

Gaza Civilians, Under Israeli Barrage, Are Being Killed at Historic Pace

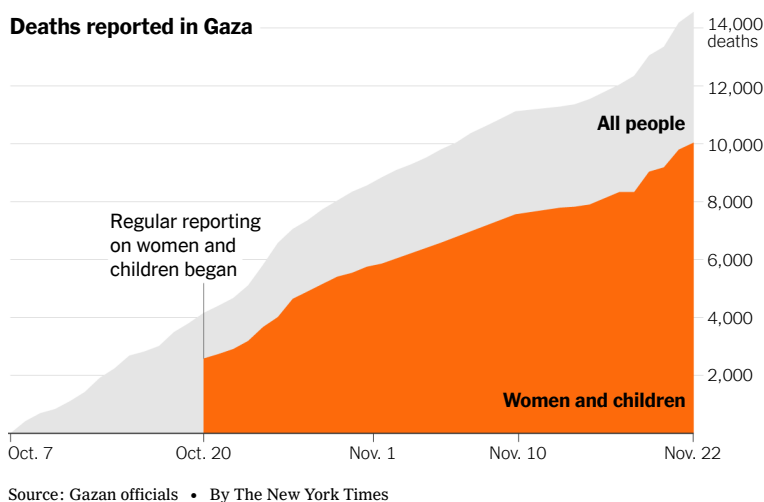
In less than two months, more than twice as many women and children have been reported killed in Gaza than in Ukraine after two years of war.



By Lauren Leatherby

Nov. 25, 2023 Updated 12:15 p.m. ET

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Israel has cast the deaths of civilians in the Gaza Strip as a regrettable but unavoidable part of modern conflict, pointing to the heavy human toll from military campaigns the United States itself once waged in Iraq and Syria.

But a review of past conflicts and interviews with casualty and weapons experts suggest that Israel's assault is different.

While wartime death tolls will never be exact, experts say that even a conservative reading of the casualty figures reported from Gaza shows that the pace of death during Israel's campaign has few precedents in this century.

People are being killed in Gaza more quickly, they say, than in even the deadliest moments of U.S.-led attacks in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, which were themselves widely criticized by human rights groups.

Precise comparisons of war dead are impossible, but conflict-casualty experts have been taken aback at just how many people have been reported killed in Gaza — most of them women and children — and how rapidly.

It is not just the scale of the strikes — Israel said it had engaged more than 15,000 targets before reaching a brief cease-fire in recent days. It is also the nature of the weaponry itself.

Israel's liberal use of very large weapons in dense urban areas, including U.S.-made 2,000-pound bombs that can flatten an apartment tower, is surprising, some experts say.

"It's beyond anything that I've seen in my career," said Marc Garlasco, a military adviser for the Dutch organization PAX and a former senior intelligence analyst at the Pentagon. To find a historical comparison for so many large bombs in such a small area, he said, we may "have to go back to Vietnam, or the Second World War."

In fighting during this century, by contrast, U.S. military officials often believed that the most common American aerial bomb — a 500-pound weapon — was far too large for most targets when battling the Islamic State in urban areas like Mosul, Iraq, and Raqqa, Syria.

The Israeli military points out that Gaza presents a battlefield like few others. It is small and dense, with civilians living next to, and even on top of, Hamas combatants who rely on tunnel networks to shield themselves and their weapons, putting residents directly in

the line of fire, the military says.

Given these underground networks — which the military says enabled Hamas to wage its deadly attacks on Oct. 7 — Israeli forces say they use the “smallest available ordnance” to achieve their strategic objectives in order to cause the “minimal adverse effect on civilians.”

Civilian casualties are notoriously hard to calculate, and officials in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip do not separate the deaths of civilians and combatants.

Researchers point instead to the roughly 10,000 women and children reported killed in Gaza as an approximate — though conservative — measure of civilian deaths in the territory. International officials and experts familiar with the way figures are compiled by health officials in Gaza say the overall numbers are generally reliable.

The Israeli military acknowledged that children, women and older people have been killed in Gaza, but said the death toll reported in Gaza could not be trusted because the territory is run by Hamas. The military did not provide a count of its own, but said that civilians “are not the target” of its campaign.

“We do a lot in order to prevent and, where possible, minimize the killing or wounding of civilians,” said Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, an Israeli military spokesman. “We focus on Hamas.”

Still, researchers say the pace of deaths reported in Gaza during the Israeli bombardment has been exceptionally high.

More than twice as many women and children have already been reported killed in Gaza than in Ukraine after almost two years of Russian attacks, according to United Nations estimates.



Palestinians being buried in a mass grave at a cemetery in the Gaza Strip. Yousef Masoud for The New York Times

More women and children have been reported killed in Gaza in less than two months than the roughly 7,700 civilians documented as killed by U.S. forces and their international allies in the entire first year of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, according to estimates from Iraq Body Count, an independent British research group.

