

The Most Documented Destruction of a Hospital System in Modern History

Gaza's hospitals: what it means when the enclave of the stricken is itself made a target

By Philippe Foubert, PhD · 20 August 2026

Every factual claim below is anchored to the numbered sources listed at the end of this essay. I verified the record, and the links, on 20 August 2026.

I spent some of my professional career as Hospital Ethicist across the five-hospital Mater Misericordiae complex in Brisbane, doing the daily work of clinical ethics: mediating between families and clinicians over withdrawal-of-care decisions, writing policies that prescribe for exhausted clinicians what they owe a patient who cannot speak for themselves, teaching residents that a hospital is not simply an impersonal machine for producing health outcomes.

It is, before anything else, a moral community, a place that exists because a society has decided, formally and informally, that it will not leave the sick and the dying to face their extremity alone.

I wrote elsewhere that the hospital is a “house of hospitality,” and that Amy Clampitt’s phrase for it, an “enclave of the stricken,” names something almost sacramental about what a hospital is supposed to be. It is the one place a society sets aside and marks off, by custom and by law, as belonging to the wounded rather than to the war that wounded them.

Gaza is, among everything else it now is, the most thoroughly documented destruction of a functioning hospital system in modern history, and the documentation does not stop at some tidy endpoint. It runs to the week I am writing this.

On 1 August 2026, ten months into a ceasefire, an Israeli strike destroyed two of four medicine warehouses at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah, obliterating dialysis fluids, gauze, and IV solutions, and damaging the hospital’s outpatient clinic. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights described a crater tens of metres deep; the Israeli military’s own account rests on an undisclosed claim about a “ Hamas hideout near the hospital.”^{1,2,3}

Gaza’s health ministry said the strike pushed a medical system already at half its operating capacity “to the brink of collapse.”⁴ The hospital’s spokesperson, Dr Khalil al-Daqran, called it “a heinous crime.”²



Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, Deir al-Balah. Left: the emergency department entrance, working, 9 January 2024. Right: the burned encampment for displaced families inside the hospital grounds after an Israeli strike, 4 August 2024. The same hospital lost two of its four medicine warehouses to a further strike under the ceasefire on 1 August 2026. Photographs: Jaber Jehad Badwan, CC BY-SA 4.0 (left); Ashraf Amra / © UNRWA, CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO (right); via Wikimedia Commons.

This is not an anomaly inside an otherwise-observed truce. It is a continuation, at a slower tempo, of what a hospital ethicist has to call by its plain clinical name: the deliberate, sustained degradation of the one institution a wounded population needs if it is not simply to die of its wounds.

What a hospital is for, and what was done to that idea

I want to be precise about the concept before I lay the record against it, because the concept is doing real work here. A house of hospitality is not a metaphor for kindness. It is a description of a specific social arrangement: a bounded space where convention and international humanitarian law suspend the ordinary “rules of war”, itself a suspect notion, because wounds have already removed the people inside from the fighting: the condition the law of war itself calls *hors de combat*, out of the fight.



Patients awaiting evacuation from Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital after Israeli evacuation orders for eastern Deir al-Balah, 25 August 2024. Photograph: Ashraf Amra / © UNRWA, CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Geneva Conventions codify exactly this intuition: hospitals, the sick and wounded, and those who treat them hold a specially protected status precisely because a moral community that did not protect its enclave of the stricken would not be a moral community at all. This is why an attack on a hospital bears a different moral weight than an attack on a barracks, even when both kill people. The barracks is inside the war. The hospital is supposed to be the place where the war stops mattering.

What the documentary record from Gaza shows, hospital by hospital, over more than a thousand days, is a systematic refusal of that suspension: an argument, made not in words but in ordnance, that no such enclave exists; that the wounded, the newborn, the dialysis patient, the surgeon are all still combatants in some sense, still legitimate objects of siege. I have spent thirty years insisting on the opposite claim inside institutions that never had their protected status seriously tested. Gaza has tested it to destruction.

