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The Bad Data Behind the 'Genocide' Charge

Everyone has a direct stake in knowing that one of the most-cited evidentiary pillars in the international campaign against Israel is far shakier than its footnotes suggest.

Leslie Johns and Gregory Rose
August 29, 2020

Martin Poyo/Getty Images

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If you've followed the international campaign to brand Israel as a criminal country over the past two years, you've likely encountered statistics. Some float through U.N. briefings, appear in medical journals and law reviews, and are cited by activists as proof that Israel has waged a systematic campaign against Palestinian hospitals and medical workers. Those numbers come from the World Health Organization's database of "attacks on health care." It is treated, almost universally, as recording verified facts. Not so.

We spent months examining that database and how it actually works. What we found should concern anyone who cares about integrity around these issues. The data underlying some of the most serious accusations Israel faces does not hold up to scrutiny. Almost no one knows this. Few have studied the WHO dataset before.

First, the WHO's definition of "attack" bears little resemblance to what the term means under the actual laws of war. It includes verbal threats and what the WHO calls "psychological violence," a category broad enough to include intimidation or embarrassment. It also includes arrests, detentions, and security searches. By the WHO's own written methodology, a doctor delayed at an IDF checkpoint and arriving late to a shift can be logged as an "attack on health care." An ambulance searched for smuggled weapons counts the same way, even though the Red Cross considers this practice lawful. And Israel has good reason to search ambulances, given Hamas' documented history of using ambulances to move fighters and weapons.

This means that when government officials, U.N. rapporteurs, or news organizations cite "hundreds of WHO-verified attacks" in Gaza or the West Bank, they are citing a number that conflates real violence with routine security operations and administrative friction. Our analysis found that only about a quarter of logged events in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem meet even a loose threshold for violence, and only 6% involve a fatality, among the lowest severity rates the WHO tracks in armed conflicts anywhere in the world. The aggregate figure, repeated without that context in nearly every WHO citation, tells a story the underlying data doesn't support.

The second problem goes to the heart of how Israel's military conduct in Gaza gets judged. International law is clear that a hospital forfeits its special protection the moment it's used for military purposes, such as a command center, a weapons cache, or a tunnel network. This is settled law, not an Israeli talking point. When the IDF moved into Al-Shifa Hospital in November 2023, following extensive evidence that a command-and-control complex sat beneath it, it was acting on a legal basis international law has long recognized. Yet the WHO's data appears to log the episode as more than a hundred separate "attacks," with no methodology that accounts for, or even acknowledges, the loss of the hospital's protected status. Every citation of that figure treats a military operation with a recognized legal basis as an atrocity statistic.

Then there is Al-Ahli Arab Hospital — the case that should trouble anyone who cares about how quickly false accusations take hold and how rarely they're corrected. When the hospital was struck on October 17, 2023, reportedly killing and wounding hundreds, Israel was blamed instantly, everywhere. Days later, forensic evidence (including from Western intelligence services) traced the explosion to a Palestinian rocket that misfired on launch. The correction reached a fraction of the audience that the original accusation did. And the event remains logged today, permanently, as the single deadliest entry in the WHO's entire global database — still cited by activists and U.N. officials as evidence of Israeli war crimes and even genocide, years after the evidence pointed elsewhere. The WHO's system has no mechanism by which Israel, or any state, can formally contest a mistaken entry.

Who is actually filing these reports? In Gaza, the primary reporting channel is a health ministry that answers to Hamas, an organization with every incentive to document Israeli actions in granular detail and zero incentive to disclose its own use of hospitals and ambulances for military purposes. The database doesn't account for that asymmetry, and neither do the international bodies that cite it. The result is a dataset structurally tilted before a single event is even logged, built on reporting from an organization that the United States, the European Union, and Israel all designate as a terrorist group.

These numbers are being fed into prosecution dossiers, U.N. Human Rights Council reports, and academic literature building the legal case against Israeli officials. Diaspora Jewish organizations fighting these accusations in op-eds, in Congress, and on campus are often arguing against a statistic their opponents treat as beyond dispute, while few people knowing how poorly it was assembled.

