

Untangling the UN's Gaza Fatality Data

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May 17, 2024

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Brief Analysis

A major shift in the death toll for women and children points to deeper problems in the way OCHA is relaying data and handling questionable sources.

Recently, news outlets ([https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-cited-un-infographics-show-17-drop-in-total-women-children-gaza-war-deaths-within-2-days/#:~:text=The%20infographic%20issued%20on%20Wednesday,%25\)%20of%20them%20being%20women.](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-cited-un-infographics-show-17-drop-in-total-women-children-gaza-war-deaths-within-2-days/#:~:text=The%20infographic%20issued%20on%20Wednesday,%25)%20of%20them%20being%20women.)) and analysts (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/05/11/un-halves-its-estimate-of-women-and-children-killed-in-gaza/>) noticed that the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs had substantially altered the Gaza death toll it relays from Palestinian sources. Between [May 6 \(https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-213\)](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-213) and [May 8 \(https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-215\)](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-215), OCHA reports decreased the total number of women and children killed during the war by almost 47%. The organization also indicated that men age 19-59 made up 40% of the dead, contradicting previous claims that 70% were women and children.

A UN spokesman [presented \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MInRobKPHZM&t=1460s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MInRobKPHZM&t=1460s) the changes as routine revisions and attributed the major discrepancy to the “fog of war.” Others concluded that the UN had unilaterally lowered the death toll. Yet both interpretations misunderstand how fatality data is collected and reported during the war, and how OCHA relays those claims.

Problems in the UN Relay Process

Although OCHA has attempted to verify deaths and distinguish between combatants and civilians in previous conflicts worldwide, it has not done so with the current Gaza data it receives from the Hamas-run Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Government Media Office (GMO, a subunit of the Hamas-run Ministry of Information). Instead, OCHA merely relays fatality statistics from Gaza; it does not generate or check them. Although the organization openly acknowledges this fact, its relay effort has been imperfect at best, and several of its decisions about the data it disseminates are cause for concern.

One problem is that OCHA consistently fails to acknowledge that the MOH uses three separate methodologies to

count fatalities:

1. The hospital and morgue system, which is well-understood and considered relatively reliable based on its reporting during previous wars
2. A self-reporting system in which relatives of those killed submit data through a [Google Form \(https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScndnMojIJoflfSPTD25uqkZSzUH--G05AMwcbbyJB42bNQcw/viewform\)](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScndnMojIJoflfSPTD25uqkZSzUH--G05AMwcbbyJB42bNQcw/viewform)
3. So-called “media reports,” about which very little is known

Between October 7 and November 10, OCHA reports relayed MOH claims about the number of women, children, and elderly killed, but often failed to update specific categories or treat data on elderly women consistently (see the author’s [January study \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-hamas-manipulates-gaza-fatality-numbers-examining-male-undercount-and-other\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-hamas-manipulates-gaza-fatality-numbers-examining-male-undercount-and-other) for more on these problems). When the MOH stopped reporting data for three weeks amid the Israeli ground invasion and collapse of the hospital system in northern Gaza, OCHA reports paused for two weeks. Afterward, OCHA began relaying GMO fatality claims from November 22 to December 11, describing the GMO as being “under the local authorities in Gaza” but incorrectly stating that it had “assumed MOH’s role” in reporting casualty figures. OCHA kept the December 11 numbers on its reports until January 2, but included a caveat in a December 21 update that the GMO’s “methodology is unknown.” It then stopped using the GMO as a source.

By mid-December, it was clear that GMO claims diverged sharply from MOH data (see table below). In a December 11 Health Sector Emergency Report (HSER), the MOH [revealed \(https://t.me/MOHMediaGaza/4576\)](https://t.me/MOHMediaGaza/4576) that it had begun including reports from “reliable media sources” to calculate fatalities and injuries. These media sources then became the dominant input in the daily death toll, accounting for 46% of claimed fatalities by the end of March. One major problem with this approach quickly materialized. While women and children made up less than 60% of the fatalities reported by hospitals and morgues, the MOH publicly claimed that they comprised over 70% of the death toll. To reconcile these contradictory claims, at least 90% of the deaths recorded via “media reports” had to be women and children—an implausible proportion under any circumstances (see the author’s [March article \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gaza-fatality-data-has-become-completely-unreliable\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gaza-fatality-data-has-become-completely-unreliable) on this discrepancy). On March 27, the MOH [dropped \(https://t.me/MOHMediaGaza/5237\)](https://t.me/MOHMediaGaza/5237) the 70% claim, but the GMO [maintained it \(https://t.me/mediagovps/2854\)](https://t.me/mediagovps/2854).