And the number of women and children reported killed in Gaza since the Israeli campaign began last month has already started to approach the roughly 12,400 civilians documented to have been killed by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan during nearly 20 years of war, according to Neta C. Crawford, co-director of Brown University's Costs of War Project.

These comparisons are based on the thousands of deaths directly attributed to U.S. coalition forces over decades in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Far more people — hundreds of thousands in total — are estimated to have been killed in these conflicts by other groups, including the Syrian government and its allies, local militias, the Islamic State and the Iraqi security forces.

But while the overall death tolls in those wars were larger, the number of people killed in Gaza “in a very short period of time is higher than in other conflicts,” said Professor Crawford, who has extensively researched modern wars.

In the nine-month battle of Mosul, which Israeli officials have cited as a comparison, an estimated total of 9,000 to 11,000 civilians were killed by all sides in the conflict, including many thousands killed by the Islamic State, The Associated Press found.

A similar number of women and children have already been reported killed in Gaza in less than two months.

The bombs being used in Gaza are larger than what the United States used when it was fighting ISIS in cities like Mosul and Raqqa, and are more consistent with targeting underground infrastructure like tunnels, said Brian Castner, a weapons investigator for Amnesty International and a former explosive ordnance disposal officer in the U.S. Air Force.

Not only is Gaza tiny when compared with conflict zones like Iraq, Afghanistan or Ukraine, but the territory's borders have also been closed by Israel and Egypt, giving civilians few, if any, safe places to flee.

More than 60,000 buildings have been damaged or destroyed in the Gaza Strip, satellite analysis indicates, including about half of the buildings in northern Gaza.

“They are using extremely large weapons in extremely densely populated areas,” Mr. Castner said of Israeli forces. “It is the worst possible combination of factors.”

A War ‘for Our Existence’

Israeli officials say their campaign is focused on degrading Gazan military infrastructure that is often built near homes and civilian institutions — or buried underneath them.

“To get to that target,” Colonel Conricus said, the military has to use “larger bombs with a higher yield.”

When an Israeli government spokesman, Mark Regev, was asked in an Oct. 24 interview with PBS about the pace of the strikes, he said Israel was aiming for a shorter campaign than the United States waged in Iraq and Syria.

“Hopefully, we get it done quicker,” Mr. Regev said. “That’s one of our goals. But it could take longer than many Israelis would hope, because Hamas has been in power for 16 years.”

Israel has directed Gaza residents to evacuate areas where the bombing campaign is especially concentrated, but it has continued to strike other areas as well.

More broadly, Israeli officials say this is a campaign on its own borders to wipe out Hamas, a group dedicated to Israel's destruction. “The war here is for our existence,” one Israeli war cabinet minister, Benny Gantz, told reporters on Nov. 8.

The brutality of the Hamas attack on Oct. 7 traumatized Israelis, and some prominent members of the Israeli government have made clear that they are waging a ferocious campaign.

“Gaza won’t return to what it was before. Hamas will no longer exist. We will eliminate everything,” Yoav Gallant, Israel's defense minister, said in the days after the Hamas raids.

After initially questioning the death toll in Gaza, the Biden administration now concedes that the true figures for civilian casualties may be even worse.

Barbara Leaf, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, told a House committee this month that American officials thought the civilian casualties were “very high, frankly, and it could be that they’re even higher than are being cited.”

International experts who have worked with the Gaza Health Ministry during this and other wars say that it gathers death figures from hospitals and morgues across the enclave, which tally the dead and report the names, ID numbers and other details of people killed.

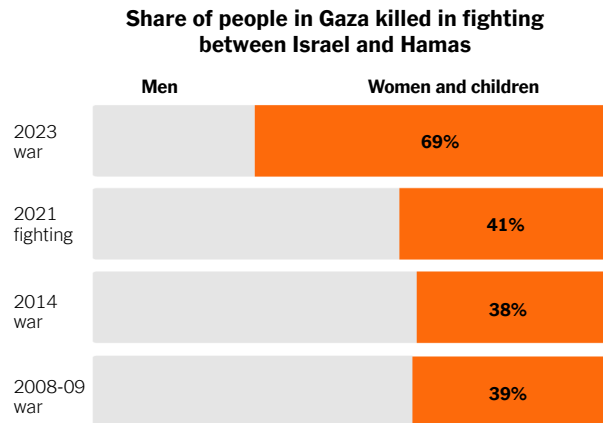
While the experts urged caution around public statements about the specific number of people killed in a particular strike — especially in the immediate aftermath of a blast — they said the aggregate death tolls reported by the Gaza Health Ministry have

typically proved to be accurate.

In the last few weeks, recording the dead in Gaza has become increasingly difficult in the chaos of the fighting, as hospitals come under direct fire, much of the health system ceases to function and other government officials have begun updating the number of killed instead of the ministry. But even before those changes, the number of women and children reported dead already outpaced other conflicts.

