

“Slow death”: Israel weaponizes disease in the Gaza genocide

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On Monday, the World Health Organization issued a dire warning: Even after the relentless Israeli bombing that has left over 20,000 Gazans dead or missing, the death toll from infectious disease in the period ahead is likely to be even higher.

“We will see more people dying from disease than from bombardment if we are not able to put back together this health system,” Margaret Harris, a spokesperson for the WHO, said at a briefing in Geneva on Tuesday.

For two months, Israel has systematically targeted Gaza’s hospital system for destruction. To date, 207 health personnel have been killed, and 56 ambulances have been attacked. Twenty-six hospitals and 55 health centers have ceased operations.

In the latest horrific scene, footage has emerged of premature babies being left to die and decompose in hospital beds at Al-Naser Hospital after Palestinian medical personnel were forced at gunpoint to abandon them.

“We were subjected to a direct targeting operation by the Israeli forces after strangling the health system on the first day of the aggression by cutting off medical supplies, fuel and electricity,” said Palestinian Health Ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qudra.

The destruction of Gaza’s healthcare system compounds the catastrophic consequences of the starvation and dehydration of the population by Israel’s blockade of food, fuel and water, and the mass displacement of nearly three-quarters of the population.

In an interview with *Al Jazeera* last week, WHO spokesperson Harris described the medical conditions in Gaza as “misery being piled on misery.”

She continued, “It’s catastrophic in so many ways. As the needs rise from the terrible crush injuries, the burns, the amputated limbs, the multiple complex fractures due to all the bombing, the hospital supply is reducing as fewer and fewer hospitals are able to function.

“Because people are so crowded, because they are in such poor condition, because they lack food and they lack water, and they are unable to wash themselves or drink clean water, we are seeing huge rises in infectious diseases, particularly in diarrheal diseases—diarrheal disease is going up exponentially. It’s

increased 31 times more than you would expect in children under 5; also in adults: 104 times greater than you would expect.” Dysentery has increased 14 times, she said.

These conditions are deliberate. Their intentional character is publicly acknowledged by Israeli officials. Last week, Giora Eiland, the former head of the Israeli National Security Council, published an article in which he urged the Israeli military to create medical conditions in which as many Gazan civilians die as possible from preventable disease.

Eiland wrote:

Who are the “poor” women of Gaza? They are all the mothers, sisters or wives of Hamas murderers...

The international community warns us of a humanitarian disaster in Gaza and of severe epidemics. We must not shy away from this, as difficult as that may be. After all, severe epidemics in the south of the Gaza Strip will bring victory closer and reduce casualties among IDF soldiers.

Eiland argues that inflicting death and misery through infectious disease should be a goal, not a mere byproduct, of Israel’s actions. Its aim is “not the mere killing of more Hamas fighters” but “irreversible harm to their families.”

Such monstrous statements would seem to be the mere ravings of a lunatic. In reality, the deliberate subjection of a population to conditions that facilitate mass infection has been a critical component of past historical genocides, including the Holocaust. The parallels between Israel’s deliberate withholding of food, fuel and water from the Palestinians and descriptions of the Nazi regime’s treatment of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto are striking.

In his landmark book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, jurist Raphaël Lemkin, who introduced the term “genocide” in its contemporary understanding, explained how the Nazis used the blockade of food, fuel and water in the Warsaw Ghetto as a deliberate means of killing its inmates:

The undesired national groups ... are deprived of elemental necessities for preserving health and life. ... No fuel at all has been received since then by the Jews in the ghetto.

Moreover, the Jews in the ghetto are crowded together under conditions of housing inimical to health, and in being denied the use of public parks they are even deprived of the right to fresh air. Such measures, especially pernicious to the health of children, have caused the development of various diseases.

Payam Akhavan, a special adviser to the International Criminal Court, wrote in 2021:

Extermination through disease and starvation in the ghettos became the staging grounds for the concentration camps. An estimated 700,000 Jews died in the ghettos from diseases such as typhus, having been abandoned to “perish in their filth.” In the Warsaw Ghetto “the death toll from typhus was estimated at 15 percent, even though the Germans prevented proper treatment ... and refused to allow the necessary preventive measures to be taken and enforced.”

In *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?*, historian Arno J. Mayer described the conditions of concentration camp inmates:

half-starved and practically without medical care, the frail and the sick were particularly imperiled, the more so since at the journey’s end the whole of Auschwitz was intermittently in the grip of a devastating typhus epidemic. The result was an unspeakable death rate...

The Nazi leaders decided to transport frail and sick Jews, and Gypsies, to Auschwitz in full awareness of the perils they would face, and they continued to do so once there was no ignoring and denying the deadly conditions there, including the endemic danger of epidemics.

The United Nations defines “genocidal acts” as including “the deliberate deprivation of resources needed for the group’s physical survival and which are available to the rest of the population, such as clean water, food and medical services,” and the “Creation of circumstances that could lead to a slow death, such as lack of proper housing, clothing and hygiene or excessive work or physical exertion.”

It notes: “Deprivation of the means to sustain life can be imposed through confiscation of harvests, blockade of

foodstuffs, detention in camps, forcible relocation or expulsion to inhospitable environments.”

This language reads as a perfect description of Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

Notably, the destruction of Gaza’s healthcare system takes place amid a new global upsurge of the COVID-19 pandemic—a disease that becomes exponentially more deadly in the absence of adequate healthcare to treat the sickest patients.

The ruling classes of the world responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with homicidal indifference to human life, with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson praising the disease as “nature’s way of dealing with old people.” In Gaza, the sociopathic indifference to human life manifested in these remarks has metastasized into a full-scale genocide.

Not one single member of the Biden administration has made a public statement condemning the Israeli government’s systematic destruction of Gaza’s public health infrastructure and the starvation of its population. When Israel bombed the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital killing hundreds, US President Joe Biden blamed the Palestinians. The White House has made clear that there are “no red lines” limiting the number of civilians the US will allow Israel to kill, or the scale of the war crimes it will be allowed to commit.

The apologists for capitalism have argued that the vast crimes committed by the imperialist powers during the 20th century, the gravest of which was the Holocaust, were an exception, the actions of singularly evil individuals the likes of which would never appear again.

Twenty-three years into the new century, many of the means by which the Nazis carried out their “Final Solution” are being applied in Gaza, with the full support of all the imperialist powers.

This reality must bear upon the analysis not only of the present but also of the past. The Holocaust and Nazism were not the result of historical accidents but expressed the essential barbarism of the capitalist system in its “highest stage” of modern imperialism, which Leon Trotsky called its “death agony.”

Millions of people have taken part in mass demonstrations against the genocide in Gaza. They must understand what they are fighting against. It is not merely Netanyahu, or even just the governments that are funding and arming Israel’s genocide. It is the entire capitalist social order that is responsible for this monumental crime.



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