


MOHAMMED ZIDAN:
"I was with my two uncles and their boys. With some of our neighbors, about 30 people ...We went to the main road... There was heavy firing throughout the town. We felt moving in a group would be safer for us.
"We saw the vehicle with the microphone coming from the eastern side...toward us.
"[A soldier] told us to raise our hands and start running to the school.
"We found a body... on the side of the road...
"His name was Abed Atiyah Sha'at.
"He was about 35 years old.
"And three women came and pulled the body inside a house.
"We stood for awhile thinking to [go] back... And we re-entered the narrow streets of the camp.
"The military vehicle... came back.
"A group of us... went to the jeep and told them that they were shooting people in the street."
WE SAW A BODY IN THE STREET.
SHOOTING, SHOOTING, NEVER MIND.
YOU HAVE TO GO TO THE SCHOOL.
WE ARE GOING TO LOOK FOR MEN INSIDE THE HOUSES, AND IF WE FIND ANYONE, WE WILL KILL HIM.
212
T. SACCO 10.07

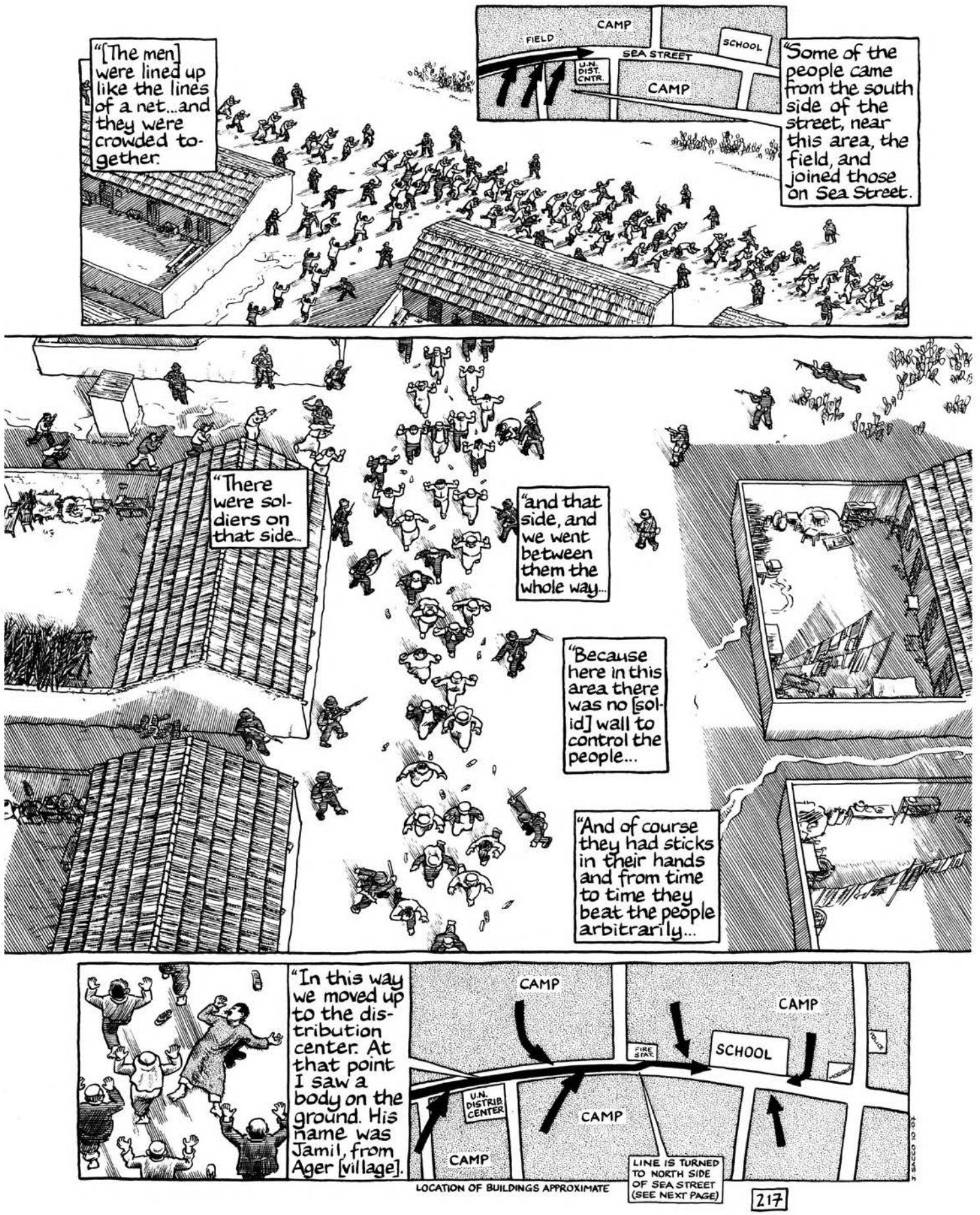

MY UNCLE AND I LEFT THE HOUSE TOGETHER.
ABDEL HADI MOHAMMED LAFI
"I heard the shooting and came back... but my uncle went.
"They shot and killed him. I didn't see it.
"The children and women... convinced me to go to the school...
"I found some of my neighbors and I accompanied them."
MANY SOLDIERS WERE IN THE STREETS AND AT THE CROSSROADS.
ANONYMOUS 2
"I thought it was up to [them] whether they shot or didn't shoot the people...
"I didn't know whether the soldiers had been ordered to do that or whether it was just their mood..."
AHMED KHALIL EL-BAWAB
AND THE SOLDIERS WERE SAYING,
THIS ONE IS FEDAYEE!
THIS ONE IS FEDAYEE!
J. SACCO 10-07


"Abdelghani El-Asmar was shot in front of me...When his son went to him, they shot him, too."
ONE MAN WAS RUNNING IN FRONT OF ME, AND HE WAS SHOT AND WENT DOWN.
ZAKI HASSAN EDWAN
"What could I do?
"I jumped over him."
MY FATHER AND THREE BROTHERS LEFT THE HOUSE.
ANONYMOUS 3
"We were shouting and crying.
"I followed them out, but only for a few minutes.
"The soldiers were shooting into the air.
"The main road ran directly in front of my house. I watched from a hole in the wall by the window.
"The people came down the road one by one with their hands on their heads in a line against the wall. The soldiers on one side, the people on the other.
J. SACCO 10-02

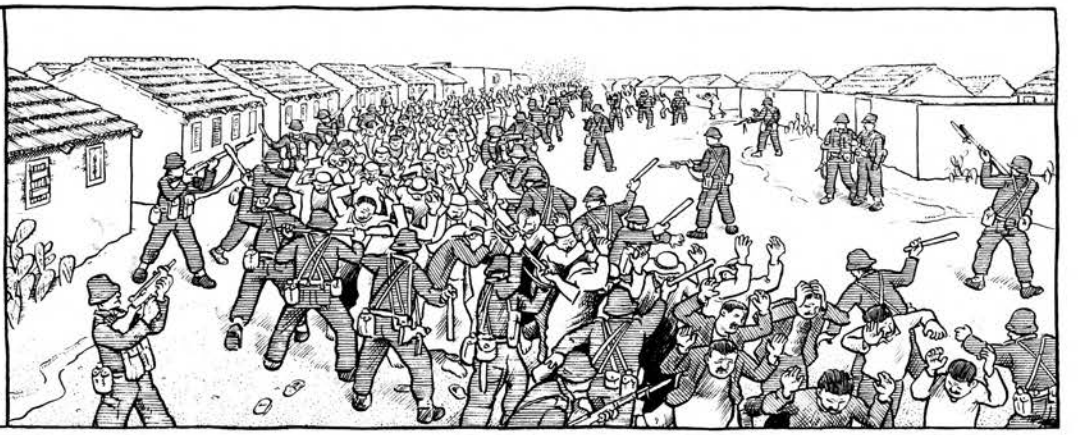

"When someone came out to join the line, the soldiers told him to run, and those that didn't run they shot.
"I saw someone shot. He was running, and his brother was behind him...
"His brother stopped...The people told him to keep moving.
HE'S DEAD!
YOU SHOULD SURVIVE!
"His name was Jamil Swaileh."
J. SACCO 10-07


MOHAMMED ZIDAN: "[T]here were many soldiers. Some of them standing and some of them lying down with their machine guns, shooting at each group that passed in front of them.
215


"Anyone who was injured or shot, the people left him and kept running. I might have seen three or four bodies on this road. And in each group one or two men were killed.
"When I reached the [UNRWA food] distribution center, I saw a funny sight.
"The shoes of the people filled the street..."
We are back with Ayesh Abdel Khalik Younis. His memory is strong and, with the aid of a map, we want his recollection of how Israeli soldiers directed the human traffic coming eastward along Sea Street toward the school.
THE FIRING WAS FROM ALL SIDES. I RAN UNTIL I REACHED THIS POINT-
NEXT TO OUR FLAT. IN THE MIDDLE BEFORE THE CAR PARK.
J. SACCO 13 07
FIELD
CAMP
SCHOOL
SEA STREET
U.N. DIST. CNTR.
CAMP
CAMP
CAMP
MAPS NOT TO SCALE
"And there I saw some soldiers with heavy machine guns, Bren guns, lying on the ground, and from time to time they shot at the people."
DID THEY SEEM TO BE SHOOTING RANDOMLY INTO THE CROWD?
"To be honest, from my point of view, they were shooting just to terrify the people, but afterwards people told me that the killing had sometimes been on purpose.
216


"[The men] were lined up like the lines of a net...and they were crowded together.
CAMP
FIELD
SEA STREET
SCHOOL
U.N. DIST. CNTR.
CAMP
"Some of the people came from the south side of the street, near this area, the field, and joined those on Sea Street.
"There were soldiers on that side...
"and that side, and we went between them the whole way...
"Because here in this area there was no [solid] wall to control the people...
"And of course they had sticks in their hands and from time to time they beat the people arbitrarily...
"In this way we moved up to the distribution center. At that point I saw a body on the ground. His name was Jamil, from Ager [village].
CAMP
CAMP
FIRE STAT.
SCHOOL
U.N. DISTRIB CENTER
CAMP
CAMP
LINE IS TURNED TO NORTH SIDE OF SEA STREET (SEE NEXT PAGE)
J SACCO 10-01
LOCATION OF BUILDINGS APPROXIMATE
217

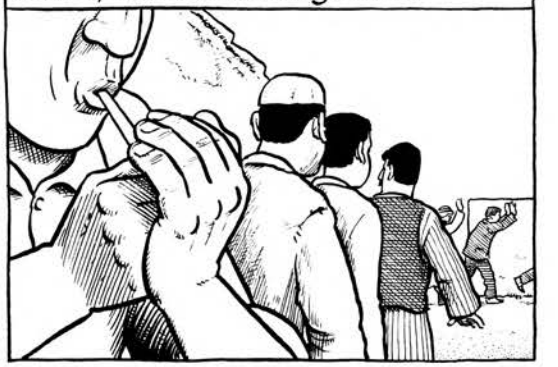
"We moved this way, on the south side of the street, until we reached the [present] fire station... There exactly... we [were] moved from the south side to the north... by pushing and heavy sticks and shooting."



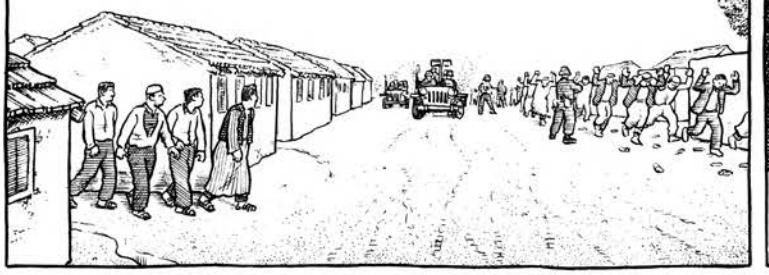
When we last saw Ghanim Mahmoud Sha'at, he was leaving the house with his two brothers and his cousin Elabed.

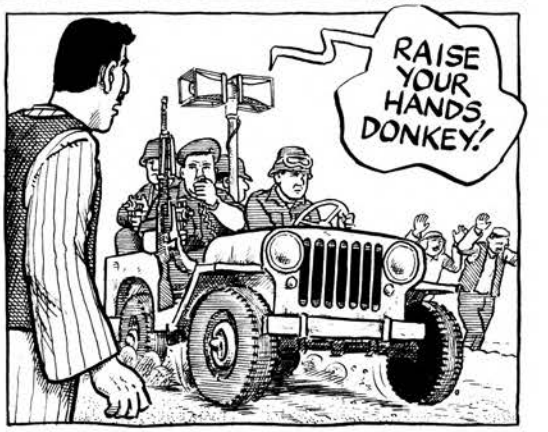
GHANIM MAHMOUD SHA'AT:
"We went through the narrow roads. Elabed was in front, I was in the back.

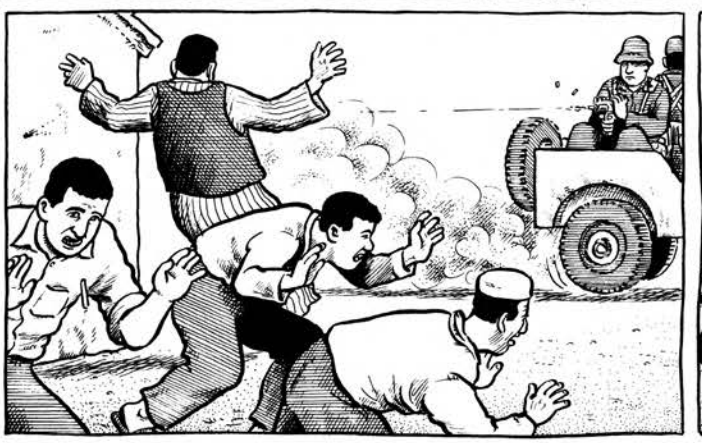
"When we reached the corner of the school, I took out a cigarette.



"Suddenly we saw two jeeps coming...









