The silent kill: "Medicide" as an instrument of human rights abuses in Gaza

Sessiz katil: Gazze'de insan hakları ihlallerinin bir aracı olarak "Medicide"

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Abstract

The Israeli military attacks on Gaza since October 7, 2023, have severely impacted healthcare, including the destruction of medical infrastructure, targeted assaults on healthcare workers, and the obstruction of medical aid. These actions have resulted in a profound humanitarian crisis, exacerbating existing health challenges and creating new ones, while dismantling Gaza's already fragile healthcare system. This study examines the multi-faceted destruction of the healthcare infrastructure, arguing that these actions constitute a deliberate strategy of warfare aimed at incapacitating the healthcare system. This phenomenon, termed medicide —a portmanteau of "medicine" and "human rights abuses," refers to the systematic destruction of a healthcare system, wholly or partially, with the intent of impairing or eliminating the conditions necessary to save and sustain the lives of the sick and injured — is explored within the context of its long-term psychological and physical toll on the Gazan population.

Keywords: Disasters; human rights; health facilities; healthcare systems; war crimes

Öz

İsrail ordusunun 7 Ekim 2023'ten itibaren Gazze'ye yönelik saldırıları, sağlık hizmetlerini ciddi şekilde etkilemiş; tıbbi altyapının yıkımı, sağlık çalışanlarını hedefleyen saldırılar ve tıbbi yardımların engellenmesi gibi olaylarla sonuçlanmıştır. Bu eylemler, mevcut sağlık sorunlarını daha da derinleştirerek yeni sorunlar yaratmış ve Gazze'nin zaten kırılgan olan sağlık sistemini neredeyse tamamen işlevsiz hale getirmiştir. Bu çalışma, sağlık altyapısının çok yönlü tahribatını inceleyerek, bu eylemlerin sağlık sistemini işlevsiz hale getirmeyi amaçlayan kasıtlı bir savaş stratejisi olduğunu savunmaktadır. Medicide olarak adlandırılan bu olgu, bir sağlık sisteminin tamamının veya bir bölümünün, hastaların ve yaralıların hayatlarını kurtarmak ve sürdürmek için gerekli koşulları kasten yok etme amacıyla sistematik bir şekilde tahrip edilmesi olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, bu yıkımın Gazze halkı üzerindeki uzun vadeli psikolojik ve fiziksel etkileri ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Afetler; insan hakları; sağlık tesisleri; sağlık sistemleri; savaş suçları

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INTRODUCTION

Medicide, a term that highlights one of the darkest intersections between healthcare and violence, is a term used to define *the destruction of a healthcare system,* either wholly or partially, with the aim of obliterating or damaging the conditions needed for saving and sustaining the lives of the sick and injured (1). This horrific act can take various forms, including attacks on healthcare facilities, denying access to essential medications, preventing medical teams from delivering aid to those in need, and targeting medical workers. In summary, it is the act of turning healthcare—typically a sanctuary for healing and relief—into a tool of oppression and suffering. Since October 2023, Israel has conducted nearly five hundred reported attacks on healthcare facilities and personnel in Gaza, in an act that can only be described as *medicide* (1). The word *medicide* stems from the Latin "medicus" meaning "physician" (2) and "-cide", meaning "to kill" or "to cut down" (3). When combined, the term signifies the killing or destruction through the denial of medical care, often as part of larger political or military strategies. The term *medicide*, previously used in a different context in earlier sources, has been analyzed for the first time in the literature in this context—as the systematic destruction of a healthcare system.

This systematic targeting of healthcare is not merely a violation of medical ethics but also a breach of fundamental human rights. In its current war on Gaza, Israel has been using it as a tool of warfare, and a method to further oppress civilians, depriving the population of 2.2 million people in Gaza of their basic right of life and health. These attacks include military assaults on healthcare facilities, murder and detention of healthcare workers, the prevention of medical aid from entering the strip, and obstruction of patient evacuations outside of Gaza. Such incidents have been reported and documented extensively, as will be exemplified with references below.

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has been targeting healthcare facilities across Gaza, almost completely paralyzing the healthcare system in the strip. One of the deadliest attacks occurred on October 17, 2023, when Al-Ma'amdani hospital was bombed, resulting in the deaths of over 500 civilians, most of whom had sought refuge there (4), in the thought that hospitals were a safe haven from military assaults.