Women and children account for nearly 70 percent of all deaths reported in Gaza even though most combatants are men — an “extraordinary statistic,” Rick Brennan, the regional emergency director for the World Health Organization’s Eastern Mediterranean office, said at an event this month.

Normally, one would expect the opposite, Mr. Brennan said. In past clashes between Israel and Hamas, for example, about 60 percent of the reported deaths in Gaza were men.



Sources: U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (pre-2023 fighting), Gazan officials (2023) • By The New York Times

The Israeli military spokesman, Colonel Conricus, said the high percentage of women and children reported killed in Gaza is another reason to mistrust the figures, adding that Israeli forces have warned civilians of strikes in advance “where it is feasible.”

Beyond that, Israeli officials have pointed not just to U.S. actions in Iraq and Syria, but also to the conduct of America and its allies during World War II.

In an address on Oct. 30, for example, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cited the accidental bombing of a children’s hospital by Britain’s Royal Air Force when it was targeting the Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen in 1945. And during visits to Israel by Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, Israeli officials privately invoked the 1945 U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which together killed more than 100,000 people.

Modern international laws of war were developed largely in response to the atrocities of World War II.

In 1949, the Geneva Conventions codified protections for civilians during wartime. International law does not prohibit civilian casualties, but it does say that militaries must not target civilians directly or indiscriminately bomb civilian areas, and that incidental harm and the killing of civilians must not exceed the direct military advantage to be gained.

Two 2,000-Pound Bombs

In the first two weeks of the war, roughly 90 percent of the munitions Israel dropped in Gaza were satellite-guided bombs weighing 1,000 to 2,000 pounds, according to a senior U.S. military official who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Those bombs are “really big,” said Mr. Garlasco, the adviser for the PAX organization. Israel, he said, also has thousands of smaller bombs from the United States that are designed to limit damage in dense urban areas, but weapons experts say they have seen little evidence that they are being used frequently.

In one documented case, Israel used at least two 2,000-pound bombs during an Oct. 31 airstrike on Jabaliya, a densely populated area just north of Gaza City, flattening buildings and creating impact craters 40 feet wide, according to an analysis of satellite images, photos and videos by The New York Times. Airwars independently confirmed that at least 126 civilians were killed, more than half of them children.



Searching for bodies and survivors in the rubble of a refugee camp hit by an airstrike in northern Gaza. Mohammed Saber/EPA, via Shutterstock

The Israeli military said it had been targeting a Hamas commander and fighters, but acknowledged that it knew civilians were present. Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, an Israeli military spokesman, said the casualties were a “tragedy of war.”

The barrage on Gaza has been intense.

Every day, local journalists in Gaza report strikes that hit private homes, some of which kill a dozen or more people as families shelter together in tight quarters. On Oct. 19, Israel struck a Greek Orthodox church where hundreds of Gaza’s small Christian community were sheltering at dinnertime, killing 18 civilians, according to an investigation by Amnesty International.

Colonel Conricus, the Israeli military spokesman, said that Hamas and its deliberate strategy of embedding itself in — and underneath — the residents of Gaza are “the main reason why there are civilian casualties.”

He said that hundreds of Israeli strikes on Hamas have been diverted “because of the presence of civilians, children, women and others who appear not to be connected to the fighting.”

Still, Mr. Castner of Amnesty International said Israel appeared to be moving too quickly to reduce harm to civilians.

The United States itself has killed thousands of civilians in years of aerial bombardments. But it generally tries to assess civilians’ “pattern of life” before a strike, experts say. Analysts will watch to see whether people go out to get food or water, for example, to determine whether civilians are inside a building.

That kind of caution for every strike “is literally not possible for the Israelis to do if they’re doing this many strikes in as much time,” Mr. Castner said.

The Long Term

More children have been killed in Gaza since the Israeli assault began than in the world’s major conflict zones combined — across two dozen countries — during all of last year, even with the war in Ukraine, according to U.N. tallies of verified child deaths in armed conflict.



Women and children account for nearly 70 percent of all deaths reported in Gaza. Yousef Masoud for The New York Times

When civilian areas are in the cross hairs, the threat does not end when the bombing does, experts say. The destruction left in the wake of war leaves people facing a struggle to survive long after the conflict has ended. Decimated health-care systems and compromised water supplies alone can pose major public health risks, said Professor Crawford, the Costs of War Project researcher.

“In every war it’s like that,” she said. “But this is a scale of immiseration over such a short period of time that it’s really difficult to comprehend.”

John Ismay and Alan Yuhas contributed reporting.

Lauren Leatherby is a visual editor based in London. [More about Lauren Leatherby](#)

A version of this article appears in print on of the New York edition with the headline: Big Bombs in Urban Areas Raise Civilian Toll in Gaza