I SACCO 10-07


"While I was sitting with him, the jeeps were coming back.
"A woman came out of a house and pulled me from behind and shut the door.
"When the jeeps had gone, she brought a blanket and, with another woman, we carried the body... and returned to the camp.
"We brought the martyr back to his house. Elabed's father asked,
WHAT'S THIS?
WHAT ARE YOU CARRYING?
"He started screaming and shouting.
"The old men told me to go to the school."
SAVE YOUR LIFE. WE DON'T WANT TO LOSE TWO PEOPLE.
NO. I WILL NOT GO.
THE SOLDIERS HAVE ENTERED THE CAMP!
The old men escorted Ghanim to his own house, which he found full of female relatives and neighbors.
"I washed my hands and my face and lay down.
"And I left the outside door open."
J. SACCO 10-07


Mohammed Atwa El-Najeeli is a jocular man, well known in Rafah for his incredible story.
I FOUND A GROUP OF SEVEN OR EIGHT PEOPLE FROM THE MASAMHA FAMILY...
I JOINED THEM.
"We walked up to Sea Street, with our hands raised, toward the school...
"I saw one of my neighbors. Swaireh the barber.
"He'd just been shot by the Israelis.
J. SACCO 10 04
"And we were walking in front of the distribution center... There were soldiers standing in the streets...
220

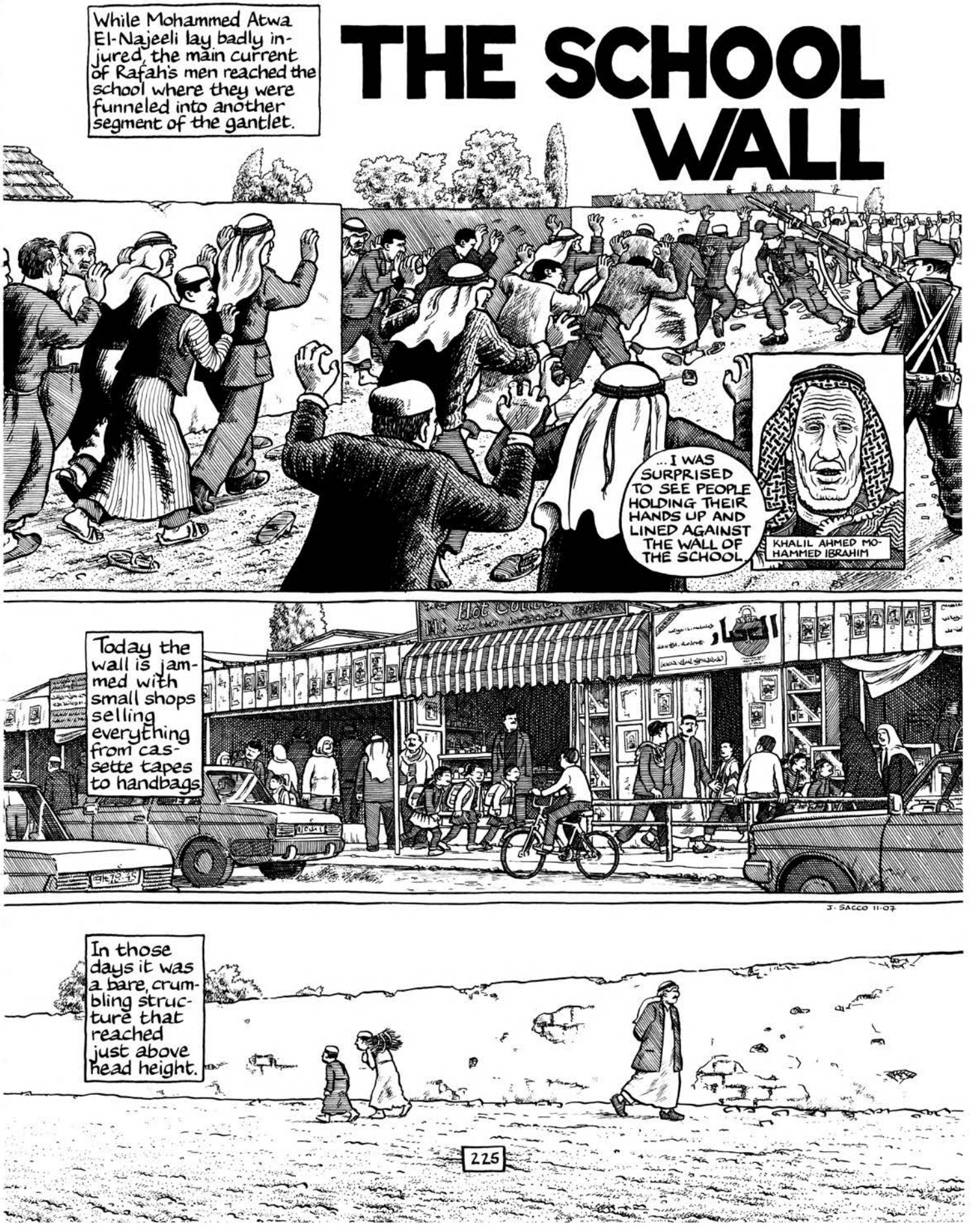

"When [one of them] noticed that there were young men in our group,
he started shooting.
"He started shooting us,
"all of us.
"Now we are on the ground and people are coming from behind, walking on our bodies.
"Now I feel that I am going to die.
J. SACCO 11-09

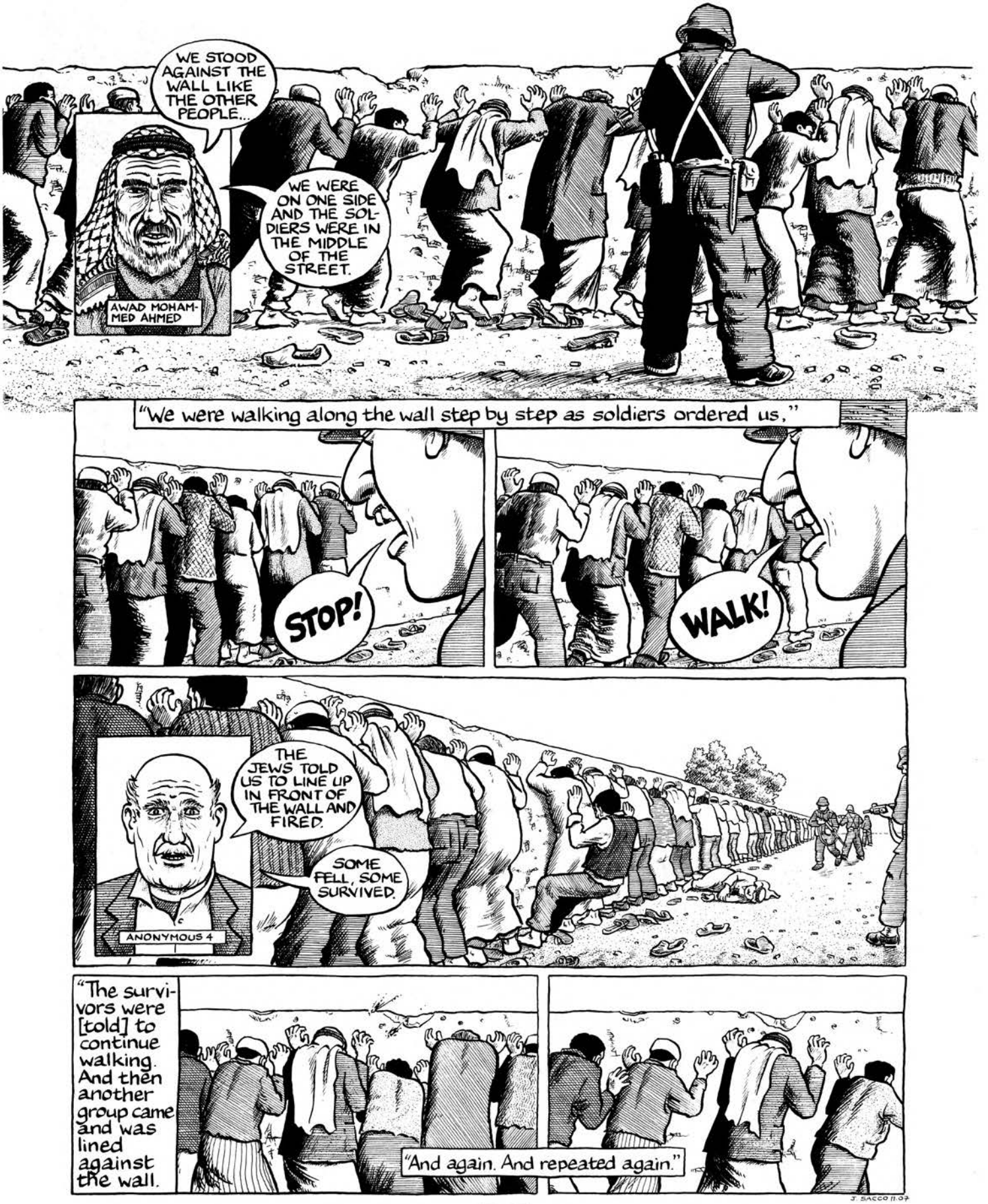

"I tried to pinch a person also lying on the ground, but got no response.
"The one behind me, the same. Nothing.
"All of them dead. I am alive. Only one bullet.
"But all the people walking on my neck!"
I WAS WEARING GOOD CLOTHES AND LOOKED GOOD.
AT THAT TIME I DIDN'T DESERVE TO BE SHOT.
BUT NOW I DESERVE IT.
"I took off my... hatta and told the soldier:
COME HERE AND SHOOT ME.
"He didn't come.
"For the second time I asked him...
COME HERE.
COME HERE.
COME AND SHOOT ME.
I AM STILL ALIVE.
"He prepared his gun, put in a full clip,
"and came towards me...
"He stood over my body."
THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD.
J. SACCO 11-07


AND HE SHOT 36 BULLETS IN MY HEAD...
THIRTY-SIX.
IN YOUR HEAD?
A FULL CLIP.
THIRTY-SIX BULLETS IN MY HEAD.
HE WAS A BAD SOLDIER.
HE WASN'T PROFESSIONAL.
IF I WAS HIS INSTRUCTOR, I'D DISMISS HIM.
"I turned on my back.
"My eyes, my mouth, my head were full of blood.
J. SACCO 11-01
"The Jews asked the people to take us aside to clear the street.
"They dragged me from my legs, and my head was bumping on the ground.
223

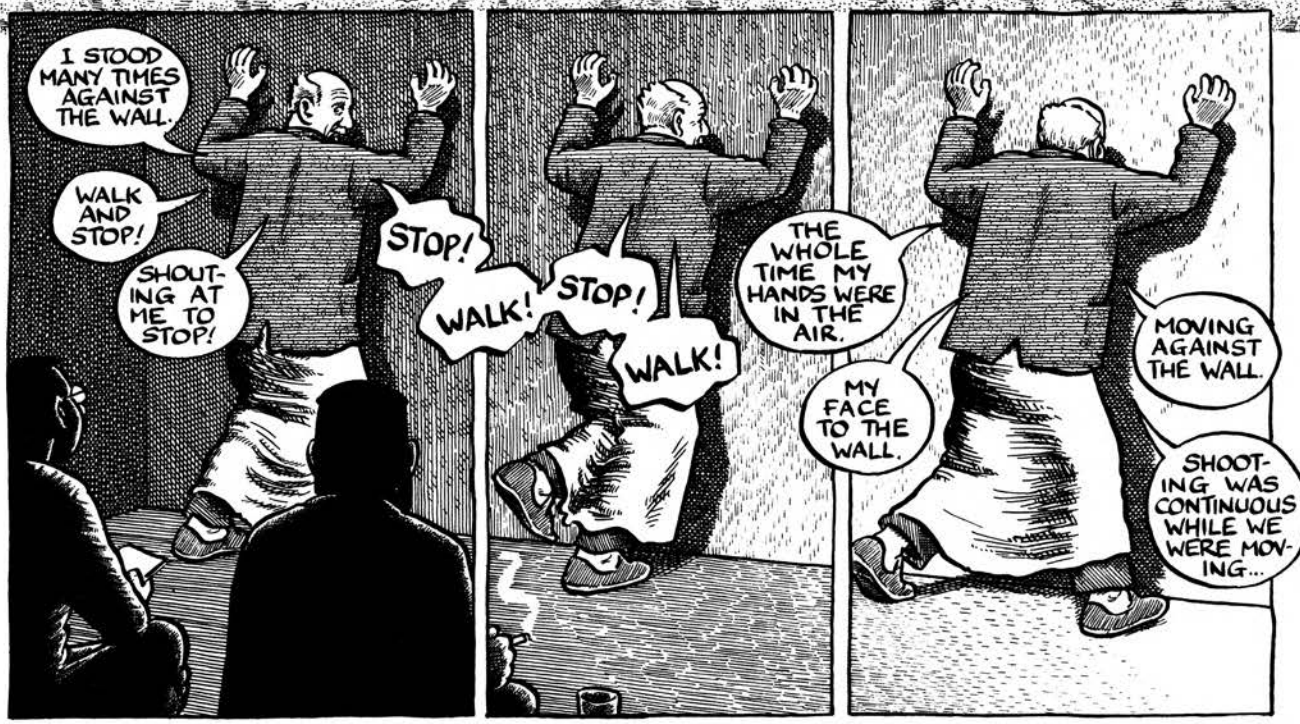

"I could feel them... searching through my clothes to find my identification—"
—AND IF THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE, MAYBE TO TAKE IT.
"The blood poured from every part of my body.
"I sank in the blood."
FROM 1956 UP TO NOW, I'M SUFFERING.
THE OLDER I GET, THE MORE PAINFUL IT GETS.
Back at our place, I can't get my head around the improbability of surviving 36 bullets shot at pointblank range.
Still...
HANI GOT SHOT SEVEN TIMES BY A GUN RIGHT UP AGAINST HIS BODY. I'VE SEEN THE SCARS.
THERE'S A GUY IN KHAN YOUNIS WHO WAS SHOT 42 TIMES IN HIS STOMACH. HE CARRIED HIS INTESTINES TO THE HOSPITAL.
IT'S A WELL-KNOWN STORY.
But I'm very skeptical that Mohammed could have survived so many bullets to the head. And how would he know how many had been fired? Automatic fire is too rapid to count, especially, I bet, while being shot.
Exaggeration or not, I don't doubt he was hit by bullets.
Just before we left him, he insisted I finger one or two of the indentations made in his skull.
J. SACCO 11-07

THE SCHOOL WALL

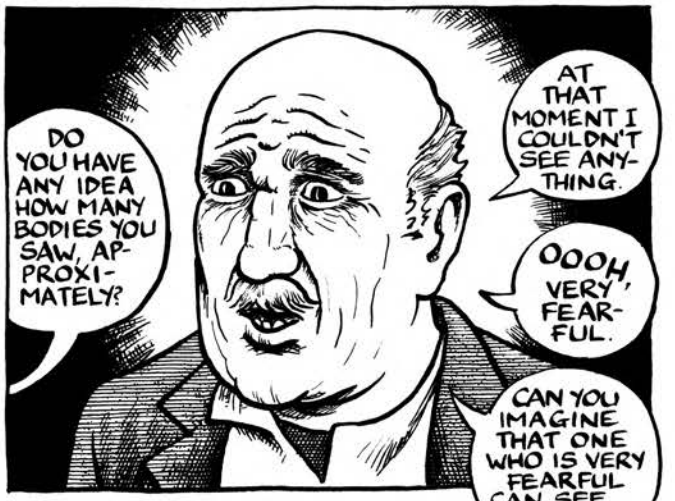



WE STOOD AGAINST THE WALL LIKE THE OTHER PEOPLE...
AWAD MOHAMMED AHMED
WE WERE ON ONE SIDE AND THE SOLDIERS WERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET.
"We were walking along the wall step by step as soldiers ordered us,"
STOP!
WALK!
ANONYMOUS 4
THE JEWS TOLD US TO LINE UP IN FRONT OF THE WALL AND FIRED.
SOME FELL, SOME SURVIVED.
"The survivors were [told] to continue walking. And then another group came and was lined against the wall.
"And again. And repeated again."
J. SACCO 11.07




I STOOD MANY TIMES AGAINST THE WALL.
WALK AND STOP!
SHOUTING AT ME TO STOP!
STOP!
WALK!
STOP!
WALK!
THE WHOLE TIME MY HANDS WERE IN THE AIR.
MY FACE TO THE WALL.
MOVING AGAINST THE WALL.
SHOOTING WAS CONTINUOUS WHILE WE WERE MOVING...


