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PolicyWatch 2308

How Many Civilians Have Been Killed in Gaza?

by [David Pollock](#)

Aug 20, 2014

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Brief Analysis

Initial estimates vary widely, but getting the numbers right is important -- not only for retrospective judgment, but also for future reference, particularly with regard to further minimizing civilian casualties.

Every violent death of an innocent is a tragedy, even if the killing was unintentional and within the laws of war. Sadly, there can be little doubt that hundreds of such tragedies have occurred in Gaza during the latest conflict there. Yet analysts differ greatly about how many of the Palestinian casualties were in fact civilians.

These discrepancies are compounded by self-serving sources of information, biased or intimidated reportage, and the usual "fog of war." For example, it took almost two years after the last major Hamas-Israeli military confrontation, in December 2008-January 2009, for Hamas interior minister Fathi Hamad to acknowledge that around half of the approximately 1,200-1,400 Palestinian fatalities in that conflict were combatants. That was completely contrary to earlier Hamas reports and international media claims. Similarly, in the wake of that conflict and Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, the initial civilian fatality counts from the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) were later discredited or even withdrawn, as described in a May 6, 2009, *New Republic* article by Simona Weinglass.

In the latest round of combat, Hamas information officials gave explicit instructions to call every casualty an "innocent civilian," regardless of the facts. On July 17, the Hamas Interior Ministry posted a video with the following instructions: "Anyone killed or martyred is to be called a civilian from Gaza or Palestine, before we talk about his status in jihad or his military rank. Don't forget to always add 'innocent civilian' or 'innocent citizen' in your description of those killed in Israeli attacks in Gaza" ([see the Middle East Media Research Institute's Special](#)

[Dispatch No. 5799](#)). And the official Hamas television channel in Gaza, al-Aqsa TV, broadcast this remarkable proclamation on August 10: "Even the jihad fighters in the battleground are actually Palestinian civilians fulfilling their religious and national duty. This is why we...say 'a civilian car,' 'a civilian target,' and so on, since we have no regular army and no real military targets, as the occupation is trying to claim in its propaganda" ([as reported by Palestinian Media Watch](#)).

Such linguistic manipulation recalls a venerable Anglo-American aphorism: "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics." Or more dryly, as the head of statistics at BBC News concluded on August 11, "The point is that it is hard to say with certainty at this stage how many of the dead in Gaza were civilians, and how many were fighters."

NEW VARIANCE IN CIVILIAN FATALITY COUNT

On August 18, according to the Palestinian news agency Maan, Hamas issued a statement that of the 2,016 fatalities from the war, 44 percent were women, children, or elderly men. That same day, however, the latest report from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) -- apparently also based primarily on reports from the Hamas Ministry of Health -- stated that 72 percent of the fatalities were civilians. The OCHA report cautioned that "data on fatalities and destruction of property is...based on preliminary information, and is subject to change based on further verifications," acknowledging the difficulty of assessing the affiliations of those killed over the past month. In addition, a representative from the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recently told the BBC that the agency's efforts have been "focused primarily on recording the casualties," not determining their status as civilians or combatants.

In a similarly skewed vein, the PCHR has placed the civilian death toll at 1,670, which accounts for 83 percent of its total fatality count. By contrast, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have stated that the fatality count for combatants is 1,068 -- a majority of the total fatalities, meaning a civilian death rate of less than 50 percent and a considerable combat loss for Hamas fighters.

The wide variation in these numbers is partly attributable to a fundamental difficulty in any such calculations: namely, definition. According to an August 8 Associated Press report by Karin Laub and Yousur Alhlou, the PCHR

defines a civilian as "anyone who is not effectively participating in a military operation...including a Hamas fighter who is killed at home while taking a break." By contrast, the IDF appears to define civilians more narrowly, as those uninvolved in military or terrorist organizations. B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights watchdog organization often critical of the government, defines civilians demographically, as "women, children, and men over sixty." Unsurprisingly, while PCHR argues that 83 percent of all casualties were civilian, B'Tselem reported a figure only half that high, at around 40 percent.

The latter figure is roughly in line with an August 5 *New York Times* report, which found that one-third of the dead with known ages were either women or children under fifteen years old. Conversely, the data analyzed in the story showed a heavy overrepresentation of men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine, the demographic most likely to be militants. This demographic accounts for only 9 percent of Gaza's population, but 34 percent of the fatalities.

LOOKING FORWARD

In the end, the number or proportion of civilian casualties on either side cannot alone determine right or wrong, or even degree of responsibility for this dimension of carnage. Yet the situation does require, at minimum, a sober assessment of conflicting claims about the scale of those casualties. In this case, by any estimate, at least several hundred Palestinians civilians were killed in the heat of battle. That is truly a tragedy. But a hard look at the evidence so far suggests that hundreds of other fatalities -- perhaps around half the total, as in 2008-2009 -- were not civilians at all, but combatants from Hamas and other militant groups.

This is important not only for retrospective judgment, but also for future reference, particularly with regard to further minimizing civilian casualties in case of another round of fighting. The above analysis suggests that this goal need not be as hopeless a cause as some suppose, despite Gaza's very crowded conditions. Strict separation of military and civilian locations (as outlined by Jeffrey White in his August 13 PolicyWatch "[Six Ways Hamas Could Limit Civilian Casualties](#)") and correspondingly strict rules of engagement could further reduce the danger to civilians. In this vein, Palestinian officials should be telling civilians to heed, rather than "resist," Israeli warnings to evacuate targeted areas. Of course, the best way to prevent casualties of all kinds is not to start a war in the first place.

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