By September 17, 2024, Israel had killed 1151 healthcare workers, according to the Palestinian health ministry (5), with the World Health Organization (WHO) reporting 1043 health attacks in Gaza, representing a systematic targeting of healthcare infrastructure, leading to the collapse of Gaza's healthcare system (6). As of January 2024, only 13 out of 36 hospitals in Gaza remained partially functional, and even those are struggling to operate due to the lack of fuel, medical supplies, and personnel. It can be strongly argued that these attacks have significantly undermined the unquestionable right to live for the 2.2 million people living in Gaza (6).

This study begins by defining the concept of *medicide* in detail, followed by an exploration of its historical context and parallels in other conflict zones. Subsequently, the focus shifts to analyzing the current situation in Gaza, specifically the systematic attacks on healthcare infrastructure and their impact on public health. Finally, the long-term consequences of *medicide* are discussed, alongside recommendations for actions the international community should take to address such violations.

METHODS

This study is based on a qualitative approach to analyze the systematic targeting and destruction of healthcare infrastructure in Gaza. A comprehensive review of relevant literature, including reports from international organizations, journalistic investigations, and firsthand testimonies from healthcare workers, was conducted.

Data were obtained from:

- Reports and databases of international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and Doctors Without Borders (MSF).
- Published journal articles focusing on conflict-related destruction of healthcare systems.
- Testimonies and interviews with healthcare professionals operating in Gaza during and after the events of October 2023.

The analysis aimed to identify patterns of attacks on healthcare systems, the impact on public health and medical personnel, and the broader implications of what is termed as *medicide*.

Ethical approval was not required as this study is a secondary analysis of publicly available data. The data used were extracted from verified and publicly accessible sources, ensuring reliability and transparency in the research process.

RESULTS

The findings reveal a systematic and deliberate targeting of Gaza's healthcare system, encompassing direct assaults on medical facilities, personnel, and essential supplies. Key results are as follows:

1) Historical context of 'Medicide' in conflict zones
Definition of human rights abuses

The United Nations, through its 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of human rights abuses, defines human rights abuses as acts intended to destroy, either entirely or in part, a group distinguished by nationality, ethnicity, race, or religion. This destruction can manifest in various forms, such as directly killing members of the group, causing serious physical or psychological harm, or creating conditions designed to slowly erode the group's ability to survive (7).

In Gaza, this concept of human rights abuses extends beyond the immediate loss of life. It encompasses the methodical dismantling of healthcare services and the denial of essential medical care. This approach aligns with the UN's definition by inflicting both immediate and long-term harm. Here, *medicide* becomes a quiet, insidious weapon—slowly extinguishing hope and life, gradually wearing down a population's ability to endure. The intentional collapse of healthcare ensures that treatable illnesses become deadly, injuries remain untreated, and the overall population grows weaker, more susceptible, and increasingly vulnerable to eventual destruction.

This method of targeting healthcare infrastructure in Gaza fits within the broader definition of human rights abuses, as it doesn't merely aim to harm individuals but systematically undermines the survival of the entire society over time. Through these means, the aggressor erodes the health and resilience of the community, leading to its gradual weakening and potential demise.

Precedents of 'Medicide' in global conflicts

Intentionally attacking healthcare facilities and personnel has been a tactic used in wars throughout history, causing significant humanitarian suffering in various conflicts worldwide, from Bosnia to Yemen and Syria to Ukraine. Targeting medical infrastructure has become an alarmingly common practice that denies many civilians vital care and security during their most challenging times in conflict areas. This deliberate destruction of essential human services underscores the severe impact of warfare, on the most fragile members of society (8). In Bosnia, hospitals in Sarajevo were repeatedly shelled during the siege, leading to countless civilian casualties (9). In Yemen, airstrikes have targeted hospitals such as the Abs Hospital, causing the deaths of both patients and healthcare workers (10). In Syria, attacks on facilities like the Al-Quds Hospital in Aleppo resulted in the destruction of vital healthcare infrastructure and the loss of dozens of lives (11). Similarly, in Ukraine, Russian forces have been reported to target hospitals, including the infamous strike on the Mariupol Maternity and Children's Hospital (12). These instances of *medicide* exemplify the deliberate destruction of healthcare systems, highlighting the catastrophic humanitarian toll of such tactics. Building upon these historical precedents, the case of Gaza represents the most systematic and devastating application of medicide in recent history.

