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Systematic Targeting of Gaza Healthcare System

Background

Since October 2023, Gaza's healthcare system has been subjected to sustained and systematic destruction in the context of Israel's ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza. On 13th October, the Israeli military ordered the evacuation of 22 hospitals in Gaza City and the northern Gaza Strip. That marked the beginning of a deliberate campaign against medical infrastructure.[1] As of July 2025, Israeli forces had attacked 33 of Gaza's 36 hospitals and clinics, depriving medical facilities of electricity, fuel, clean water and essential medical supplies.[2] This has resulted in a near-total collapse of the territory's healthcare system.

The deliberate targeting of healthcare workers and medical infrastructure has been widely characterised as conduct that may amount to genocide, including Article 3(c) and 3(d). In December 2023, South Africa instituted proceedings before the International Court of Justice, alleging that Israel has committed numerous genocidal acts against Palestinians in Gaza, including attacks on the healthcare system that have rendered conditions of life increasingly unsustainable.[3]

As of 9th February 2026, 246 health service points were reported to be functioning across the Gaza Strip; however, 234 were only partially operational. These included 19 hospitals, 12 field hospitals (operating in tents), 102 primary health centres and 113 medical points. On 5th February, one hospital resumed operations in Gaza City, bringing the total number of hospitals in the Gaza governorate to 13, while no hospitals remain operational in North Gaza. These figures underscore that nominal functionality does not equate to effective healthcare provision. The overwhelming majority of facilities operate under severe resource shortages, damaged infrastructure and acute staffing deficits, rendering them incapable of meeting the scale of medical need.[4]

Destruction of healthcare facilities

Israel's systematic bombardment of Gaza's health facilities has devastated the territory's already collapsing healthcare system.

On 17th October 2023, just one week into the genocide, an explosion tore through the grounds of Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in central Gaza, commonly known as the Baptist Hospital, killing hundreds of civilians who had sought refuge there from ongoing bombardment. Gaza's health authorities reported that at least 471 people were killed and hundreds more injured, with additional victims reportedly buried beneath the rubble.[5] The hospital, operated by the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, was overwhelmed at the time with displaced families sheltering in its courtyard and car park after repeated evacuation orders and airstrikes across the Gaza Strip. In the days preceding the blast, the hospital director reportedly received warnings from Israeli authorities. The scale of the casualties, and the targeting

[1] Physicians for Human Rights Israel (28 July 2025), Genocide in Gaza.
[2] Physicians for Human Rights Israel (28 July 2025), Genocide in Gaza.
[3] Hassan, Fatima and Manjra, Shuaib and London, Leslie (14 February 2024), Israel's unrelenting war on Gaza healthcare requires urgent action. Al Jazeera.
[4] United Nations (16 February 2026), OCHA Gaza Humanitarian Response Situation Report No.67.
[5] Al Jazeera (18 October 2023), What we know so far about the deadly strike on a Gaza hospital.

of a site visibly sheltering civilians, laid bare at an early stage the trajectory of attacks on medical facilities and foreshadowed the systematic destruction that would follow.

Since then, at least 94% of the hospitals in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed, [6] effectively crippling the healthcare system.

Nearly twenty-eight months later, what began with that mass-casualty attack has unfolded into the systematic dismantling of Gaza's healthcare system. In Gaza alone, 2,231 incidents affecting healthcare have been recorded. Health facilities, including children's hospitals, dental clinics, field hospitals, health centres, medical storage facilities, pharmacies and rehabilitation clinics, have been struck or damaged on 435 occasions.[7] The cumulative effect is not isolated devastation but the sustained destruction of medical infrastructure and personnel on a scale that has rendered meaningful healthcare access for much of the population impossible.

The destruction has extended beyond bombardment of hospital buildings; medical facilities have been deprived of electricity, fuel, clean water and essential medical supplies through siege conditions and restrictions on humanitarian access. Equipment necessary for surgery, dialysis, neonatal care and the treatment of chronic illness has been destroyed or rendered unusable.[8] Hospitals that remain standing frequently operate without anaesthetics, antibiotics, sterilisation or reliable power.

