

Gaza: A statistical anomaly

by GWYNNE DYER

I was just idly looking at the casualty numbers the other day and I noticed that there was something badly wrong with them. This will take a little time and a few stats, but it's worth staying with it.

The number of civilians killed in Ukraine in three years of war, most of them from rockets, bombs and shells but a small proportion by bullets, is 12,605. Ukraine's current population, not counting the 10 million people living under Russian military occupation or as refugees abroad, is about 29 million.

The number of people killed in Gaza in half that time (eighteen months), most of them from rockets, bombs and shells but a small proportion by bullets, is 50,600. The current population of the Gaza Strip, almost none of whom have been able to leave, is just over 2 million.

Now, the Israelis would point out that many of the Palestinian deaths were combatants, and it is true that the Gaza Health Ministry (GHM) does not record the military status of the casualties who are brought in to the various hospitals still functioning in Gaza. So let's just exclude all Palestinian men of military age, regardless of whether they were fighters or not.

That means 59.1 per cent of the dead with 'traumatic injuries' seen in hospitals are children, women and old men: definitely civilians. Although the Israelis claim that these numbers are false because Hamas runs the GHM, its reports are considered reliable by the United Nations, the World Health Organization, Human Rights Watch and the international media.

Moreover, a peer-reviewed analysis published by the respected British medical journal The Lancet in January 2025 concluded the GHM had undercounted deaths due to traumatic injury by 41 per cent in its reports, mainly because so many corpses still lie buried under the ruins of their homes. (Bodies in Ukraine are almost always recovered, but this is often impossible in Gaza.)

Therefore, the Lancet study estimated, traumatic injury deaths in Gaza as of October 2024 probably exceeded 70,000 as opposed to the GHM's reported 41,909. Another six months have passed since then, but two of those months were a ceasefire so let's say only another 20,000 deaths, for a total of 90,000 since October of 2023.

We're almost there. Just one more calculation.

Out of those 90,000 deaths, using the estimate in The Lancet that 59.1 per cent of 'traumatic deaths' in Gaza were children, women and old men, there were 53,190 civilians killed in the Strip by bombs, rockets, shells and small arms since October 2023.

Now we have a number for civilians killed by Israelis in Gaza that can be roughly but fairly compared with the number of civilians killed by Russians in Ukraine ? and do you see what's wrong? About FOUR times as many civilians have been killed in Gaza, in HALF the time, out of a population LESS THAN ONE-TENTH AS BIG.

I'm not suggesting here that the Israelis are conducting a genocide in Gaza. I'm just pointing out that something very unpleasant is going on ? and it can't be explained away by saying that Gaza is a lot more crowded than Ukraine. Almost all the Russian strikes that kill civilians in Ukraine also hit crowded cities.

There is a plausible explanation, but it isn't pretty. Most people don't know this, but the better armies ? the ones that try to keep civilian casualties at a minimum ? can estimate in advance how many civilians will die if they carry out a particular artillery or air strike.

There's even software to calculate how many civilians would die as 'collateral damage' for a strike that kills one low-ranking enemy

combatant. The Israeli version of this program is called 'Lavender,' and it has been intensively used in Gaza to identify probable militants.

Six Israeli intelligence officers told +972 Magazine last year that they regularly consulted pre-set limits for the number of civilians who could be killed before they authorized strikes on various levels of suspected Hamas members.

This limit can go up and down, but in the early part of the war it was often up around 15-20 civilian deaths for a single low-level militant. Moreover, they preferred to strike the target at home, because then they could use a cheap, unguided 'dumb bomb' and just drop the entire house on its occupants, wiping out the entire family.

'You don't want to waste expensive bombs on unimportant people,' one said, and that is probably the best answer we're ever going to have for this sad statistical anomaly. Which leaves us with the surprising fact that the Russian army cares more about the lives of enemy civilians than the Israeli Defence Force does.

But then, the Russians believe (mistakenly) that Ukrainians are really Russians who have just lost their bearings, whereas the Israelis believe that Palestinians are...well, just Arabs.