We are not arguing that no legitimate criticism of Israeli conduct exists, or that health care workers in conflict zones don't deserve real protection — they do, and better data would serve that goal far better than what currently exists. But everyone has a direct stake in knowing that one of the most-cited evidentiary pillars in the international campaign against Israel is far shakier than its footnotes suggest. They should demand that the WHO fix its methodology by adopting clearer definitions, independent verification, and a right of reply for accused states. The WHO should act like the credible institution it claims to be, especially when the cost of its sloppiness falls so heavily, and undermines the entire credibility of its database on attacks on healthcare.

***Leslie Johns** is a professor of political science and law at UCLA. **Gregory Rose** is a professor of law at the University of Wollongong. They are the authors of a report on the WHO's health care attack data published by the Henry Jackson Society and The Hague Initiative for International Cooperation.*

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Creative Community for Peace Calls Mark Ruffalo's Ellison Attack Antisemitic, Urges Hollywood to Stop Platforming Him
August 22, 2020
The entertainment-industry organization said Ruffalo based criticism of Israel with conspiratorial themes involving Jewish wealth, media ownership and concentrated power. Ruffalo called the antisemitism allegation "fundamentally dishonest."

In Accusing Ellison of Complicity in 'Genocide,' Mark Ruffalo Echoes Ancient Tropes of Jewish Control
August 21, 2020
Ruffalo made the Ellisons' relationship with Israel—and the nationality of an Oracle executive—a central part of his indictment of the Warner Bros. Discovery deal.

The Death of the Bucket List: Discovering the Art of Slow Travel in Portugal.
August 21, 2020

When You Go Out To War — A poem for Parsha Ki Teitzei
August 20, 2020
When you go out to war, be nice.

"Jerusalemites"
August 20, 2020
Chosen Links by Boaz spotlight.

Did Josephus See Jesus as a Rebellious Son?
August 20, 2020

A Moment in Time: Looking Back, Moving Forward
August 20, 2020

A Bid Torah — Repairs Reopen
August 20, 2020
Wounds reopen; repair is sometimes never really over.

Print Issue: The Silent Boycott | August 21, 2020
August 20, 2020
How Israeli academics are being shut out of the international academic world, and how UCLA professor Judea Pearl is fighting back.

Jacob and Esau Clash on the Cross Bronx Expressway in New Book
August 20, 2020
The novel is set in 1952 and centers on Jay Antevasia, a 23-year-old, six-foot-five-inch Italian Jew from the Bronx, and his older brother, Eric "Bud" Antevasia.

Israeli Rom Com 'Bloody Murray' Balances Life and Art
August 20, 2020
"Bloody Murray," whose first season is available on ChaiFlicks, stars Naomi Levov as Ms, better known as Murray, and Ronen Sela as her best friend and roommate, Dana.

Elon Gold's 'The Wedding Entertainer' Up for Best Film at 2026 Ophir Awards
August 20, 2020
In addition to Best Feature Film, "The Wedding Entertainer" received nominations for Best Actor for Rand, Best Supporting Actor for Tal Friedman, Best Supporting Actress for Matty Goldman, Best Screenplay for Rand and Best Cinematography for Gora Bojach.

The Bad Data Behind the 'Genocide' Charge
August 20, 2020
Everyone has a direct stake in knowing that one of the most-cited evidentiary pillars in the international campaign against Israel is far shakier than its footnotes suggest.

In This Season: Renewing Our L.A. Jewish Community
August 20, 2020
In this, the season of our renewal, I am proposing a transformational agenda for our Los Angeles Jewish community.

There's a Leek in the Bureka
August 20, 2020
Deliciously flaky and crispy with a satisfying creamy filling, these burekas are really easy to prepare.

Table for Five: Ki Teitzei
August 20, 2020
A Lost Sheep

The Silent Boycott
August 20, 2020
How Israeli Academics Are Being Shut Out of the International Academic World

Hit the Pause Button
August 18, 2020
The pause isn't the absence of action, it's a sanctuary in time.

Rosner's Domain | The Repressed Question of Judea and Samaria
August 18, 2020
It's a challenge for which various solutions have already been tried and failed. Most of all, it is a challenge that doesn't seem to have any prospect of being addressed anytime soon in a way that leads to a final resolution.

Presidents Have Always Lied — When Threatened by Assassins
August 18, 2020
Presidential security machinations, like presidential vacation time and decorating budgets, often serve as partisan Rorschach tests. Hoots mock, while supporters defend.

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