I should also say plainly how I have weighed sources, because the weighing is part of the method. Israeli military statements appear in this essay as claims, never as evidence, and the reason is documented rather than assumed: this war's record includes their refutation. The military first asserted that the ambulances at Tel al-Sultan approached without emergency signals, and withdrew the assertion when video recovered from a dead paramedic's phone showed the lights flashing as the vehicles arrived.³² A source that has done

that forfeits the presumption of accuracy. I quote such statements where they concede something against interest, or where the assertion itself, an undisclosed claim, an unevidenced accusation, is part of the record being documented.

The record, hospital by hospital



One building, one photographer. The special surgery building at Al-Shifa Medical Complex, Gaza City: on 11 October 2023, in the first week of the war (left), and on 23 February 2025, after two sieges (right). Photographs: Jaber Jihad Badwan, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Israeli forces besieged Al-Shifa Hospital, Gaza City's largest, twice. In November 2023 they encircled a complex that held, by Gazan health officials' account, roughly 1,500 patients, 1,500 staff, and thousands of displaced people. On 14 November, its staff buried 179 bodies, among them seven babies and 29 intensive-care patients who died after the generators failed, in a mass grave dug in the hospital grounds because there was nowhere else to put them.⁵

A second, two-week operation in March 2024 left the hospital largely destroyed; returning residents told reporters that army bulldozers had ploughed over a makeshift cemetery inside the compound.⁶ The WHO mission that reached the site that April found "an empty shell" holding no patients at all, and reported that the destruction of Al-Shifa and Nasser together had "broken the backbone" of the health system.⁷ Today, by its director's account after the ceasefire, Al-Shifa runs at roughly 300 of its original 700 beds, its operating theatres cut from 22 to 8, with no MRI or CT capacity, about 250 of its staff killed, and 350 health workers still detained.⁸ Israel held that director, Muhammad Abu Salmiya, without charge for more than seven months and released him on 1 July 2024; he emerged alleging torture,⁹ and put the present plainly: "Although we have a ceasefire, wounded people arrive at the hospital every day. The situation here is very bad."⁸

Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, Gaza City's Anglican-run hospital and the oldest in the Strip, absorbed a catastrophic explosion in its courtyard on 17 October 2023. The Gaza health ministry put the toll at 471 killed. Human Rights Watch, investigating, found the blast resulted from an apparent rocket-propelled munition of a type commonly used by Palestinian armed groups, said it could

not corroborate the ministry's count, and noted a United States intelligence assessment placing the toll at the low end of a 100-to-300 range. Responsibility for that single incident remains genuinely and seriously contested, and I record it here exactly as contested, not as settled.¹⁰

What is not contested is what followed. On 13 April 2025, Palm Sunday, twin Israeli missiles demolished the hospital's two-storey genetic laboratory and damaged its pharmacy and emergency department; the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which runs the hospital, counted it as the fifth attack on al-Ahli since the war began.¹¹ And under the ceasefire, on 29 July 2026, a late-evening strike on an adjacent apartment building shattered the hospital's windows and doors and damaged its diagnostic centre's elevator.¹²

Israeli forces twice besieged Nasser Medical Complex in Khan Younis in early 2024; by mid-February the hospital stood out of service, and medics who remained said thirteen patients died from the conditions of the siege, including the loss of water, electricity, and oxygen.¹³ In April 2024, recovery teams uncovered mass graves on the hospital grounds. The UN human rights chief said he was horrified; by 10 May 2024, the United Nations Security Council itself recorded "several hundred bodies" in mass graves in and around Nasser and Al-Shifa and called for immediate, independent, and transparent investigations.^{13,14}