Claimed Gaza Fatalities by Source, Dec 2023–May 2024

	GMO Report*	MOH Report**	Media Report***
DEC 11, 2023			
Children	8,000	4,327	3,673
Women	6,200	4,349	1,851
Men	4,196	3,377	-1,381****
Total	18,396	14,253	4,143
DEC 31, 2023			
Children	9,280	4,602	4,670
Women	6,600	4,609	1,941
Men	6,098	6,088	10
Total	21,978	15,349	6,629
FEB 10, 2024			
Children	12,300	4,984	7,366
Women	8,400	4,991	3,409
Men	7,476	6,986	490
Total	28,176	16,911	11,265
MAR 3, 2024			
Children	13,430	5,008	8,422
Women	8,900	5,065	3,815
Men	8,204	7,255	949
Total	30,534	17,348	13,186
MAR 18, 2024			
Children	14,000	5,040	8,960
Women	9,220	5,124	4,096
Men	8,599	7,407	1,192
Total	31,819	17,571	14,248
MAR 21, 2024			
Children	14,350	5,091	9,259
Women	9,460	5,169	4,291
Men	8,813	7,470	1,343
Total	32,623	17,730	14,893
APR 12, 2024			
Children	14,560	6,998	7,562
Women	9,582	5,150-5,222	4,360-4,424
Men	9,544	9,269-9,333	211-275
Total	33,686	21,489	12,197
APR 22, 2024			
Children	14,778	7,619	7,159
Women	9,792	5,032-5,050	3,902-4,220
Men	9,653	10,540-10,858	(-1,205)-(-887)****
Total	34,123	24,009	10,174
MAY 3, 2024			
Children	14,944	7,798	7,146
Women	9,849	5,741	4,108
Men	9,829	11,152	-1,323****
Total	34,622	24,691	9,968

Source: GMO Telegram channel, MOH Health Sector Emergency Reports
 * GMO figures for men were calculated by subtracting the subtotal for women and children from the total. They should be understood as the maximum possible number of deaths for men.
 ** Combination of Hospital/Injury system and self-reports.
 *** Negative values reflect what would be necessary to reconcile GMO figures for men with known MOH data on the same date.
 **** On April 1, the MOH began reporting a category for the elderly but did not distinguish between men and women. Values for men and women are therefore presented as a range, using a March 31 MOH data release that included individualized statistics as a baseline.
 ***** Data for elderly men and women are divided for this date based on an April 30 MOH data release that included individualized statistics.

(/sites/default/files/2024-05/claimed-gaza-fatalities-dec-may-POL3871-table.jpg)

Meanwhile, OCHA inexplicably **reverted** (<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-153>) to using GMO figures for women and children on March 8, even though they were disconnected from and inconsistent with MOH data. OCHA also briefly engaged in circular citations, attributing the fatality data for women to another UN agency, **UN Women** (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/03/press-release-9000-women-have-been-killed-in-gaza-since-early-october>), who in turn cited OCHA; in reality, both were citing the GMO.

The UN’s relay of GMO data—often incorrectly identified as MOH data—persisted until **May 8** (<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-215>), when OCHA accurately relayed what the MOH was claiming for the first time in five months, resulting in a major decrease in the total reported deaths for women and children. Despite this improvement, however, problems persist.

For one, OCHA has apparently accepted the MOH’s new terminology of “identified” and “unidentified” fatalities without comment. Between December 11 and March 31, the MOH repeatedly referred to “media reports” in all of its HSERs (see here (<https://archive.org/details/moh-gaza-health-sector-emergency-reports/Gaza%20-%20MOH%20-%201-30/>) for an archive of past HSERs). Yet it **changed** (<https://t.me/MOHMediaGaza/5258>) this phrase on April 1 as **questions mounted** (<https://www.npr.org/2024/02/29/1234159514/gaza-death-toll-30000-palestinians-israel-hamas-war> <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/29/1234159514/gaza-death-toll-30000-palestinians-israel-hamas-war>) about its fatality claims, instead calling them “unidentified reports” in its daily summaries of Gaza public health issues. Tellingly, however, it retained the phrase “media reports” in the data tables that accompanied its HSERs, suggesting that this was a change in name only.

The crux of the problem with relabeling “media reports” as “unidentified” is that in many cases, there is no body to identify. When presenting claimed fatalities under this label, Palestinian reports and OCHA relays give the

impression that the MOH is working through some backlog of unidentified bodies sitting in morgues. Yet the “media reports” methodology was originally established to record fatalities in places where the hospital/morgue system had gone offline—that is, these claimed fatalities never went to morgues, whether because they were privately buried, presumed to be lying under rubble, or never located. The result is substantial overlap between separate counting mechanisms and mistaken assumptions about the overall death toll.