Healthcare as a target in previous conflicts

Gaza's healthcare system has long been a target in various rounds of conflict, with hospitals, clinics, and ambulances frequently coming under direct attack. These incidents have not only devastated the healthcare infrastructure but also led to countless preventable deaths due to the inability to provide medical care in times of need. Below is the revised timeline that illustrates the ongoing impact of conflicts on Gaza's healthcare system from 2008 to the present day.

2008-2009: Operation cast lead

During Operation Cast Lead, Israeli forces *launched* a massive offensive that severely impacted Gaza's healthcare infrastructure. Over the 22-day assault, airstrikes damaged or destroyed 58 hospitals and clinics, crip-

pling essential medical services for civilians. Emergency response services were also heavily affected; 29 ambulances were damaged or destroyed, making it nearly impossible for medics to reach those in need. Tragically, 16 healthcare workers lost their lives, and 25 others were injured while trying to provide care amidst relentless bombardment. Following the conflict, a blockade restricted vital supplies, leaving Gaza's healthcare system struggling to rebuild under severe constraints (13).

2012: Operation pillar of defense

In 2012, during Operation Pillar of Defense, Israel once again targeted Gaza's healthcare facilities. Sixteen hospitals and clinics were either damaged or destroyed, and six ambulances were hit, further hampering emergency services. The conflict posed significant risks to medical personnel, with three healthcare workers injured while tending to the wounded, underscoring the dangers they faced even in their protected roles (13).

2014: Operation protective edge

The conflict in 2014, known as Operation Protective Edge, saw a significant escalation in attacks on healthcare. Israeli airstrikes caused severe damage to 73 hospitals and clinics, with 45 ambulances also affected. This destruction left critical gaps in emergency response capabilities. Sadly, 23 healthcare workers lost their lives, and 78 were injured while risking everything to care for their community. The widespread devastation severely reduced Gaza's healthcare capacity, leaving the population in desperate need (13).

2021: May escalation

The May 2021 escalation brought another wave of destruction. Israeli strikes resulted in 132 attacks on health facilities, injuring 58 healthcare workers and impacting 41 healthcare facilities. Additionally, 59 ambulances were hit, severely limiting the ability to transport patients and provide emergency care. These assaults further disrupted Gaza's already fragile healthcare system, exacerbating civilian suffering (14).

2023 October 7th: Al Aqsa Flood Operation

Since the outbreak of conflict on October 7, 2023, Israeli forces have systematically targeted Gaza's health-care facilities, leaving a devastated medical infrastructure. Reports from the Palestinian Ministry of Health's Emergency Operations Center indicate that 23 of 38 hospitals have been hit, with 13 completely closed and 15 barely operational.

The continued blockade has exacerbated severe shortages of medical supplies, making it difficult for hospitals to treat even basic health needs. Infectious diseases have surged, with 2,136,026 cases reported, underscoring a severe health crisis (15).

Medical personnel have paid a heavy toll, with 1151 healthcare workers killed and over 310 injured or detained. More than 130 ambulances have been destroyed, further crippling emergency response capabilities. This systematic targeting represents a form of *medicide* a warfare tactic aimed at breaking the spirit of Gaza's people by dismantling the healthcare system, leading to a prolonged humanitarian disaster (16).

2. 'Medicide' as an instrument of human rights abuses

Medicide, or the intentional targeting and destruction of healthcare systems, serves as a direct mechanism of *human rights abuses* in the context of human rights abuses. By demolishing hospitals and either killing or psychologically breaking medical professionals systematically weakens the health and survival of the entire population. By portraying healthcare workers as both victims and symbols of resilience, it can be argued that this gradual and deliberate dismantling of healthcare is not a mere byproduct of war but rather a calculated strategy of extermination. This tactic strips a society of its ability to recover, both physically and mentally, rendering it vulnerable for generations.

Psychological human rights abuses

The term psychological human rights abuses describes how prolonged conflict gradually erodes the mental well-being of Gaza's healthcare workers. These doctors face daily psychological challenges, not only from the violent surroundings in which they operate, but also from the immense burden of treating the wounded with scarce resources—all while their own families often remain at risk. In this context, resilience reflects more than just survival; it symbolizes their fight to

uphold dignity and professionalism in conditions designed to break their spirits. This demonstrates how *medicide* attacks both the mental and physical foundations of Gaza's healthcare system, crippling future generations of medical providers (17)

Building hospitals vs. Building medical staff

Building Hospitals in Gaza Will Take Two Years, But Developing a Medical Staff Will Take a generation -Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah (18)

This stark comparison highlights the long-term damage inflicted by war and blockades on Gaza's medical infrastructure. While rebuilding hospitals may take just a few years, the loss of experienced medical personnel, combined with the psychological devastation of those who remain, means that training new staff will take an entire generation. This underscores the point that the destruction of Gaza's healthcare system is not just a short-term consequence of war, but part of a longer-term human rights abuses strategy that prevents future generations from maintaining adequate healthcare standards.