"There were many bodies on the ground, and we were walking over the bodies..."


DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MANY BODIES YOU SAW, APPROXIMATELY?
AT THAT MOMENT I COULDN'T SEE ANYTHING.
OOOH, VERY FEARFUL.
CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT ONE WHO IS VERY FEARFUL CAN SEE ANYTHING?

J. SACCO 11.09


MOHAMMED ZIDAN:
"And they started shooting, sometimes over our heads and sometimes at our feet.
"A colleague of mine, his name was Ahmed El-Abed, the bottom of his ear was shot while he was standing at the wall...
"I saw the blood running from his ear...
J.SACCO 11-04
"They were stopping us... shooting arbitrarily at the people, and then telling us to enter the school – and then they received another group.
"When the soldiers finished shooting at the people, they told us,"
RUN NOW!
RUN!
228


ZAKI HASSAN EDWAN
WHEN WE CAME NEAR THE SCHOOL IT BEGAN TO GET CROWDED BECAUSE THE PEOPLE WERE ENTERING THE SCHOOL ONE BY ONE.
"Where could we go? Fly away? Jump over the wall?
"We didn't know where to go...
"I wish the wall had collapsed so I could have gone in."
KHALIL AHMED MOHAMMED IBRAHIM
IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT TO WALK BECAUSE THERE WERE SO MANY SHOES. ALL THE PEOPLE LEFT THEIR SHOES ON THE GROUND.
BEFORE I REACHED THE SCHOOL GATE, TEN METERS MAYBE, A MILITARY JEEP CAME.
LET THEM ENTER THE SCHOOL.
J. SACCO 11-07


[MY BROTHER-IN-LAW] SALEH HASSAN AWAJA — THE SOLDIERS TOLD HIM TO STOP AND TO STAND AGAINST THE WALL, AND TWO OR THREE SOLDIERS BEAT HIM WITH THEIR GUNS.
AHMED KHALIL EL-BAWAB
I WAS STANDING NEAR HIM, AS CLOSE AS THIS CHILD.
THEY WERE STOPPING HUGE GROUPS OF PEOPLE AT THE GATE OF THE SCHOOL, AND THEN THEY'D OPEN UP THE BARBED WIRE AND LET THEM IN.
WE HEARD SHOUTING TO STOP US, BUT WE WENT INTO THE SCHOOL.
ABDELWAHAB MAHMOUD ABDELWAHAB EL-ASMAR
230

THE SCHOOL GATE

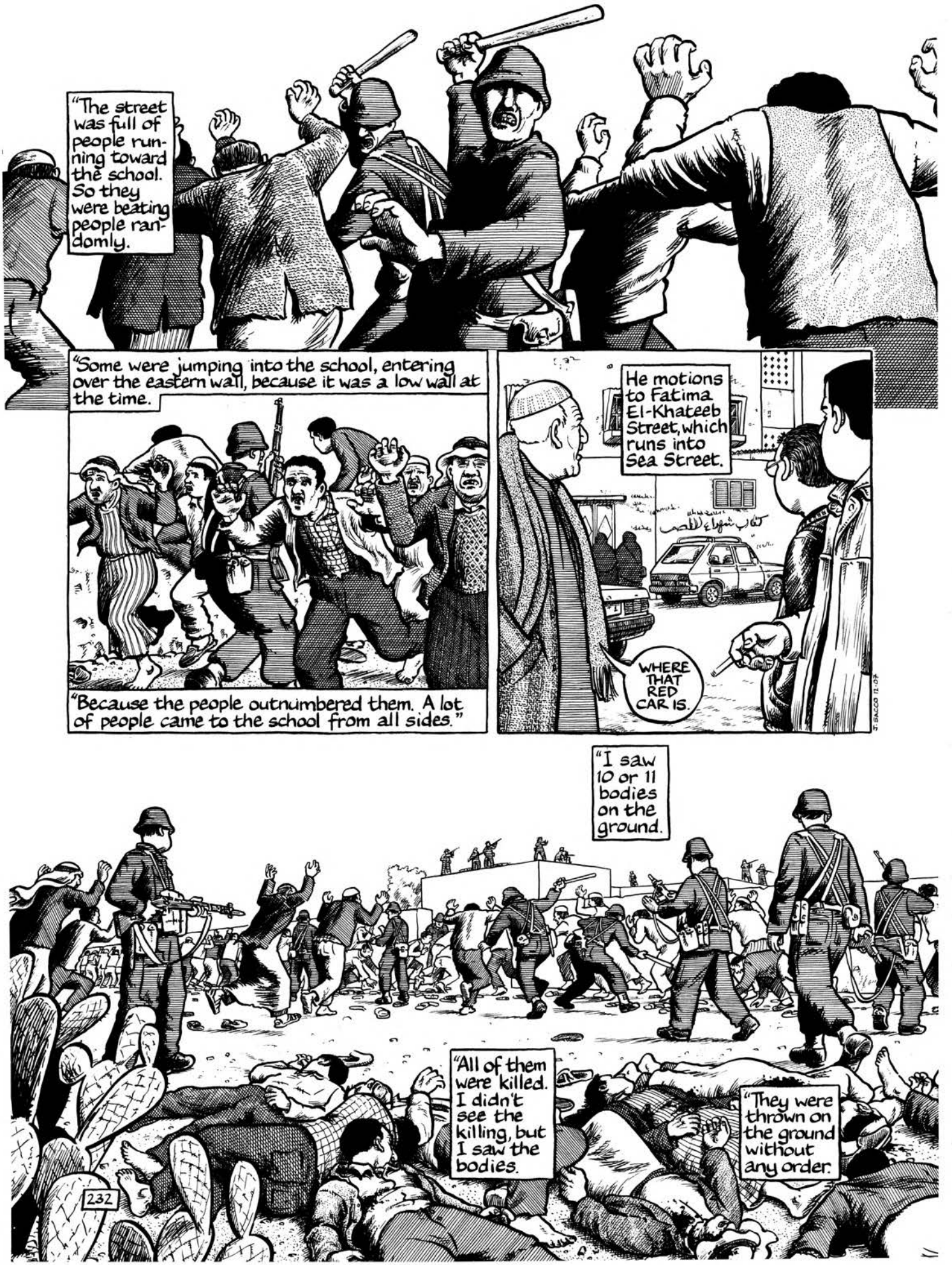








J. SACCO 12·07


"The street was full of people running toward the school. So they were beating people randomly.
"Some were jumping into the school, entering over the eastern wall, because it was a low wall at the time.
"Because the people outnumbered them. A lot of people came to the school from all sides."
He motions to Fatima El-Khateeb Street, which runs into Sea Street.
WHERE THAT RED CAR IS.
J SACCO 12-07
"I saw 10 or 11 bodies on the ground.
"All of them were killed. I didn't see the killing, but I saw the bodies.
"They were thrown on the ground without any order.
232


"None of the people cared about the others... The only goal was to enter the school.
"I saw many people falling on the ground...
"They were falling on each other.
"The entrance was very small and many people were crowded in this entrance."
He tells us the gate was corrugated zinc back then, not the sturdy iron door we see today.
He says when the men of Rafah reached the school gate, they found a ditch and barbed wire obstructing their path.
J. SACCO 12-07


And here we come to a part of the story that remains burned into even the most age-dulled minds.
Though some of the men don't remember the barbed wire and others don't remember the ditch, almost to a man they remember something else at the school entrance—
the soldiers with the heavy sticks.
I WAS BEATEN AT THE GATE.
AND STILL I HAVE THE MARK ON MY HEAD.
"The blood was flowing from my head. Blood was flowing from other people also.
"I jumped over the barbed wire...
" and went to the people and sat with them."
J. SACCO 12-07


THEY BEAT ME ON MY HEAD.
MY HEAD OPENED.
SOMETIMES IT GIVES ME PAIN UP TO NOW.
UP TO NOW.
ISMAEL ABDULLAH FARAHAT
"In front of me there was barbed wire.
"It helped that I was young, active, and strong,
"and could jump over the barbed wire."
THERE WAS A SOLDIER INSIDE...WITH A HEAVY STICK.
WHEN YOU WENT IN YOU COULDN'T SEE THIS SOLDIER.
MOSA ABDULLAH EL-HAJJ MOHAMMED
"Now the three of us are entering the school.
"The soldier hit the first one on his head.
"The second one escaped."
NOW IT'S MY TURN.
I MADE LIKE THIS.
"And I jumped over the ditch."
J. SACCO 12-07


AT THE SCHOOL THERE WAS BARBED WIRE AND A HOLE IN THE GROUND.
AYESH ABDEL-KHALIK YOUNIS
"One had to enter the school quickly, and if he fell in that hole, he'd be killed...
"I kept my body close to the wall. So I was free to move, not like the other people.
"When I got to the gate, I just broke away and went through."
J. SACCO 12-07


ONE SOLDIER WAS HOLDING A STICK AND BEATING EVERYONE WHO ENTERED.
A BIG STICK.
ANONYMOUS 4
"One by one.
"One by one.
"I was one of those people who was hit with the stick."
THEN I REACHED THE SCHOOL GATE.
ZAKI HASSAN EDWAN
"There was barbed wire on both sides and we had to enter through the barbed wire.
"Two soldiers with heavy sticks, big hammers, beat everyone who entered...
"The one in front of me, he hit him in the head, and his blood spilt all over his body.
"When I saw that, I don't know how I managed to jump."
ANONYMOUS 2
SOLDIERS WERE STANDING WITH STICKS IN THEIR HANDS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE GATE, BIG STICKS.
"Hitting us on our heads,
"on our faces,
"on our legs,
"on our arms."
J. SACCO 12.09


TWO SOLDIERS CARRYING STICKS WERE AT THE ENTRANCE, AND THEY HIT EVERYONE WHO WENT IN.
AHMED KHALIL EL-BAWAB
I SAW TWO ISRAELIS ... THEY HAD BIG STICKS, AND EVERYONE WHO WENT IN, THEY HIT.
SOME PEOPLE FELL DOWN. SOME PEOPLE THEY MISSED.
MOHAMMED JUMA EL-GHOUL
WHEN WE REACHED THE SCHOOL, THEY HAD A TRENCH AT THE GATE ... THEY WERE BEATING PEOPLE WITH HEAVY STICKS AND MAKING THEM JUMP OVER IT.
I WASN'T HIT.
MOHAMMED HASHIM IBRAHIM ABU TALIB
TWO SOLDIERS HERE,
AND TWO SOLDIERS THERE,
EL-SAYED ABDEL HAMID ABU TAHA
AND EVERYONE WHO ENTERED WAS BEATEN ON THE HEAD WITH A STICK.
THIS I REMEMBER WELL: THREE OR FOUR ISRAELI SOLDIERS WITH HEAVY STICKS OF ABOUT 1½ TO TWO METERS IN THEIR HANDS.
MOHAMMED HASSAN MOHAMMED
I WASN'T HIT. I WAS LIGHT AND SPORTY — OR YOU COULD SAY IT WAS LUCK.
J. SACCO 1-08
I WAS BEATEN BY ONE OF THE SOLDIERS STANDING AT THE SCHOOL GATE WITH HIS STICK — [ON] MY SHOULDERS AND ALL OVER MY BODY.
ABDEL HADI MOHAMMED LAFI
I MANAGED TO ENTER WITHOUT BEING BEATEN.
IBRAHIM SAKER


The policeman Khalil Ahmed Mohammed Ibrahim was nearing the school entrance when he was joined by a colleague.
HE WAS A POLICEMAN [TOO], BUT HE WASN'T WEARING HIS UNIFORM.
THE DISTANCE BETWEEN ME AND THE SCHOOL GATE — ABOUT FOUR OR FIVE METERS...
WHEN I GOT TO THE GATE I LOOKED TO THE RIGHT...AND SAW TWO BODIES, TWO MEN WHO HAD BEEN KILLED.
"Up Fatima El-Khateeb Street, about 15 meters away. I thought they might be friends because...I had friends in that area."
WHEN I SAW THOSE BODIES, I DIDN'T KNOW HOW I KEPT ON WALKING.
I FORGOT MYSELF.
NOW I AM WALKING WITH MY POLICEMAN FRIEND.
I HAVE TO GO INTO THE SCHOOL.
J. SACCO 1-08


"There is a soldier, a short soldier, about a meter and a half tall, who has a heavy stick.
"And now I'm going toward him."
I'M JUST WALKING.
I HAD LOST MY MIND...
THE STICK THE SOLDIER WAS HOLDING WAS IRON.
WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
DO YOU WANT TO BE KILLED?
COME HERE!
AND HE PULLED ME AND TOOK ME AWAY.
AND THEN I WOKE UP.
J. SACCO 1-08
"And we kept walking, and my friend seemed to be guiding me because I still didn't know where we could go.
"We just kept walking,
"kept walking.
240

"When we reached the [police] station they took us to...a room nearby... They put us inside and locked the door and put a guard on us.

"And every few minutes...he fired just to panic us.

"Just to let us know he was there."

Their intimidation notwithstanding, the Israeli army considered local policemen as assets. Their cooperation would soon be enlisted to help consolidate the occupation of Gaza.

AT THE [SCHOOL] GATE THERE WAS A HUGE [NUMBER] OF SHOES.

MOSA AHMED EL-QEESI

"Whoever arrived thought everyone was supposed to take off his shoes...

"While they were taking off their shoes, they were getting beaten."

I TOOK OFF MY SHOES.