As it stands, the Gaza Health Ministry have said that there are no function MRI machines; two mammogram machines out of ten; six CT scanners out of 17; one cardiac catheterisation machine; 52% medicine deficit – meaning more than half of the people in Gaza don't have regular access to medication they need to take; 22 hospitals are out of service.[9]

Targeting of healthcare workers

Healthcare workers have been directly targeted as part of this broader dismantling. More than 1,700 members of Gaza's medical staff have been killed since October 2023; 3,000 have been wounded; 364 have been abducted and 220 remain in Israeli custody.[10]

During the first week of the genocide, Israel carried out 94 attacks on healthcare facilities, killing 29 healthcare workers and injuring 24,[11] and by 30th November 2023, 427 attacks on healthcare facilities in the West Bank and Gaza had been documented, killing 566 and injuring 758.[12]

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[6] World Health Organisation (22 May 2025), Health system at breaking point as hostilities further intensify in Gaza, WHO warns.
[7] Relief Web (11 February 2026), Attacks on Health Care in the occupied Palestinian territory.
[8] Harb, Ali (4 February 2026), How Israel destroyed Gaza's heath system 'deliberately and methodically', Al Jazeera.
[9] Harb, Ali (4 February 2026), How Israel destroyed Gaza's heath system 'deliberately and methodically', Al Jazeera.
[10] Harb, Ali (4 February 2026), How Israel destroyed Gaza's heath system 'deliberately and methodically', Al Jazeera.
[11] Dunn, Laura (19 October 2023), Attacks on health care facilities have increased in past decade, human rights groups say. NBC News.
[12] Muro, Adam and Najjar, Farah (30 November 2023), Israel-Hamas war updates: More Palestinian prisoners released. Al Jazeera.

Many healthcare workers – doctors, nurses, and paramedics – have reported severe mistreatment whilst in Israeli custody, including abuse, beatings, humiliation, forced stress positions, prolonged cuffing and blindfolding, denial or medical care, as well as torture including, rape and sexual abuse.[13]

Just this month, it has been reported that the sixth healthcare worker to be abducted and taken from Gaza into Israeli detention since 7th October 2023 has been killed or died. Hatem Ismail Abdullatif Rayyan, a paramedic described by colleagues as a dedicated healthcare worker 'who never left his post', died at Ktzi'ot detention facility in the Negev. Mr Rayyan was the amongst tens of other healthcare workers and patients to be abducted from Kamal Adwan Hospital, including alongside his injured son. Mr Rayyan is just one of hundreds of healthcare workers to be abducted. It is understood that his family have received no information about the circumstances of his death – reflecting a severe lack of transparency surrounding the treatment of detained healthcare workers.[14]

The scale of loss has devasted Gaza's medical workforce and severely diminished its remaining capacity. Arrests and detentions of medical personnel, often conducted without charge or due process, raise serious concerns of arbitrary detention. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 37/194 affirms that medical personnel must not be punished for carrying out medical activities consistent with medical ethics.[15] The removal of such a substantial proportion of Gaza's trained medical professionals has further entrenched the collapse of the health system.

Disinformation efforts to legitimise bombardment

- **Al Shifa Hospital - Personnel**

In November 2023, viral content circulated online showing a 'nurse' inside Al-Shifa Hospital stating that Hamas was 'taking over the entire hospital, taking over the fuel; the medicine; I have nothing to treat with.'[16] Marc Owen Jones, an associate professor of Middle East Studies at Hamad bin Khalifa University and expert on disinformation and digital media described the testimony as 'clearly staged'.[17] Human Rights Watch confirmed that despite claims by the Israeli military on 5th November 2023 of 'Hamas's cynical use of hospitals', no evidence put forward would justify depriving hospitals and ambulances of their protected status under international humanitarian law.[18]

- **Al Ahli October 2023 bombing**

Following the 17th October 2023 explosion at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, a wave of claims circulated alleging that the blast had been caused by Hamas, Forensic Architecture found that much of this material had been decontextualised or repurposed, with key frames inconsistent with verified timelines and impact sites. The analysis concluded that widely

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[13] Human Rights Watch (26 August 2024), Israel: Palestinian Healthcare Workers Tortured.
[14] Healthcare Workers Watch (13 February 2026), A sixth healthcare worker from Gaza has died while in Israeli detention as fears grow for the safety of the remaining detainees.