By June 2025, WHO described Nasser as "the most important referral hospital left in Gaza" while it operated at 180 percent over bed capacity, and warned starkly: "The relentless and systematic decimation of hospitals in Gaza has been going on for too long. It must end immediately."¹⁵ Under the ceasefire, in February 2026, Médecins Sans Frontières suspended non-essential activities at Nasser, alleging armed men and intimidation on the premises; the hospital rejected the allegation as unsubstantiated and as endangering its protected status. I record both statements, because both are what the record contains.¹⁶

Israeli forces besieged Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahia, North Gaza's last major functioning facility, repeatedly across 2023 and 2024. On 26 December 2024, a strike on adjacent staff housing killed 50 people; the next day troops stormed the hospital, set it on fire, and shut it down. WHO's statement was unambiguous: the raid put "the last major health facility in North Gaza out of service" and, after documenting at least 50 verified attacks on or near the hospital since October, it concluded: "Kamal Adwan is now empty."¹⁷ Israeli forces detained its director, Dr Hussam Abu Safiya, a paediatrician, the day of the raid, 27 December 2024, while he was on duty. As I write, he has spent 600 days in Israeli custody without charge or trial, held under a law that permits indefinitely renewable detention orders on classified evidence with no indictment ever produced. On 16 June 2026, Israel's Supreme Court rejected his appeal and upheld his detention until at least October 2026. After a lawyer's visit on 2 July 2026 found him shackled, bruised, and barely

recognisable, Amnesty International reported an imminent threat to his life from torture and other ill-treatment and demanded his immediate and unconditional release.^{18,52} He is the single detail that most concentrates the moral question this essay is asking, and I return to him below. Even after the ceasefire, on 10 July 2026, an Israeli drone struck the hospital's courtyard, injuring hospital security workers inside what is nominally an Israeli-designated "Green Zone."¹⁹

Israeli forces besieged and raided the Indonesian Hospital in Beit Lahia from late November 2023, leaving it in ruins.²⁰ When Médecins Sans Frontières teams finally reached northern Gaza after the January 2025 ceasefire, the organisation's emergency coordinator described finding every medical machine at the hospital deliberately destroyed: "smashed to pieces, one by one, to make sure no medical care could be provided anymore."²¹ WHO listed it out of service again in May 2025, along with every other public medical facility in northern Gaza.²⁶

On 13 May 2025, Israeli aircraft struck the European Gaza Hospital in Khan Younis with at least nine bunker-penetrating bombs, roughly 50 munitions in 30 seconds by the military's own later accounting, targeting Hamas's de facto leader Mohammed Sinwar in a tunnel beneath the complex. Gaza's health ministry recorded 28 people killed at the hospital; the Israeli military later confirmed Sinwar died there.^{22,23} As of the most recent confirmable reporting, the hospital remained non-operational into 2026.

None of these is an outlying incident. By WHO's own verified count, all 36 of Gaza's hospitals have sustained damage since October 2023. By August 2026, WHO had recorded 968 verified attacks on health care in Gaza since the war began, 1,002 people killed and 1,676 injured in those attacks specifically, and 257 ambulances damaged or destroyed.²⁴ Even after the ceasefire took hold, WHO verified 45 further attacks on health care between 1 January and 6 August 2026 alone.²⁵

As of the World Health Organization's report to its own governing assembly in May 2026: "No hospital is fully functional anywhere in the Gaza Strip," and none are operating in the north.²⁶ Ten months into a supposed peace, the UN's health agency was telling the world that Gaza's health system remained, in the Director-General's words, "in ruins", "a system on the brink of collapse."²⁷ As of 4 August 2026, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was still saying, plainly: "WHO calls for the protection of health care. Health care facilities must never be attacked or militarized."²⁸ Gaza's own Government Media Office described what happened in language a health official does not use lightly: "The Israeli occupation has deliberately and methodically destroyed the health system."²⁹

And the people who staffed that system were not incidental casualties of it. The Gaza health ministry counts at least 1,700 health-sector workers killed since October 2023.³⁰ An independently verified subset, more conservative

but still rising, puts the confirmed figure above 750 as of February 2026, with the compiling organisation stating plainly that its own number is an undercount.³¹



Palestine Red Crescent personnel inspect a destroyed ambulance in Deir al-Balah, 11 January 2024. WHO has verified 257 ambulances damaged or destroyed since October 2023. Photograph: Ashraf Amra / © UNRWA, CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO, via Wikimedia Commons.