Testimonies and evidence

Testimonies from international organizations, journalists, and healthcare workers on the ground provide irrefutable evidence that *medicide* is a deliberate, systematic campaign aimed at dismantling Gaza's healthcare system.

Doctors without borders (MSF):

The MSF has repeatedly condemned the deliberate targeting of medical facilities, stating that such actions are not isolated incidents but part of a broader strategy. MSF reports have documented the bombing of hospitals during ceasefires, showing that the intent goes beyond military objectives and aims to eliminate the possibility of recovery (19)

The World Health Organization (WHO):

The WHO has reported the destruction of essential medical facilities and blockades that prevent the delivery of basic medical supplies, making it impossible for doctors to treat patients. This blockade is another facet of *medicide*, where life-saving drugs and equipment are intentionally withheld, turning treatable conditions into death sentences (20).

First-hand testimonies from doctors and nurses on the frontlines describe their daily struggle to work with minimal resources, often witnessing their patients die from lack of basic care. These healthcare workers are overwhelmed, under-equipped, and deeply traumatized by the systematic destruction of the infrastructure that should allow them to save lives. Their voices are a critical reminder that *medicide* is a weapon that extends far beyond the battlefield—it strikes at the heart of society's ability to survive.

3. The immediate and long-term consequences of 'Medicide' on Gaza

The destruction of Gaza's healthcare infrastructure has led to a surge in preventable diseases, untreated injuries, and the rapid spread of infectious diseases, creating an immediate and profound public health crisis. Long-term effects include widespread psychological trauma, a severe shortage of healthcare professionals, and the collapse of rehabilitation services, leaving future generations increasingly vulnerable. These cascading consequences underscore the urgent need for immediate international intervention to address the crisis and rebuild Gaza's healthcare system for a sustainable future.

Spread of infectious diseases

During times of war, the horror and ugliness of death due to shelling and bombing often overshadows deaths due to other causes like infectious diseases. However, historically infectious diseases have appeared in all armed conflicts as the ''third army'' that, though silently, causes death tolls that often exceed deaths from combat (21). During the Napoleonic Wars, British soldiers died of infections eight times more frequently than combat wounds, and during the American Civil War, 660,000 people died of infectious diseases like malaria and dysentery (22).

In Gaza, beyond the tragic loss of at least 42,227 lives (23), the destruction of infrastructure (87% of housing units are damaged (23) and displacement of 90% of the Gazan population (24) have created the perfect environment for the thriving of infectious diseases (22). As of 30 June 2024, the WHO reported 974,253

cases of acute respiratory infections, 562-753 cases of diarrhea, 103,385 cases of scabies and lice, 65,368 cases of skin rashes, 11,214 cases of chickenpox and 104,766 cases of acute jaundice syndrome, and these are only the reported cases, with estimates that the real numbers are much higher in the light of delayed and incomplete data reporting (25). Moreover, variant type 2 poliovirus has been isolated from sewage samples in Gaza (25) raising international fear from the spread of Polio, which is a highly infectious and incurable disease (26), in Gaza.

''Without an immediate, permanent ceasefire and unrestricted aid, people in Gaza will continue to get ill and die from infectious diseases. Israel's military offensive has created the conditions for polio to spread rapidly, posing a dangerous threat to Gaza's more than one million children," writes Sameer Sah, highlighting the devastating impact of the ongoing conflict on public health (27)."

Mass psychological trauma

Due to the continuous cycle of violence, blockades and widespread hopelessness compounded by the trauma of witnessing death and destruction, Gazans have been being exposed to severe traumatic events for decades (28). This has created a generational mental health crisis that has been going on for years.

The mental health of people in Gaza has been a pressing public health concern for years before the current war, particularly concerning PTSD, depression, and anxiety. A study published in 2023 showed that 53.5% of Gazan children had PTSD even before October 7 (28). The current attacks have only made the mass psychological trauma much worse, making the mental health toll on the population immeasurable.