[15] UN Resolution 37/194, 'Principles of Medical Ethics relevant to the Role of Health Personnel'

[16] Eltayeb, Mohamed (12 November 2023), Disinformation experts call out Israeli theatrics for using actress to play anti-Hamas nurse. Doha News.
[17] Eltayeb, Mohamed (12 November 2023), Disinformation experts call out Israeli theatrics for using actress to play anti-Hamas nurse. Doha News.
[18] Human Rights Watch (14 November 2023), Gaza: Unlawful Israeli Hospital Strikes Worsen Health Crisis.

shared clips did not correspond with the documented location of the blast, and that attempts to attribute the explosion to Hamas were not supported by reliable evidence.[19]

These misleading narratives helped to hide who was responsible for the attack and shape international perceptions in a way that could deflect scrutiny from the targeting of a protected medical facility under international humanitarian law. It demonstrates how disinformation can function alongside military operations to undermine legal protections and distort public understanding of violations against civilian infrastructure.

- **Tunnels under Hospitals**

Prior to their capture of Al-Shifa Hospital, the Israel Defense Forces went to considerable lengths to depict the medical complex as a headquarters for Hamas, from which attacks on Israel were planned. Animated graphics shared with the media portrayed a network of well-equipped subterranean chambers beneath the hospital.

Widely discredited IDF videos showed modest collections of small arms, mostly assault rifles, recovered from within the extensive complex. These videos showed wild inconsistencies, with videos recorded hours before they were claimed to be recorded, later versions of videos showing larger quantities of guns in the same place, and videos shown by the BBC to have been doctored despite the IDF claiming the footage was unedited.[20]

These issues are significant under the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits military operations against hospitals unless they are used, outside their humanitarian duties, to commit acts harmful to the enemy. Article 19 makes clear that the presence of small arms and ammunition taken from combatants does not in itself remove protected status.[21]

Legal Obligations to Protect the Healthcare Sector

The deliberate targeting of medical facilities constitutes a war crime under Article 8(2)(b)(ix) of the Rome Statute.[22] According to Article 19 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, protections afforded to civilian hospitals shall not cease unless they are used to commit acts outside of their humanitarian duty.[23] The protection granted to medical facilities is therefore only negated where there is conclusive evidence that they are being used for harmful purposes.[24]

[19] Forensic Architecture (2023), Israeli Disinformation: Al-Ahli Hospital.
[20] Borger, Julian (17 November 2023), IDF evidence so far falls well short of al-Shifa hospital being Hamas HQ. The Guardian.
[21] Borger, Julian (17 November 2023), IDF evidence so far falls well short of al-Shifa hospital being Hamas HQ. The Guardian.

[22] Rome Statute. Art 8.
[23] Fourth Geneva Convention, Art 19.
[24] Rome Statute, Art 8.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has interpreted this "derogation clause" as requiring that loss of protection should not be applied where there is doubt as to whether medical facilities are being used to commit harmful acts. In such circumstances, medical units must be presumed to retain their protected status.[25]

The targeting of medical vehicles is likewise prohibited under Rule 29 of customary international humanitarian law,[26] Article 35 of the First Geneva Convention, and Article 21 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.[27] The deliberate targeting of such protected vehicles constitutes a war crime under Article 8(2)(b)(xxiv) of the Rome Statute.[28]

[25] International Committee of the Red Cross. (2nd November 2023), The protection of hospitals during armed conflicts: What the law say'

[26] International Humanitarian Law Customary Treaties, Rule29.

[27] First Geneva Convention, Art 35; Fourth Geneva Convention, Art 21.

[28] Rome Statute, Art 8.