In March 2025, Israeli fire killed fifteen emergency workers, eight Red Crescent paramedics, six Civil Defence personnel, and one UN staff member, in the Tel al-Sultan district of Rafah; the troops then buried them, with their crushed vehicles, in a mass grave. Cellphone video recovered from one of the dead showed the ambulances' emergency lights flashing as they arrived.³² An Israeli military fact-finding review in April 2025 found "professional failures," dismissed the deputy battalion commander, and censured the brigade commander.³² And on 19 August 2026, in the week of this writing, the Military Advocate General ordered a full criminal investigation into the killings.³³

Israel has detained 362 health workers over the course of the war; 83 remained in custody as of April 2026, and three have died in Israeli detention.³⁰ As of J Street's most recent independent assessment of the ceasefire, published this summer, only three hospitals in the entire Gaza Strip were fully functional as of 8 July 2026.³⁴

| *Three. Out of thirty-six.*

A ceasefire that has not, in fact, ceased fire on the hospitals

The Gaza ceasefire took effect at noon on 10 October 2025, brokered by the United States, Qatar, Egypt, and Türkiye under a twenty-point framework and endorsed the following month by the UN Security Council.³⁵ I do not discount what that agreement stopped. It stopped the daily mass-casualty bombardment that made the first two years of this war a byword for civilian slaughter. But a hospital ethicist has to insist on a distinction the word “ceasefire” tends to erase: a ceasefire is not the same thing as the restoration of the enclave. The Gaza Government Media Office’s own tally records at least 3,795 Israeli ceasefire violations between 10 October 2025 and 19 July 2026.³⁶

Gaza’s Ministry of Health counts more than 1,200 people killed since the ceasefire began; the figure sharpens, in the most current reporting, to somewhere between 1,259 (OCHA, to 12 August 2026) and 1,266 (Gaza health ministry, 18 August 2026).^{37,38} Overall, the Ministry of Health’s cumulative count as of 18 August 2026 stands at at least 73,400 killed, including 21,500 children, and more than 174,300 injured, a figure the Israeli government itself, per reporting in late January 2026, has accepted as “broadly accurate.”³⁶

Some of that post-ceasefire violence has landed directly, repeatedly, on hospitals. A drone above Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in November 2025. Armed intimidation reported at Nasser in February 2026. A drone strike wounding hospital workers at Kamal Adwan in July 2026. Two missiles through the first floor of Yemen Al-Saeed Hospital in Jabalia camp on 20 July 2026, killing four people and wounding sixteen.³⁹ And then, on 1 August 2026, the warehouses at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. Insecurity Insight, the independent monitoring group whose count is broader than WHO’s because it includes obstruction as well as direct violence, records that even during the supposed calm of the ceasefire, health-care attacks in Gaza continued at a rate of roughly 1.9 per week.³⁹

Ten months in, by J Street’s July 2026 assessment, “little progress” had been made on the ceasefire’s second phase, and the UN had independently verified 629 people killed by Israeli fire between the truce’s start and April 2026 alone, before Gaza’s health ministry recorded roughly 300 more through mid-July.³⁴

A house of hospitality that can still be struck, whose director can still be held without charge, whose medicine warehouse can still be levelled on a Saturday morning ten months after the guns were supposed to have gone quiet, has not been restored. It has simply had its destruction slowed to a rate the world finds easier to ignore.

Wholesale destruction of human life: the mortality and famine record

A hospital destroyed is, first and always, a body count, and the counting itself has become one of the most disputed and most studied aspects of this war. Outside researchers have repeatedly examined the Gaza Ministry of Health's running tally, the figure most commonly cited and the one I have used throughout this essay, and repeatedly found that, if anything, it understates the true toll.