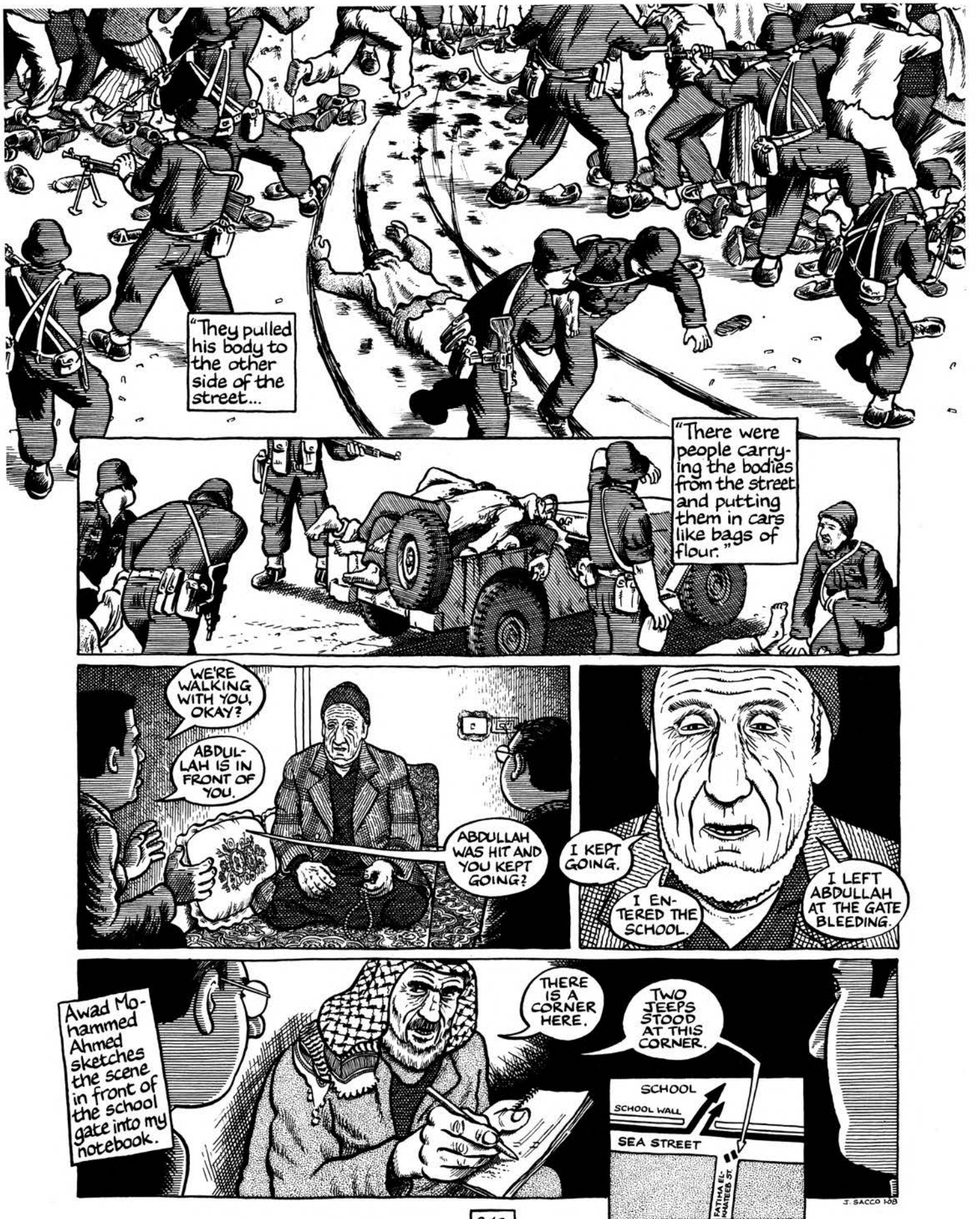
SALEH MEHI ELDIN EL-ARGAN

ABDULLAH [MOHAMMED AHMED EL-ARGAN] WAS IN FRONT OF ME, AND WE WERE WALKING CLOSE TO EACH OTHER.

"A Jewish soldier came and beat him on his head with the stick.

"He fell down on his face.

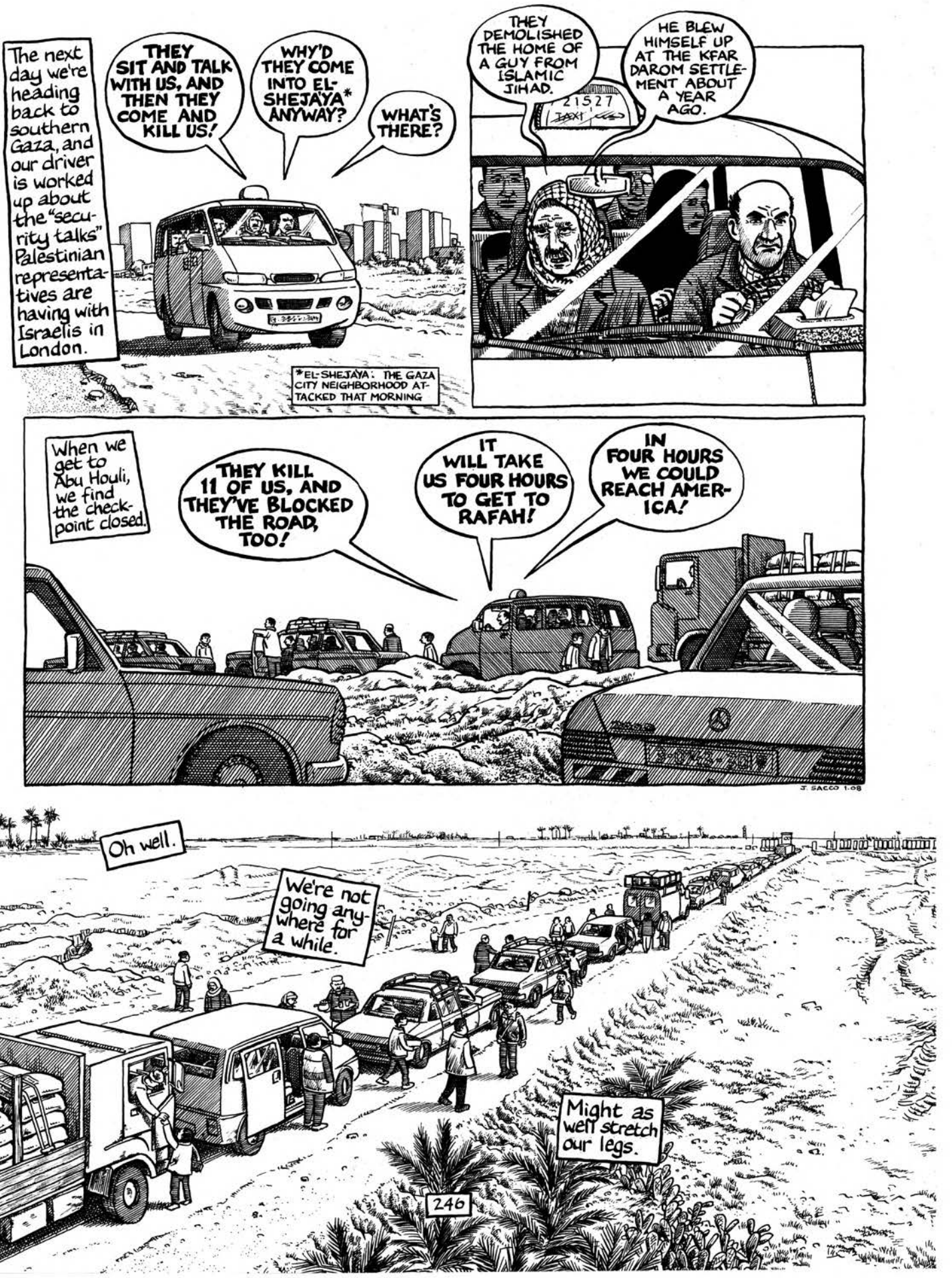
J. SACCO 1-08

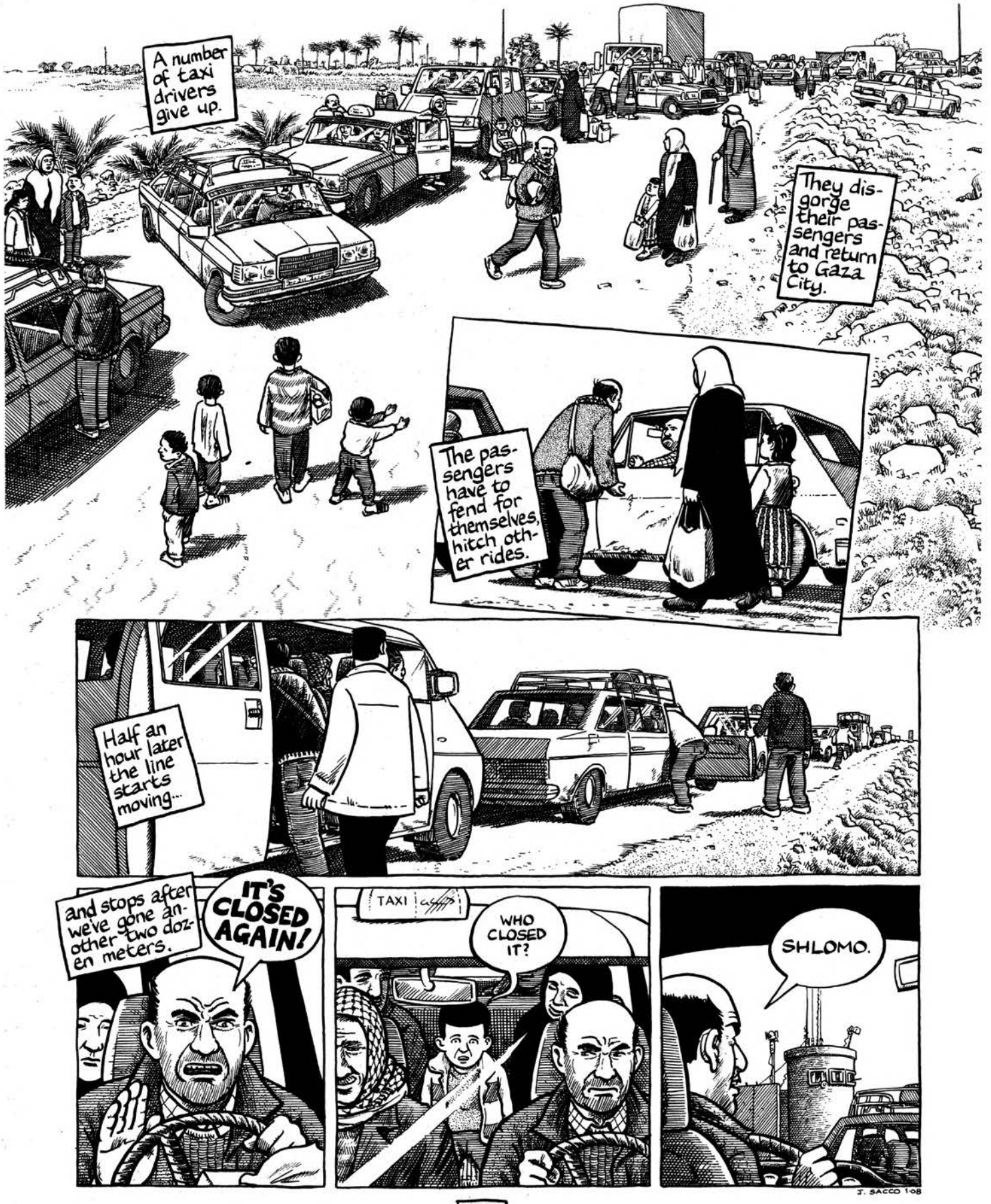

"They pulled his body to the other side of the street...
"There were people carrying the bodies from the street and putting them in cars like bags of flour."
WE'RE WALKING WITH YOU, OKAY?
ABDULLAH IS IN FRONT OF YOU.
ABDULLAH WAS HIT AND YOU KEPT GOING?
I KEPT GOING.
I ENTERED THE SCHOOL.
I LEFT ABDULLAH AT THE GATE BLEEDING.
Awad Mohammed Ahmed sketches the scene in front of the school gate into my notebook.
THERE IS A CORNER HERE.
TWO JEEPS STOOD AT THIS CORNER.
SCHOOL
SCHOOL WALL
SEA STREET
FATIMA EL-KHATEEB ST.
J. SACCO '08


"If someone fell, the soldiers took him to the jeeps. Whether he was alive or dead.
"They put four people in each jeep.
"And they took them to the western side."
DID YOU SEE THE JEEPS YOURSELF? DID YOU SEE THEM CARRYING THE BODIES?
I SAW THEM TAKING A GROUP OF BODIES. I SAW THEM ONCE.
"One [man] was dressed in a mukhtar's clothes, and one, his name was Abdullah Argan."
Awad motions with a hand down his skull.
A head split open.
AHMED HASSAN EDWAN
ANYONE WHO WAS BEATEN AND FELL DOWN, HE WAS DEAD.
"Even if he was still alive, they shot and killed him."
DID YOU SEE ANY OF THAT WITH YOUR EYES?
YES, I SAW MANY BODIES ON THE GROUND BEFORE JUMPING OVER THE TRENCH...
"and because I was tall and strong, I jumped quickly..."
J. SACCO 1-03


IT WILL NEVER LEAVE MY MIND.
MOHI EL DIN IBRAHIM LAFI
"A young man was entering the school in front of me,
"and they beat him on his head."
... HE FELL DOWN AND MOVED ON THE GROUND AND MADE SOUNDS LIKE A SLAUGHTERED CHICKEN.
"I looked back to see what happened to him... And another one came and killed him.
"With a stick to his head."
WHAT WAS HIS NAME?
I DON'T KNOW HIS NAME.
AT THE TIME IT WAS DIFFICULT.
IT WAS LIKE JUDGMENT DAY.
J. SACCO 1-08


SHLOMO
Nineteen fifty-six or not, life goes on, the present needs tending, and Abed must beat the deadline for his university and grant applications—so we're back in Gaza City where I'm trying to help him finish up his essays.
But it hasn't been easy.
Not with that racket coming from out back!
A mourning tent!
Loudspeakers are blasting patriotic songs!
Messages of condolence!
Exhortations to jihad!
Six Hamas militants were blown to bits yesterday under mysterious circumstances
Assassinated?
Killed in a "work accident"?
Depends which side you listen to.
With helicopters and a drone buzzing in our ears, we fall asleep.
At 5a.m. heavy shooting erupts.
Eleven Palestinians are being killed.
Seven here in Gaza City.
Four in nearby Jabalia refugee camp.
J. SACCO 1.08


The next day we're heading back to southern Gaza, and our driver is worked up about the "security talks" Palestinian representatives are having with Israelis in London.
THEY SIT AND TALK WITH US, AND THEN THEY COME AND KILL US!
WHY'D THEY COME INTO EL-SHEJAYA* ANYWAY?
WHAT'S THERE?
*EL-SHEJAYA: THE GAZA CITY NEIGHBORHOOD ATTACKED THAT MORNING
THEY DEMOLISHED THE HOME OF A GUY FROM ISLAMIC JIHAD.
HE BLEW HIMSELF UP AT THE KFAR DAROM SETTLEMENT ABOUT A YEAR AGO.
21527
When we get to Abu Houli, we find the checkpoint closed.
THEY KILL 11 OF US, AND THEY'VE BLOCKED THE ROAD, TOO!
IT WILL TAKE US FOUR HOURS TO GET TO RAFAH!
IN FOUR HOURS WE COULD REACH AMERICA!
J. SACCO 1-08
Oh well.
We're not going anywhere for a while.
Might as well stretch our legs.
246