Closer analysis of the MOH’s data casts doubt on the “identified” distinction as well. Although OCHA did not specifically source its new demographic breakdown on May 8, it closely matches a [May 2 MOH release \(https://t.me/MOHMediaGaza/5405\)](https://t.me/MOHMediaGaza/5405) covering October 7-April 30. Yet a significant number of the fatalities that the MOH has recorded from hospitals, morgues, and self-reports are only partially identified—specifically, 17.1% of them are missing one or more key data points such as age, name, sex, or ID number (or have invalid ID numbers). This problem is only getting worse—[analysis \(https://aoav.org.uk/2024/analysis-of-new-death-data-from-gazas-health-ministry-reveals-several-concerns/\)](https://aoav.org.uk/2024/analysis-of-new-death-data-from-gazas-health-ministry-reveals-several-concerns/) of a March 31 MOH report revealed that 15.7% of its fatality records had incomplete data.

Timeline of OCHA Relays for Gaza Fatality Data, 2023-2024

Source of OCHA Relay	Key Dates
Oct 7–Nov 30	Gaza MOH
Nov 10–21	No data to relay
Nov 22–Jan 2	GMO
Jan 3–Mar 7	Gaza MOH
Mar 8–May 7	GMO
May 8–present	Gaza MOH

Key Dates:

- Nov 3: Likely date that Gaza MOH begins collecting fatality data via media reports.
- Dec 11: Last update of GMO submitted for women/children.
- Dec 21: OCHA acknowledges that the GMO methodology “is unknown.”
- Jan 2: Removal of claim that 70% of fatalities are women and children.
- Jan 5: Re-insertion of 70% claim.
- Jan 11: Final removal of 70% claim.
- Mar 8: Circular attribution of data for women killed: OCHA cites UN Women, which cited OCHA.
- Mar 11–Apr 8: Data for women killed is incorrectly attributed to Gaza MOH.
- May 8: OCHA switches from relaying GMO figures to MOH figures, with an apparent major decrease to the number of women and children killed and to their proportion of the overall death toll. A new category is introduced without demographic information.
- May 13: Introduction of modified disclaimer about data sourcing.

(/sites/default/files/2024-05/ocha-timeline-POL3871-table.jpg)

Recommendations

To its credit, OCHA has been clear that it only relays fatality figures and does not attempt to verify them. It has also beefed up the disclaimer on its reports and moved it from the bottom of its dense data summaries—where many viewers likely overlooked it—to the top. The [new disclaimer \(https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-220\)](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-220) on OCHA’s “reported impact” statements reads as follows: “Figures that are yet-to-be verified by the UN are attributed to their source. Casualty numbers have been provided by the Ministry of Health or the Government Media Office in Gaza and the Israeli authorities. Previous data breakdowns provided in this snapshot of women and children killed were attributed to the GMO based on reported fatalities. The fatality breakdowns currently cited are those that the MOH in Gaza has recently fully identified out of the higher number of casualties they report.”

Yet this revision was not made until May 13—days after a major change quietly appeared in the death toll for women and children, months after questions were first raised about data from Hamas-run institutions, and more than half a year into a war in which many observers likely assumed that the UN’s published figures had been validated. Moreover, OCHA’s on-again, off-again reliance on GMO claims is highly questionable given their opaque methodology and sharp divergence from MOH claims.

A more transparent OCHA relay process would embrace the following practices:

- Avoid citing the GMO at all

- Consistently use MOH data
- Clearly explain and distinguish between the MOH’s methodologies for obtaining this data
- Sort out the MOH’s shift from “media reports” to “unidentified reports”—which does not seem like a shift at all and lends unwarranted veracity to fatalities categorized as “identified”

Too often, journalists and commentators erroneously cite GMO officials as “Gaza health authorities” and make claims that the actual Gaza health authority—the Hamas-run MOH—does not make. By relaying GMO claims, OCHA contributes to that conflation and the spread of unsupported claims.

Of course, accurately counting the dead in a chaotic conflict is a severe challenge, so all parties should be exceedingly careful when making claims about the death toll. Given their stature, OCHA and other UN bodies have a particularly deep responsibility to ensure professionalism and transparency—a duty that has not been fulfilled so far.

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RECOMMENDED



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May 16, 2024



Hanin Ghaddar

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May 16, 2024



Michael Knights,
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Hamdi Malik

[\(/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](#)



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May 15, 2024



Michael Knights

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