A Lancet correspondence in July 2024 noted that, applying even a conservative multiplier drawn from other recent conflicts, "it is not implausible to estimate that up to 186,000 or even more deaths could be attributable to the current conflict" once indirect deaths from the collapse of health, water, and sanitation systems are included.⁴⁰ A subsequent capture-recapture study published in The Lancet in January 2025, cross-referencing hospital records, a household survey, and social-media obituaries, found tens of thousands of traumatic-injury deaths missing from all official lists, implying a toll roughly 40 percent higher than the Ministry of Health's count for the same period.^{41,42}

Most tellingly, a population-representative field survey published in The Lancet Global Health in February 2026, built on 2,000 households and a proper sampling frame, the gold standard of mortality research, estimated 75,200 violent deaths through early January 2025 alone, a figure 34.7 percent above the Ministry of Health's count for that same window, plus another 8,540 excess non-violent deaths from the general collapse of care.^{43,44} Every serious independent effort to measure this war's dead has concluded the official count is the floor, not the ceiling.

The destruction of the health system did not happen in isolation from the destruction of the food system, and a clinical ethicist cannot separate the two, because starvation and untreated wounds kill by the same collapsed logistics. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification's Famine Review Committee confirmed Famine, IPC Phase 5, the technical term reserved for the worst measurable form of mass starvation, in Gaza Governorate in August 2025: the first famine ever formally declared in the Middle East. The same review recorded 240 starvation deaths, including 107 children, by that August.⁴⁵

Aid access has since improved enough that no Gaza governorate remains formally classified in Famine as of the most recent analysis in July 2026, a genuine and welcome fact, and one I record without qualification. But that same analysis still finds roughly 1.2 million people facing significant food shortages and 90 percent of Gaza's population confined to about 30 percent of its land.^{46,47} Famine receding is not health restored. It is catastrophe stepping back from its worst possible threshold, in a population still living inside every threshold beneath it.

The finding trail, laid out rather than asserted

The International Court of Justice, hearing South Africa's case against Israel under the Genocide Convention, found in its 26 January 2024 provisional-measures order that Palestinians in Gaza "appear to constitute a distinct" protected group under the Convention, that at least some of South Africa's claimed rights were plausible, and that there was a real and imminent risk of irreparable harm to those rights, while explicitly declining, at that preliminary stage, to rule on whether genocide had in fact occurred.⁴⁸ The Court has since issued three further orders reaffirming and extending those provisional measures. As of the most recent scheduling order, in May 2026, the case remains in the written merits phase, with Israel's Reply not due until November 2027 and its Rejoinder not until May 2029, meaning no merits ruling on the ultimate question is likely before the end of this decade.⁴⁹

The United Nations' own Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory went further. In a report released in September 2025, it concluded that genocide had been and was being committed in Gaza, identifying four of the five prohibited acts under Article II of the Genocide Convention and concluding that genocidal intent was "the only reasonable inference" available from the pattern of conduct.⁵⁰ In the same month, the Commission found specifically that the Israeli authorities had committed genocide by targeting the healthcare system and medical professionals in Gaza since October 2023.⁵¹

Then, on 8 July 2026, in the statement most directly relevant to everything above, the Commission reiterated that finding while demanding the "immediate, unconditional and safe release" of Dr Hussam Abu Safiya, Kamal Adwan's director, then jailed without charge for more than eighteen months amid credible reports of continued and severe abuse. It restated that Israeli forces "deliberately killed, wounded, detained, and severely mistreated medical personnel," constituting war crimes and a crime against humanity, as "part of a concerted policy to destroy the health-care system of Gaza," and it called the continued detention of medical personnel "deplorable and flagrant violations of international law."⁵² Of every finding in this essay, that is the one closest to my own work, because it is a UN body of inquiry concluding, in effect, that the enclave of the stricken was not collateral to this war but a chosen object of it.