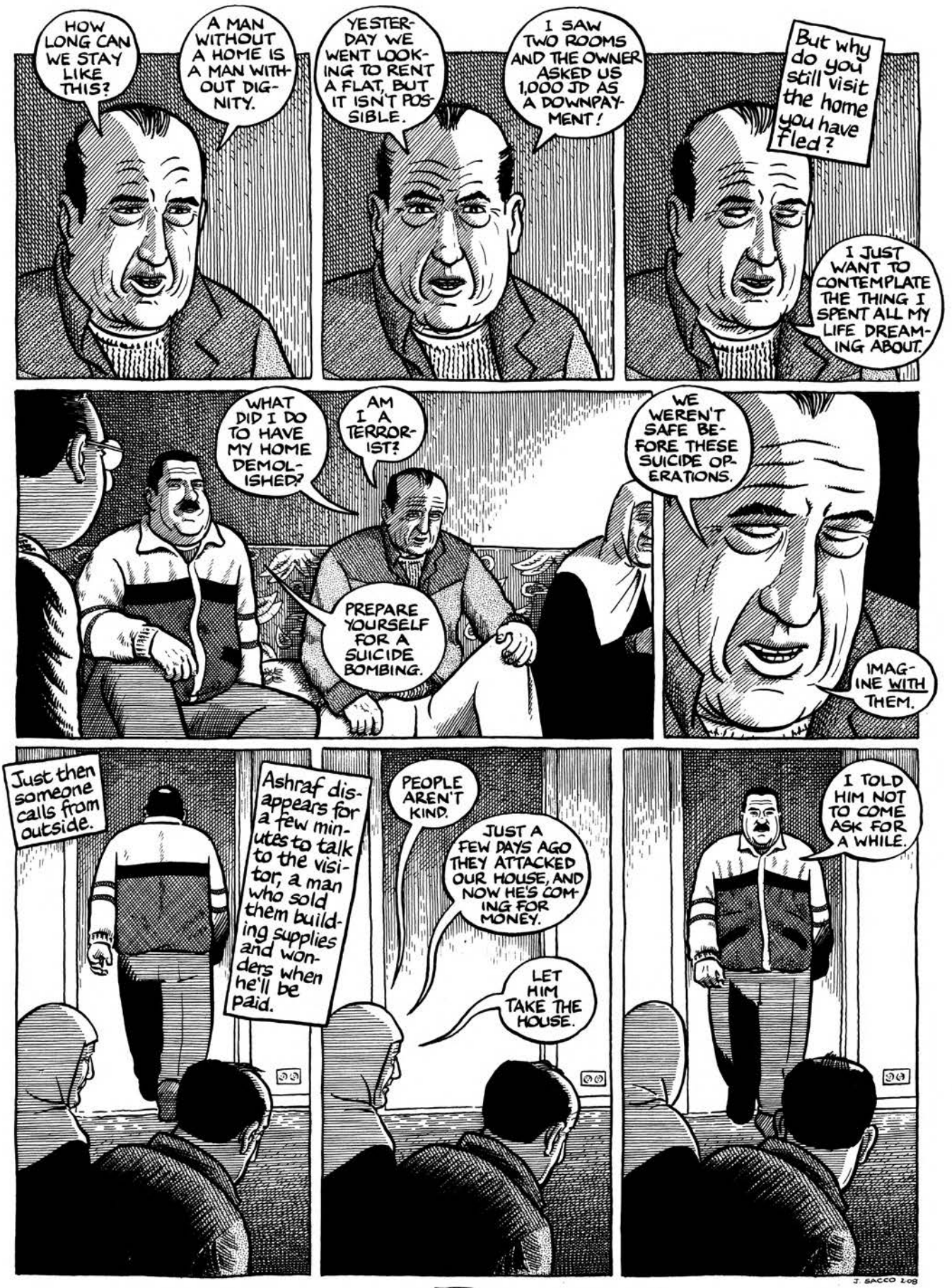

A number of taxi drivers give up.
They disgorge their passengers and return to Gaza City.
The passengers have to fend for themselves, hitch other rides.
Half an hour later the line starts moving...
and stops after we've gone another two dozen meters.
IT'S CLOSED AGAIN!
TAXI
WHO CLOSED IT?
SHLOMO.
J. SACCO 1-08

WORSE THEN, WORSE NOW

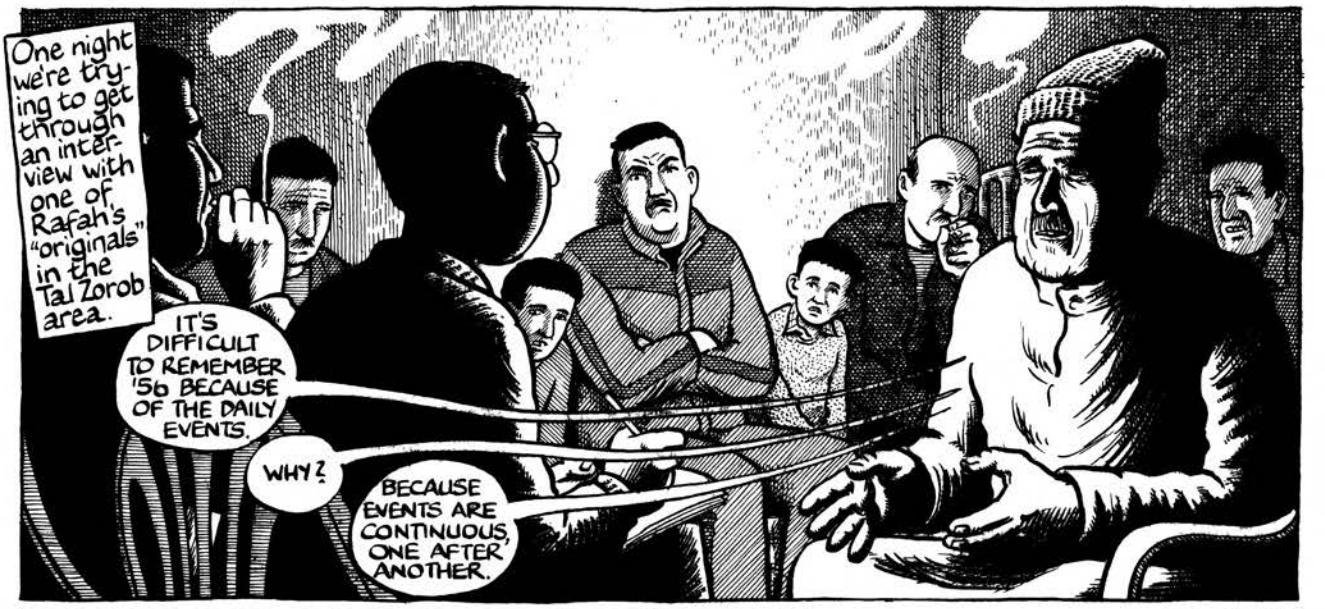



Ashraf invites us to the apartment he's renting now in Block J. He says he can add a piece to our '56 story. He says his grandfather was killed in Rafah.
But Ashraf has it wrong.
Like many younger Palestinians who live today's events, his grasp of yesterday's is mixed up.
His grandfather was killed in Khan Younis, not Rafah.
His mother, Wasfeya, tells us the story.
I WAS SITTING WITH MY FATHER LIKE YOU ARE SITTING WITH ASHRAF NOW.
SUDDENLY A SOLDIER ENTERED THE ROOM AND STARTED SHOOTING WITHOUT ANY WARNING.
NOWADAYS IT'S WORSE THAN IN '56.
THOSE DAYS WERE MORE DIFFICULT BECAUSE THE MEN WERE KILLED IN FRONT OF THEIR FAMILIES.
HE REMINDS YOU OF MANY BAD THINGS.
But Wasfeya is lost in thoughts of her father.
I HARDLY KNEW HIM.
J. SACCO 2-08


'56 WASN'T THE END OF THE STORY.
THEY'RE STILL RUNNING AFTER US.
WE WISHED TO LIVE WITH THE JEWS AS NEIGHBORS.
EVEN THOUGH ABU AMMAR* OFFERED THEM A LOT, WE ACCEPTED THAT.
BECAUSE OF THE PEACE WE BOUGHT LAND AND BUILT A HOUSE FOR OUR SONS' FUTURE.
* ABU AMMAR: YASSER ARAFAT
IF THAT HOUSE IS DEMOLISHED IN FRONT OF MY EYES, WHAT PEACE ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?
ALL THE WORLD JUDGES US AS TERRORISTS.
THOSE WHO ARE INSIDE THEIR HOUSES WHICH ARE DEMOLISHED ON TOP OF THEM, THEY'RE CONSIDERED TERRORISTS!
Ashraf's dad brings out some documents, including copies of permits from the municipality of Rafah to start building and to hook up to the electrical and water grids.
The cost of the paperwork, the land, and the house was 40,000 Jordanian dinars, almost $57,000.
ALL MY LIFE HAS BEEN LOST.
MY SON IS SUPPOSED TO GET MARRIED.
WHERE AM I GOING TO FIND A FLAT FOR HIM?
FIND HIM A TENT.
I'VE RENTED TWO STOREROOMS TO HOLD MY FURNITURE.
I CAME TO LIVE WITH ASHRAF BECAUSE THERE'S NO HOUSING.
IT'S EITHER LIVE WITH MY SON OR ON THE STREET.
MAYBE I'LL EXPEL HIM.
J. SACCO 2.08


HOW LONG CAN WE STAY LIKE THIS?
A MAN WITHOUT A HOME IS A MAN WITHOUT DIGNITY.
YESTERDAY WE WENT LOOKING TO RENT A FLAT, BUT IT ISN'T POSSIBLE.
I SAW TWO ROOMS AND THE OWNER ASKED US 1,000 JD AS A DOWNPAYMENT!
But why do you still visit the home you have fled?
I JUST WANT TO CONTEMPLATE THE THING I SPENT ALL MY LIFE DREAMING ABOUT.
WHAT DID I DO TO HAVE MY HOME DEMOLISHED?
AM I A TERRORIST?
PREPARE YOURSELF FOR A SUICIDE BOMBING.
WE WEREN'T SAFE BEFORE THESE SUICIDE OPERATIONS.
IMAGINE WITH THEM.
Just then someone calls from outside.
Ashraf disappears for a few minutes to talk to the visitor, a man who sold them building supplies and wonders when he'll be paid.
PEOPLE AREN'T KIND.
JUST A FEW DAYS AGO THEY ATTACKED OUR HOUSE, AND NOW HE'S COMING FOR MONEY.
LET HIM TAKE THE HOUSE.
I TOLD HIM NOT TO COME ASK FOR A WHILE.
J. SACCO 2.08