"As a psychologist, I have never witnessed anything like what we see happening in Gaza right now. This will further add to intergenerational, collective and historical expressions of trauma for the Palestinian population in Gaza that will last for many years. There is nowhere to flee. No prospect of peace in the future. No basic things available like medicine, food, clean water – all of which affect mental health very much." Says Eoin O'Shea, a psychologist who has worked for the Irish Red Cross (29).

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to address and treat PTSD in the presence of concurrent stressors, and even if the war ends, these issues will escalate into severe, long-term societal problems that affect productivity, family structures, and overall community resilience, and even if the psychological trauma left on the population is properly addressed in the future, it will take decades to heal.

Irreversible injuries

The number of people injured in Gaza is estimated to be at least 97,303, which is equal to one in 23 people (30). According to the WHO, 22,500 of these injuries are life-changing and require life-long rehabilitation services (31).

Among these injuries is the quite alarming high number of limb amputations. Rajaa Hassan, a Gaza-based doctor, says that with the shutting down of most hospitals in Gaza and due to the lack of adequate medical supplies, amputations, even if unnecessary, are sometimes the only option available to cauterize bleeding and save patients' lives (32). According to a Save the Children report published in January 2024, more than 10 children per day, on average, have lost one or both of their legs in Gaza since October 2023 (33). Since then, between 3105 and 4050 limb amputations have occurred (31). Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah, a London-based plastic and reconstructive surgeon who has volunteered as a physician in Gaza, mentioned that he had to perform 6 amputations in a single night while serving at a hospital in Gaza (34).

"This is the biggest cohort of pediatric amputees in history," says Ghassan Abu Sittah (35).

Pediatric patients who undergo amputations need regular medical check-ups and often require multiple surgeries in their lives (36). There are serious concerns concerning the quality of life of all of the children who have amputated limbs, especially with the targeting of healthcare workers, including surgeons, physiotherapists, and prosthesis/orthosis technicians, and with Gaza's only limb reconstruction and rehabilitation center, located in the Nasser Medical Complex has been out of function since December 2023 due to lack of supplies and staff, and was further damaged in a February 2024 Israeli raid (36).

Impact on the medical infrastructure

Since the start of the Israeli attacks on Gaza, 31 out of 36 hospitals have been demolished or destroyed, including

Al-Shifa Hospital, the largest medical complex in Gaza, which remains completely out of service (37).

"Hospitals are not places of hope anymore, nor of refuge or care. Gaza is at breaking point, and it will break very soon," says Judith Starkulla, Head of Office in Gaza, United National Population Fund (UNFPA) (38).

Rebuilding healthcare facilities and reconstruction of the demolished healthcare infrastructure in Gaza will take years, if not decades, and will only be possible with long-term urban and health planning, coupled with serious international fundraising (39).

The attrition of healthcare personnel

Even when the physical healthcare infrastructure is restored, the real challenge lies in reviving the system to its previous capacity. This is especially difficult considering that Israel has killed 1151 healthcare workers in the past year, including at least 165 doctors, 260 nurses, 300 management and support personnel, 184 health associate professionals, 76 pharmacists, and 12 other health workers (5). Hospitals can be rebuilt in a matter of years, but the training of specialists takes much longer. This makes the loss of key medical personnel one of the most devastating aspects of *medicide*. Additionally, at least 214 medical staff from Gaza have been detained by the Israeli military (40), many of whom lost their lives under torture while in detention.

This loss creates a vicious cycle: fewer skilled professionals means the healthcare system is less capable of managing the public health crisis. The emotional toll on surviving medical staff is immense, leading to burnout and further reducing the system's ability to function. The destruction of Gaza's healthcare workforce ensures that the effects of *medicide* will persist for generations, perpetuating suffering, death, and inadequate care long after the conflict ends.

CONCLUSION

The deliberate targeting of Gaza's healthcare infrastructure and personnel underlines a systematic strategy of *medicide*, aimed at eroding not only the physical health but also the social resilience of the population. The destruction of hospitals, the loss of over a thousand healthcare workers, and the collapse of medical services have crippled Gaza's ability to provide basic care, transforming treatable conditions into death sentences. This devastation is not a short-term byproduct of war but a calculated assault on the future of Gaza's people, ensuring long-lasting public health crises and generational trauma. Without comprehensive international efforts to rebuild both medical infrastructure and personnel, Gaza's healthcare system will remain critically impaired, perpetuating suffering for decades to come.

Conflict-of-interest and financial disclosure

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to disclose. The authors also declare that they did not receive any financial support for the study.

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