Amnesty International reached a parallel conclusion in December 2024, after reviewing killings, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, forced displacement, and the obstruction of humanitarian aid: "genocidal intent is the only reasonable conclusion" that could be drawn from Israel's pattern of conduct.⁵³ The UN's Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices, in November 2024, found Israel's warfare methods "consistent with the characteristics of genocide," citing the use of starvation as a method of war.⁵⁴

The International Association of Genocide Scholars, the leading professional body of scholars who study genocide for a living, and therefore an unusually weighty voice on the question of definitional fit, passed a resolution in 2025 concluding that “Israel’s policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide,” with 86 percent of participating members voting in favour, out of the roughly 28 percent of its approximately 500-member body who cast a vote.^{55,56} I record that turnout figure because a documentarian owes the reader every number that bears on how to weigh a finding, including numbers that qualify it.

The International Criminal Court, for its part, has issued arrest warrants: in November 2024, for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, upheld against Israel’s challenges. But the charges are for the war crime of starvation as a method of warfare, crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts, and intentionally directing attacks against civilians; not, notably, for genocide.^{57,58} Both men remain, in Human Rights Watch’s plain word, “fugitives” from the Court as of March 2026; no state party has arrested either, despite travel to countries the Rome Statute obliges to act.⁵⁹ That the Court’s own prosecutors chose not to bring the genocide charge, while three separate UN and international bodies have, is itself part of the record a careful reader deserves to see: a reminder that “genocide,” in law, sets an intent standard that even sympathetic prosecutors sometimes judge harder to prove than atrocity crimes that do not require it.

I have laid out that trail because I think the trail itself is the more serious argument. A single tribunal’s finding can be an outlier. A pattern across an international court’s preliminary findings, a UN commission of inquiry’s successive reports, a UN special committee, the world’s leading NGO investigator, and the field’s own professional association, converging independently on the same word, is not an outlier. It is what a finding trail looks like when the underlying reality is not actually in serious dispute among the people whose job is to determine such things, whatever legal process still has years left to run.

What it means when the enclave of the stricken is itself struck

I return, then, to where I started. A house of hospitality exists to say: whatever violence brought you here, you are now outside it. A hospital that can still be raided, whose director can still be disappeared into detention without trial, whose medicine warehouse can still be flattened on a Saturday morning ten months into a ceasefire, is not failing to be a hospital by accident. Israel has done something, with evident deliberateness and at extraordinary and sustained scale, to the idea that any such enclave exists at all.

This matters beyond Gaza, and I want to close on that point. Every hospital ethics committee on which I ever sat rested on an unstated premise: that the protected status of the hospital, and the trust patients place in it, is durable; that it will hold even under the worst pressures a society can generate, because a society that lets it collapse under pressure has told itself something terrible about what it truly believes it owes the suffering. Gaza's hospitals did not collapse under the ordinary attrition of underfunding or negligence that most health systems eventually face. WHO's own word for what happened to them, repeated across two years of statements, is "systematic."⁶⁰ Systematic destruction of an enclave of the stricken is not a side effect of war. It is a judgement about who deserves one.

I do not think the world can look honestly at the mass graves in the courtyards of Nasser and Al-Shifa, at a hospital director held without charge for six hundred days, at a medicine warehouse destroyed under a ceasefire, and conclude that the house of hospitality was simply, tragically, in the wrong place.

The record shows it was found, and struck, again and again, by design.



Al-Shifa Medical Complex from the air after the second siege, ambulances dwarfed by the burnt-out blocks. Drone still: Jaber Jehad Badwan, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

What a moral community does with that finding, whether it insists, as I have spent a career insisting, that the enclave of the stricken must hold even when everything else gives way, is now the actual question in front of us, and it will remain in front of us long after any court delivers its final word.

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