THE WILL OF GOD



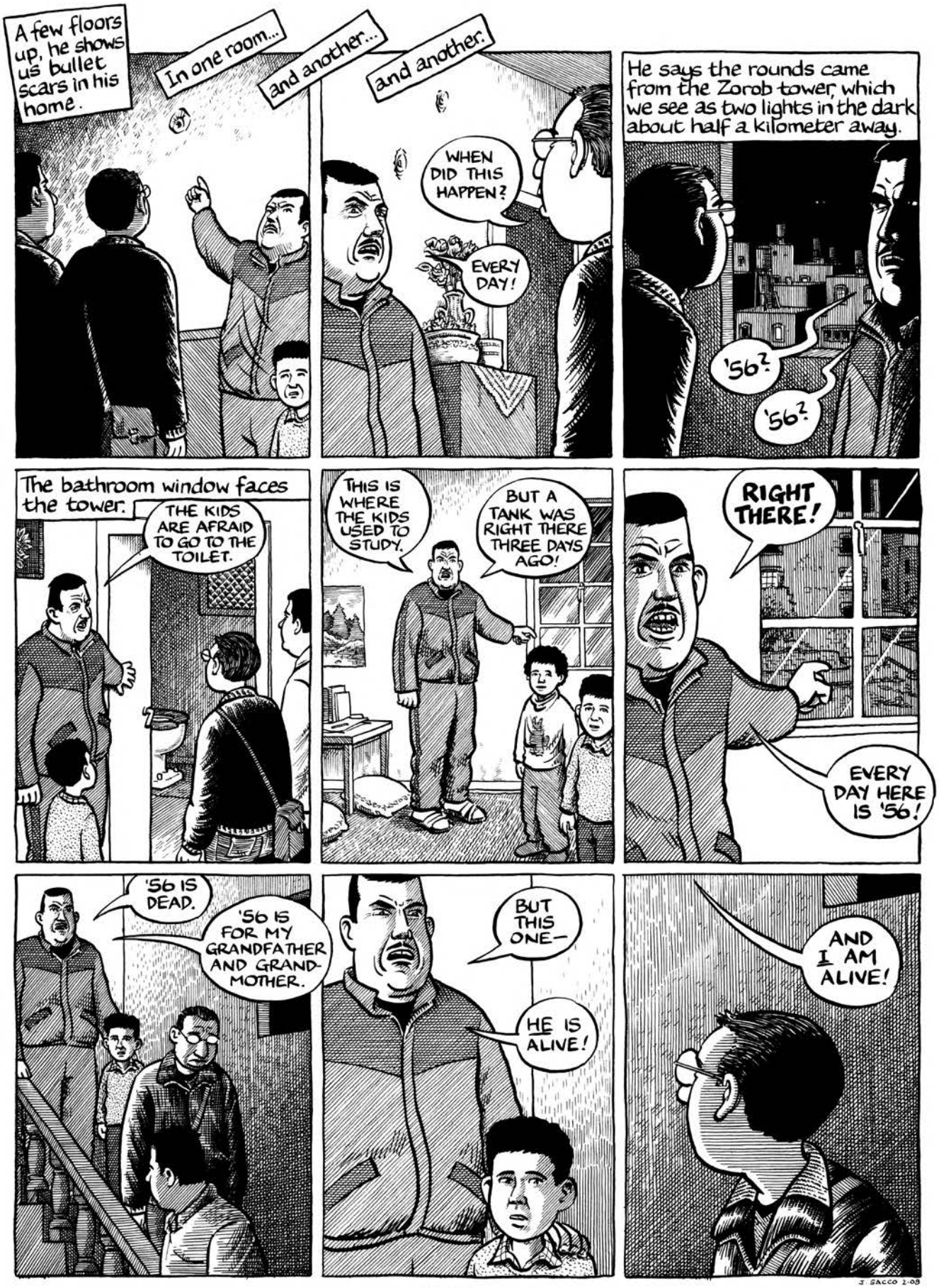




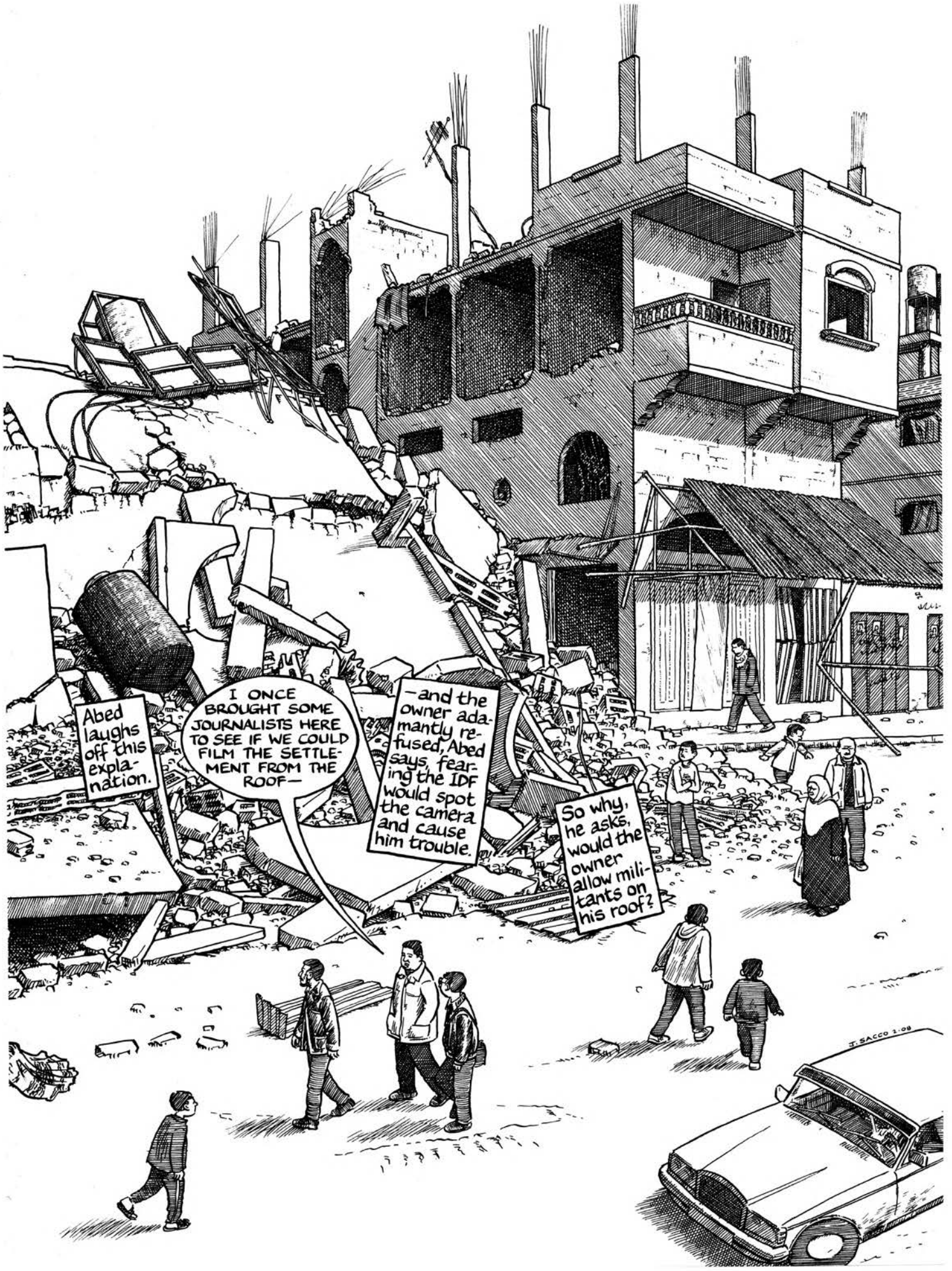




J. SACCO 2-08


A few floors up, he shows us bullet scars in his home.
In one room...
and another...
and another.
WHEN DID THIS HAPPEN?
EVERY DAY!
He says the rounds came from the Zorob tower, which we see as two lights in the dark about half a kilometer away.
'56?
'56?
The bathroom window faces the tower.
THE KIDS ARE AFRAID TO GO TO THE TOILET.
THIS IS WHERE THE KIDS USED TO STUDY.
BUT A TANK WAS RIGHT THERE THREE DAYS AGO!
RIGHT THERE!
EVERY DAY HERE IS '56!
'56 IS DEAD.
'56 IS FOR MY GRANDFATHER AND GRANDMOTHER.
BUT THIS ONE—
HE IS ALIVE!
AND I AM ALIVE!
J. SACCO 2-08


Like the man's father told us, events are continuous.
Last night the Israelis attacked Bureij camp several kilometers away and killed eight; the night before they attacked Khan Younis and killed two...
In the morning Abed, Khaled, and I go see the damage to Khan Younis.
An eight-story building, the largest in the Toufieh neighborhood, was imploded by the IDF.
The Israelis say it was used as an observation post for militants firing into a nearby IDF position.


Abed laughs off this explanation.
I ONCE BROUGHT SOME JOURNALISTS HERE TO SEE IF WE COULD FILM THE SETTLEMENT FROM THE ROOF—
—and the owner adamantly refused, Abed says, fearing the IDF would spot the camera and cause him trouble.
So why, he asks, would the owner allow militants on his roof?
J. SACCO 3.08


In any case, an extended family of some 90 people is now homeless.
Many of the neighbors are, too.
Nearby structures have been shattered.
J. SACCO 2.08
Abed and I check up on an area we used to know.
ISRAELI MILITARY POSITION
Here Israeli bulldozers have scooped out the earth as if it were ice cream.
WALL AROUND JEWISH SETTLEMENT
Into these pits they push and bury the homes they destroy.
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IS THIS THE SAME PLACE WE VISITED LAST TIME?
YES. HERE'S THAT FRIDGE.
We come across a woman named Sabha sitting nearby.
We met her last month when her home was partially destroyed.
Now it has disappeared.
WE'VE RENTED A PLACE IN THE CAMP.
UNRWA KNOWS OUR HOME IS DEMOLISHED, BUT UP TO NOW WE HAVEN'T RECEIVED COMPENSATION.
THE GOVERNORATE KNOWS ABOUT US, TOO.
WHAT CAN I DO?
WHY DO YOU COME BACK HERE?
THE RENTED FLAT IS SMALL. I CAN'T STAY IN THAT SMALL PLACE.
I SPEND THE TIME IN THIS AREA IN ORDER TO BREATHE.
TWELVE OF US LOST OUR HOME HERE.
THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD.
J. SACCO 2008


We go back to the main street where we find Khaled with one of the self-styled defenders of Khan Younis.
I remember meeting this guy before—an odd fellow who had showed off his hand grenade.
Abed recognizes a woman shuffling by.
When we visited her some weeks ago she told us how she managed to stop a bulldozer operator from demolishing her home by yelling that people were living inside.
But two days ago the bulldozers came again.
NOW IT'S FINISHED.
She is overcome by emotion and obliquely blames the Palestinian resistance for the destruction wrought by the Israelis.
GOD RID US OF THE PEOPLE WHO ARE UNJUST.
DON'T SAY THAT, HAJJA.
THIS WAS THE WILL OF GOD.
NONE OF US [FIGHTERS] DARED TO COME NEAR YOUR HOUSE.
AND IF SOMEONE PUT SOMETHING NEAR YOUR HOUSE—
—Khaled means a land mine—
—IT WAS TO [STOP] THOSE WHO CAME TO DEMOLISH YOUR HOUSE...
J. SACCO 1 '98


NOW BOTH FLOORS ARE ON THE GROUND, BUT PRAISE BE TO GOD.
And then she directs blame elsewhere.
SHARON NEEDS TO DEMOLISH HOUSES.
SHARON NEEDS PEOPLE TO RUN FROM THEIR HOMES.
We walk back up the street to a market place where we find a crowd teasing parts of an Israeli vehicle blown off by a land mine.
A crater near the hospital testifies to the power of the home-made explosives.
Meanwhile, Khaled is getting some funny looks.
I HEARD ON PALESTINIAN TV THAT YOU WERE CAPTURED THE NIGHT THEY ENTERED.
J. SACCO 2-08


We walk to the hospital grounds, which were breached by Israeli armor.
Khaled tells me that a boy of eight or nine was killed after the funeral for the two people killed the day before.
He'd gone to throw stones at a military position, and an Israeli soldier shot him in the head, Khaled says.
In fact, here comes a truck blasting the time of the boy's funeral.
DO YOU WANT TO TAKE A PICTURE OF THE MARTYR?
LIKE GO INTO THE MORGUE AND TAKE A PICTURE?
YES.
YOU CAN, IF YOU'D LIKE.
NO, REALLY, THAT'S FINE.
After all, what right do I have to intimacy with the poor kid's corpse? Only time, history, the bone-bleaching years can strip the dead of their privacy and make them sufficiently decent for viewing.
It's time to get back to Rafah and 1956.
J. SACCO 3.08

THE SCHOOLYARD




Of course, he says, the boys are taught about The Day of the School. On each anniversary he explains how the men were beaten at the gate.
The headmaster escorts us as I take pictures of the main building and classrooms.
Someone introduces the school gardener, Abdullah.
He was here that day in 1956. He was only 12, he says.
BUT WHY WERE YOU IN THE SCHOOL? YOU WERE BENEATH THE AGE.
I WAS AFRAID TO STAY AT HOME.
He doesn't want to talk about it any more.
He says there are others who remember better than he does.
J. SACCO '08
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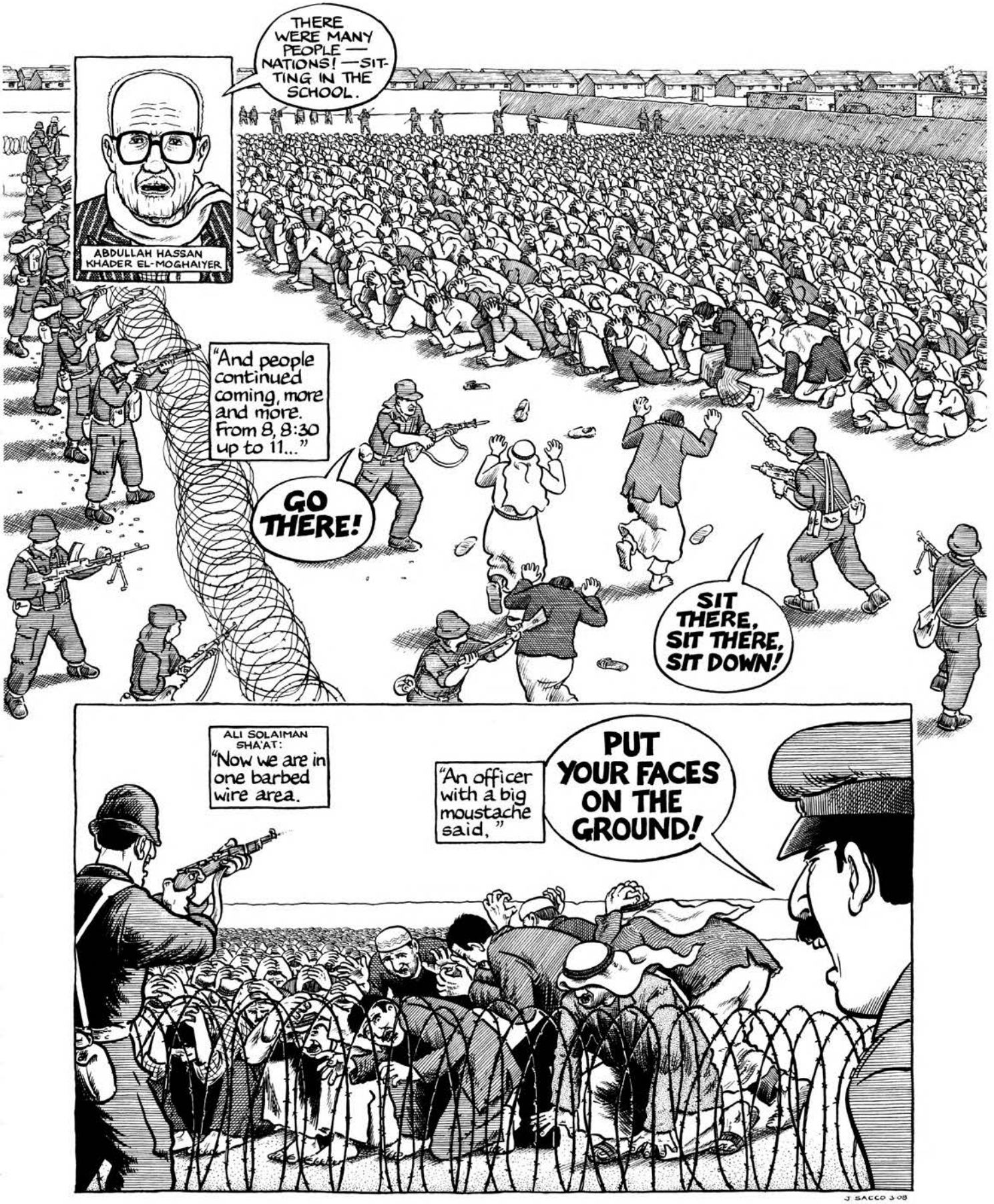
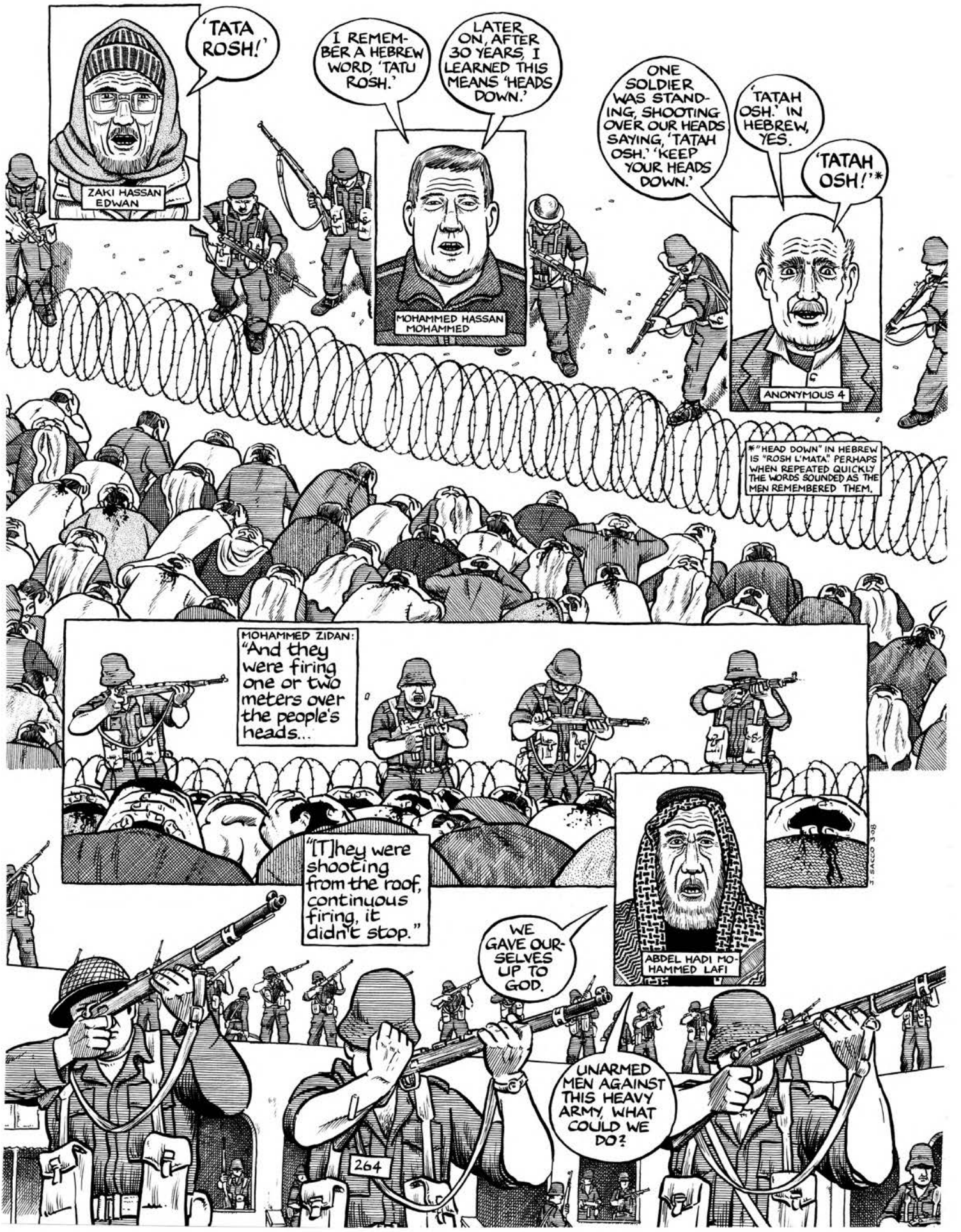

THERE WERE MANY PEOPLE — NATIONS! — SITTING IN THE SCHOOL.
ABDULLAH HASSAN KHADER EL-MOGHAIYER
"And people continued coming, more and more. From 8, 8:30 up to 11..."
GO THERE!
SIT THERE, SIT THERE, SIT DOWN!
ALI SOLAIMAN SHA'AT: "Now we are in one barbed wire area.
"An officer with a big moustache said,"
PUT YOUR FACES ON THE GROUND!
J SACCO 3-08


'TATA ROSH!'
ZAKI HASSAN EDWAN
I REMEMBER A HEBREW WORD, 'TATU ROSH.'
LATER ON, AFTER 30 YEARS, I LEARNED THIS MEANS 'HEADS DOWN.'
MOHAMMED HASSAN MOHAMMED
ONE SOLDIER WAS STANDING, SHOOTING OVER OUR HEADS SAYING, 'TATAH OSH.' 'KEEP YOUR HEADS DOWN.'
'TATAH OSH.' IN HEBREW, YES.
'TATAH OSH!'*
ANONYMOUS 4
*"HEAD DOWN" IN HEBREW IS "ROSH L'MATA." PERHAPS WHEN REPEATED QUICKLY THE WORDS SOUNDED AS THE MEN REMEMBERED THEM.
MOHAMMED ZIDAN: "And they were firing one or two meters over the people's heads...
"[T]hey were shooting from the roof, continuous firing, it didn't stop."
ABDEL HADI MOHAMMED LAFI
WE GAVE OURSELVES UP TO GOD.
UNARMED MEN AGAINST THIS HEAVY ARMY, WHAT COULD WE DO?
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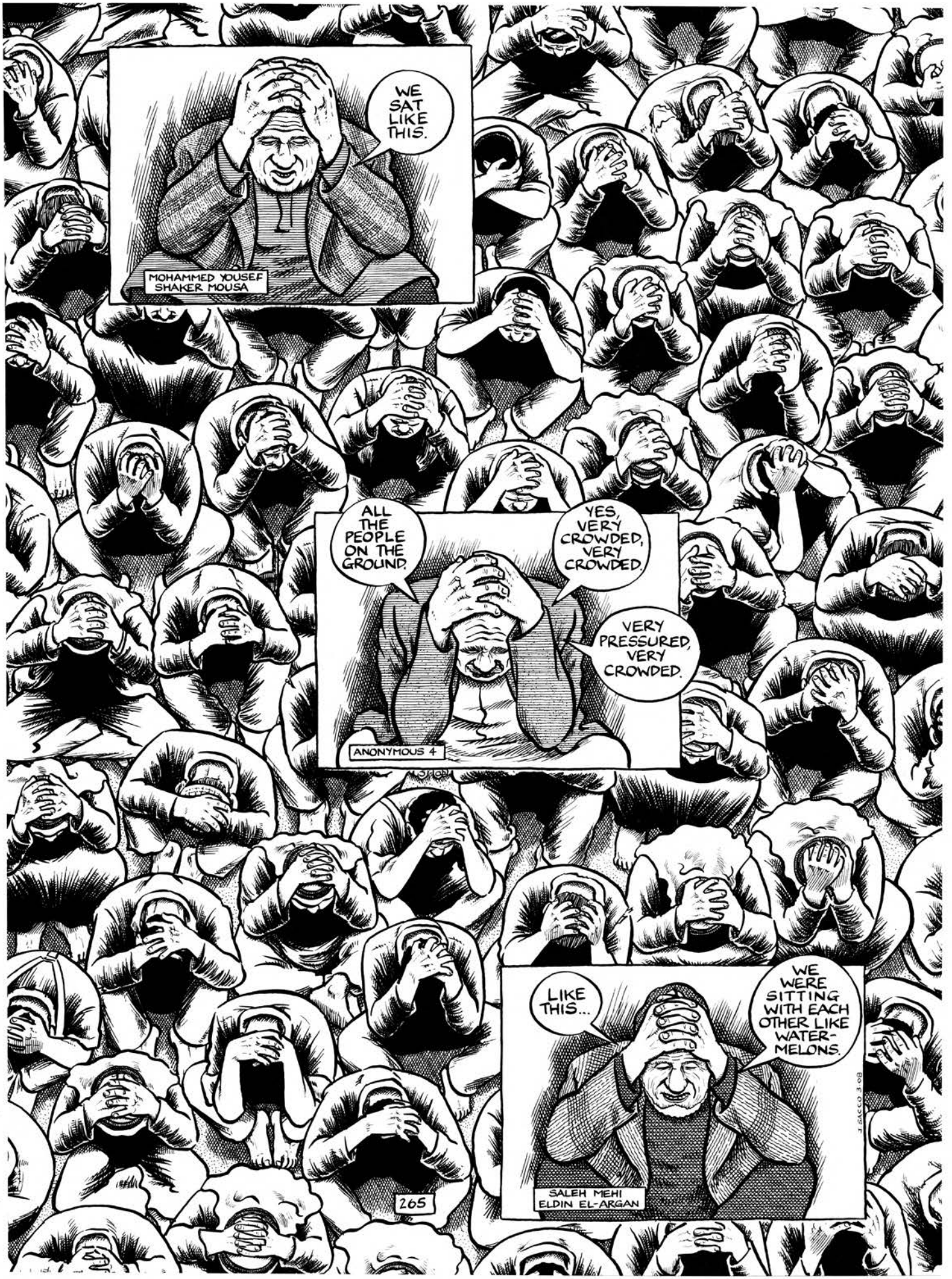
J. SACCO 3.98


WE SAT LIKE THIS.
MOHAMMED YOUSEF SHAKER MOUSA
ALL THE PEOPLE ON THE GROUND.
YES, VERY CROWDED, VERY CROWDED.
VERY PRESSURED, VERY CROWDED.
ANONYMOUS 4
LIKE THIS...
WE WERE SITTING WITH EACH OTHER LIKE WATER-MELONS.
SALEH MEHI ELDIN EL-ARGAN
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ABDEL HADI MOHAMMED LAFI
AND SOME OF THE PEOPLE INSIDE THE SCHOOL WERE INJURED, AND THEIR BLOOD WAS FLOWING.
I SMELT SOMETHING. I FOUND OUT THAT THE SMELL CAME FROM THE BLOOD OF THE PEOPLE AROUND ME...
AYESH ABDEL-KHALIK YOUNIS
I KNOW ONE MAN, HE WAS FROM MY VILLAGE...
HE WAS BLEEDING FROM HIS HEAD, AND WE TRIED TO FILL HIS WOUND WITH SAND TO STOP THE BLEEDING.
MOHAMMED JUMA' EL-GHOUL
I tell Mohammed Yousef Shaker Mousa I have a silly question:
WERE PEOPLE ALLOWED TO GO TO THE TOILET?
NO, THEY WERE PISSING ON THEMSELVES.
CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT THEY WOULD ALLOW THE PEOPLE TO GO TO THE RESTROOM?
El-Sayed Abdel Hamid Abu Taha grabs his grandson to demonstrate.
OUR HEADS WERE ON THE BACKS OF THE ONES IN FRONT OF US, AND WE PISSED ON [THEM].
J. SACCO 4.98


AHMED HASSAN EDWAN
WE WERE SITTING WITH OUR HEADS DOWN, AND ME, I WASN'T ABLE TO [GO] PISS, SO I PISSED ON THE GROUND AND ON MYSELF.
"In front of all the people I pissed."
WHILE WE WERE SITTING IN THIS WAY, WE PISSED ON EACH OTHER.
WERE YOU SITTING WITH YOUR FATHER THE WHOLE TIME?
MOHI ELDIN IBRAHIM LAFI
YES, YES. OUR HEADS IN THE OTHER ONE'S ASS...
DID YOU SPEAK TO YOUR FATHER?
WE PISSED ON EACH OTHER AND YOU'RE ASKING ME WHETHER I SPOKE TO MY FATHER?
© J. SACCO '08
NO ONE ALLOWED TO STAND UP. NOTHING OFFERED TO THEM. NOTHING AT ALL. NO WATER, NO FOOD.
NOTHING. NOTHING. NOTHING. NOTHING.
MOHAMMED YOUSEF SHAKER MOUSA
AND ANYONE WHO TRIED TO SMOKE, THEY SHOUTED AT HIM TO STOP.
WE SPENT THE WHOLE DAY WITHOUT WATER, WITHOUT FOOD.
ZAKI HASSAN EDWAN
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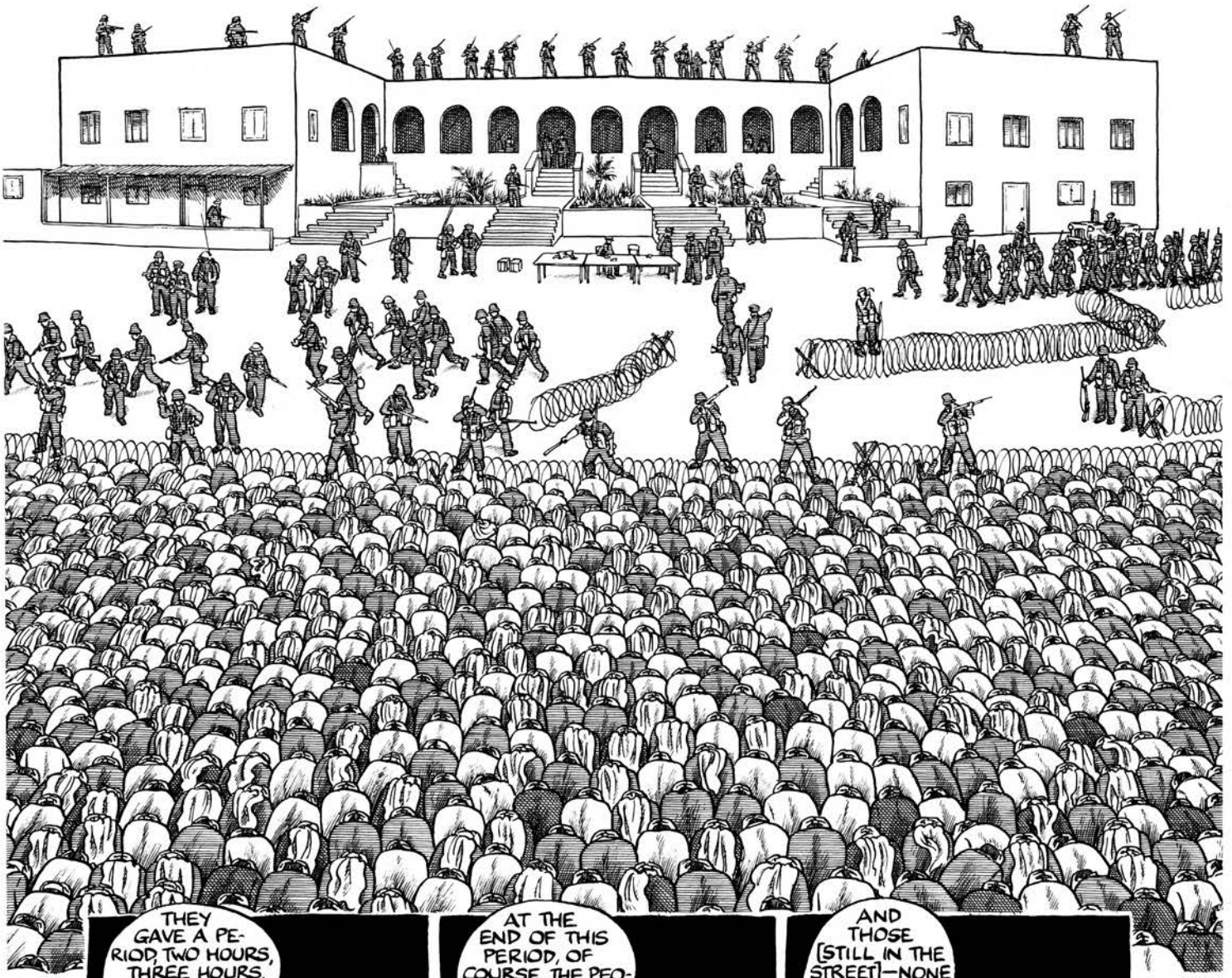


THEY GAVE A PERIOD, TWO HOURS, THREE HOURS, FOR THE PEOPLE TO GATHER.
AYESH ABDEL-KHALIK YOUNIS
AT THE END OF THIS PERIOD, OF COURSE, THE PEOPLE STOPPED COMING...
AND THOSE [STILL IN THE STREET]—NONE OF THEM SURVIVED.
J. SACCO 1.08


In the meantime, what was going on outside the school?
THE SEARCH
We circle around it looking for older ladies who, we hope, can fill us in.
And in one of Shabour a's back alleys, we discover Ra'esa Salim Hassan Kaloob selling sweets at a make-shift stall.
Sure she remembers '56! She was a child, but she says her memory is strong.
She entrusts her goods to some grandkids and takes us to the house of an obliging neighbor.
The women there are cracking up, giggling. We're the most fun they've had in ages. And they're the most fun we've had, too!
Gone are the formalities, the solemnity! In fact, the entire tea-and-coffee-serving spectacle is eliminated because — well, the women are out here with us, not in the kitchen boiling water.
J. SACCO 4.08



*"IHMAR": YOU DONKEYS


"The women weren't able to leave their houses at first, but when they saw me running and walking in the streets they became stronger and went out."
I WASN'T AFRAID.
AND I'M [STILL] NOT AFRAID. I'M STRONG.
WERE THERE MANY WOMEN IN THE STREETS?
"Yes, many women, many kids. Holding black flags.
"They ran after their men until they reached this area, screaming and shouting."
A few doors down from Ra'esa's stand, we find Deeba Jamil El-Talili, who also remembers.
MY HUSBAND AND HIS THREE BROTHERS WENT TO THE SCHOOL WHEN THEY HEARD THE LOUDSPEAKERS...
WE STARTED TO SCREAM AND SHOUT AT THE SOLDIERS.
"They pushed us back telling us,
GO HOME! GO HOME!
"[A soldier] pushed us inside and closed the door.
"[Later] we went outside again."
J. SACCO 4.08
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Omm Awad El-Najeeli, who lived across Sea Street, tells us—
ALL MY NEIGHBORS, ALL MY DAUGHTERS, ALL OF US, WE WENT OUT.
THEY TOOK OUR MEN SO WE WENT OUT.
"Should we remain in our houses? We were going to die like them!
"We stood at the end of Fatima El-Khateeb Street, and when they shot at us we went up the street and then came back."
WERE THEY SHOOTING AT YOU OR OVER YOUR HEADS?
OVER OUR HEADS.
Soldiers fanned out into Rafah, she says, and the women and children rushed home.
The soldiers entered each house looking for two things: men who had not gone to the designated gathering points and weapons.
WE OPENED THE DOOR FOR THEM AND THEY ENTERED.
FIVE CAME.
JAMILA ISSA SOLAIMAN ABU ZEATER
"Each of them was tall and very strong.
J. SACCO 4.08


"They searched all the furniture, the mattresses, the blankets... the dove cage.
"I will not lie. They didn't take anything from our house."
THEY SEARCHED EVERYTHING.
EVERYTHING.
OMM AWAD EL-NAJEELI
"They didn't leave a... chicken. They left nothing. They stole everything."
THEY TOOK ALL MY SEVEN SONS... AND STOOD THEM AGAINST THE WALL ...OPPOSITE MY HOUSE.
TA'AH KHALIL OUTHMAN
"I left the house and followed them screaming and crying."
OKAY, YOU ARE CRYING.
TAKE YOUR SONS.
SHUT THE DOOR AND DON'T GO OUT.
J. SACCO 4.08



*MAGHRIB: EVENING PRAYER


We last left Ghanim Mahmoud Sha'at, who had seen his cousin killed in front of him and who had returned home, lying on his bed, awaiting the soldiers.
Now they were at his door.
STAND UP!
I CAN'T. YESTERDAY I WAS AT THE CLINIC.
Ghanim told the officer he was sick and showed him his UNRWA card.
"They took me from the room.
"And a soldier told me to stand against a wall
"and raise my hands.
HE'S SICK. DON'T SHOOT HIM.
"We walked for awhile...
"One of the soldiers tried to hit me with a heavy stick...
"I fell and it hit me on my back.
"The same officer told the soldiers not to touch me.
J. SACCO 4-08
"He took me to an area and there were many men... with their faces on the ground. It was an open area... and the soldiers surrounded them.
"All [the prisoners] were old men. I was the youngest among them. I was 21 years old.
"We spent about an hour or an hour and a half.
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"When they finished searching in the camp, the same officer came back...and they started to ask each of us,

YOUR NAME?

WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

"They were letting the old men leave. Only three of us remained."

Ghanim was taken to one of two alternative gathering points, distinct from the government school, for further screening.

Abed and I hear many stories of men being found in the camp and shot.

For example, Fatima El-Khateeb tells us, "My neighbor, age 55, they took him outside the door and killed him."

Over and over again we are told the story of one Mohammed Thabit, a school teacher discovered hiding at home — some say dressed in women's clothing — and shot by Israeli soldiers.

But his family has emigrated and we cannot properly verify the story.

We also hear of killings of groups of men who left for the school late. But we want an eyewitness.

One man — a young boy at the time — claims to have followed several family members and neighbors from Block O and watched from a distance as they were lined up against a wall and shot.

Others repeat the story, and parts of it are solidly confirmed; indeed, all the men he mentions were killed that day.

But Abed is somewhat skeptical that the man actually witnessed the killings...

and Abed's doubt is as good as a veto.

J. SACCO 5.08


Who decides what is credible and what is not?
Abed and I, that's who, sitting in our room drinking coffee.
We decide.
We edit.
We determine.
In the absence of UNRWA records, of Israeli records — and could we rely on them if we had them? — it's up to us to fill history's glass with as much truthful, cogent testimony as we can.
If some truth spills along the way, we apologize.
Anyway, one day, after we've moved on from this part of the story, we come across four black Palestinians, perhaps the descendants of Turkish slaves, playing a game with stones in the sand.
In passing, one of them tells us he saw seven men gunned down that day in 1956.
When I take out my notepad and ask him to repeat the story, he hesitates.
IT'S SOMETHING DAMAGING TO THE JEWS, AND I DON'T WANT TROUBLE FOR MYSELF.
I tell him I won't name him, and reluctantly he starts again.
"They entered our house and searched it... They said to my grandfather,
YOU ARE YOUNG. WHY DIDN'T YOU GO TO THE SCHOOL?
YOUR ID?
"He looked at the ID and asked the soldiers to take [my grandfather] to the school and check if the age was right or wrong.
"My brother and I secretly followed the soldiers and my grandfather.
J. SACCO 5.08
"Near the sanitation department we found seven men lined up against the wall with their hands over their heads.
"My grandfather already had passed that point.
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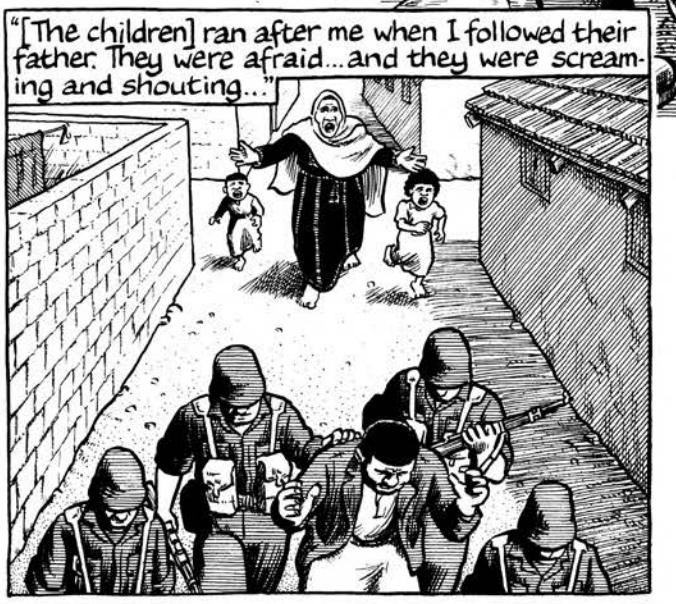
"Now we stopped.
"There was an old woman on the street looking for her son, who had gone to the school.
"And the old woman stopped also.
"The woman fell down on the ground to her hands and knees..."
ALL THE PEOPLE KILLED.
ALL THE PEOPLE KILLED.
ALL OF US WENT BACK TO OUR HOUSES.
WE... TOLD THE STORY TO OUR FAMILY.
AFTER HALF AN HOUR MY GRANDFATHER CAME BACK WITH THE SOLDIERS BECAUSE THEY HAD FOUND HE WAS OLDER THAN THE [WANTED] AGE.
Abed and I have to take responsibility for believing or rejecting a witness.
In this case we both trust our instincts and this man's story.
J. SACCO 5-08


He and the others have warmed to us, and they direct us to a woman living nearby.
Her husband, they say, was shot in front of her.
Soon we are sitting with Nasrah Felfel on the same spot she was living with her husband, Salem, all those years ago.
IT WAS HIS FATE TO COME BACK AND TO BE KILLED.
"I told him,
ALL THE PEOPLE ARE RUNNING TOWARDS THE SCHOOL, AND YOU SHOULD GO.
"When he went outside he didn't see any people. The men had already gone to the school...
"So he decided to come back...
"Our neighbor [also] left late. They beat our neighbor with the back of their guns, and they took him to the school...
"Suddenly we found them entering the house.
J SACCO 5-08


"They were searching.
"All of us were afraid and were together in one room.


"They took my husband outside the house.


"[The children] ran after me when I followed their father. They were afraid...and they were screaming and shouting..."


THEY SHOT HIM IN HIS STOMACH, ON THE LEFT SIDE, AND ANOTHER TIME IN HIS HEAD.
YOU SAW THIS, HAJJA?
NEAR THE DOOR OF OUR NEIGHBORS.
J. SACCO 3.08


"I saw it with my eyes.
"And then they shot at us.
"I fell down, and I started to crawl on my hands and knees to get inside the house.
"I tried to go out to see the body many times...but there was a soldier at the end of the street the whole day.
"And my neighbor from time to time shouted to me,"
DON'T GO OUT! HE'LL SHOOT YOU IF YOU LEAVE YOUR HOUSE!
OF COURSE THEY WERE SHOOTING EVERY-WHERE,
AND THE BODY REMAINED IN THE STREET IN THE SAME PLACE UNTIL THE NEXT MORN-ING.
J. SACCO 5-08


While we feverishly dig away at 1956, daily events are shovelled back at us, obscuring our finds, making it that much harder for our subjects to focus on the stratum in question.
100 SHEKELS
That woman we met in the last chapter, for example, 80- or 82-year-old Ta'ah Khalil Outhman... her leg was broken when her house was demolished on top of her a few days before we talked.
She lay buried in the rubble for up to an hour.
I WAS SAYING, 'THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD.'
Abed and I had already surveyed the apparent Israeli target, a water pumping station across the road, which was heavily damaged.
A second pumping station was completely destroyed the same night.
There was no warning.
Ta'ah awoke when the zinc roof collapsed onto her bed.
THE WHOLE HOUSE FELL DOWN ON ME...
J. SACCO 508


"and I started to shout.
"Then the neighbors and my sons came after the tanks withdrew."
MY GRAND-MOTHER IS DEAD!
MY GRAND-MOTHER IS DEAD!
ISN'T IT TABOO TO DO THIS TO ME?
And now?
I'M STAYING WITH MY SON.
Her son, who as a young boy was stood up against a wall in 1956, is renting in this neighborhood, Tal El-Sultan, after his own home was demolished in Block O a few months ago.
WE GOT ONLY $100 FROM UNRWA.
THE RED CROSS GAVE US A TENT, THAT'S ALL.
WE GOT THREE MATTRESSES AND A MAT.
IS THERE ANY WAY WE CAN GET SOME HELP?
J. SACCO 5-08


I feel terrible for these people who have lost two homes between them. I want to do something, but I don't want to overstep the bounds of Arab propriety.
SHALL I GIVE THEM SOME MONEY, OR IS IT A BAD IDEA?
IT'S A BAD IDEA.
I ask Abed again, but he is firm.
I should not give them anything.
Time for us to go.
J. SACCO 5-03
Taàh's daughter-in-law follows us out and directs us to the wreckage of the old woman's house.
SHE WAS SLEEPING THERE.
HER HEAD WAS WHERE THE MIRROR IS.
I take some quick pictures, and then we beat it.
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The whole street, which faces a Jewish settlement across no-man's-land, has been severely shot up and shelled.
It's a wonder that people still patch up their places and remain.


As we turn left onto Sea Street, we come across more unfortunates.
J. SACCO 5-08

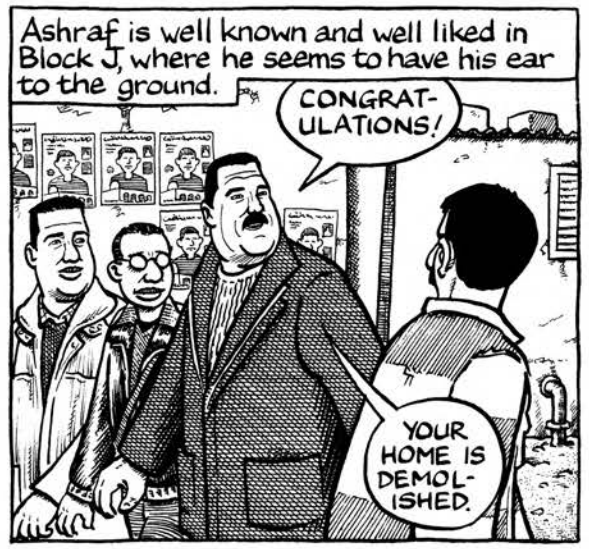

I put money in the hand of the woman, Abed or not.
She gets the dough the other people didn't get.

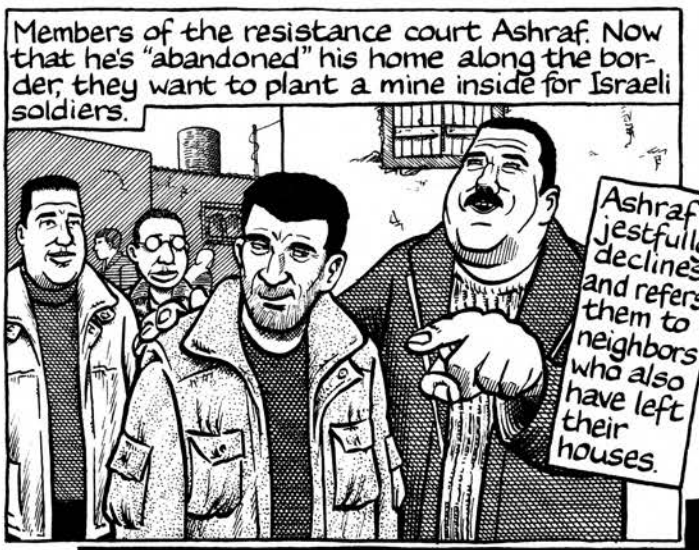

At least someone is happy.

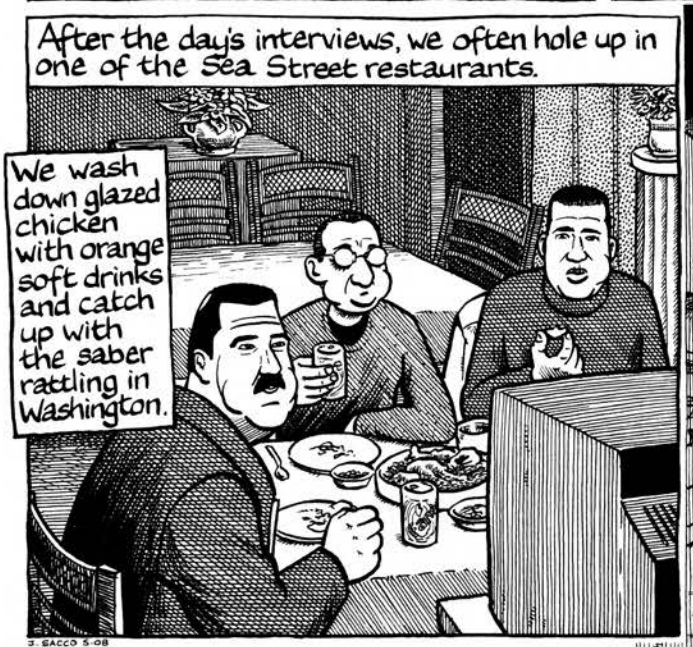
THE MOUTH OF THE LION




He accompanies us on some of our evening interviews and listens closely to old men telling a story he has never heard before.


Ashraf is well known and well liked in Block J, where he seems to have his ear to the ground.
CONGRATULATIONS!
YOUR HOME IS DEMOLISHED.


Members of the resistance court Ashraf. Now that he's "abandoned" his home along the border, they want to plant a mine inside for Israeli soldiers.
Ashraf jestfully declines, and refers them to neighbors who also have left their houses.


After the day's interviews, we often hole up in one of the Sea Street restaurants.
We wash down glazed chicken with orange soft drinks and catch up with the saber rattling in Washington.


One night we leave a restaurant as the border erupts with gunfire.
The rounds seem to be smacking into Ashraf's neighborhood.

J. SACCO 5-08


We wait with Ashraf for the shooting to subside.
An ambulance waits with us in case there are casualties.
At one point overhead tracer fire scatters us.
Enough. We tell Ashraf he can sleep at our place tonight.
NO, I WANT TO GO HOME.
J SACCO 6-08
His wife and baby are in Block J. His parents, his brothers and sisters, too.
The shooting finally lets up, and Abed and I decide to accompany Ashraf home through the back alleys.
YOU GUYS OUGHT TO WATCH OUT.
WE DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO CARRY YOU.
We don't say much, but Ashraf seems grateful for our company.
288