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Israel Pays a Political Price for Killing Aid Workers - When They're Not Palestinians

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The attack that killed seven volunteers from World Central Kitchen is Israel's latest assault on the humanitarian aid system in Gaza. This time most of the dead are Westerners, so Israel will have a hard time playing the strike down

Children in Gaza gathering around a vehicle in the World Central Kitchen convoy struck by Israel late Monday. Credit: AFP

Somewhere in the Israel Defense Forces' chain of command, a decision was made to attack an international aid convoy based on a suspicion that at some point an armed man had traveled in that convoy. In the attack, missiles fired from an air force drone killed seven aid workers from the group World Central Kitchen.

It's hard to overstate the gravity of the decision to open fire and the headache the drone operators have caused the IDF and Israel's PR efforts. This headache wouldn't have happened if the seven dead had been Palestinians, not Westerners, as six of them were.

After all, Israel has repeatedly claimed that [Hamas](#) hides behind civilians, so if the victims are Palestinians, it can say Hamas was responsible. Normally, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#) wouldn't have rushed to express regret at the "tragic case of our forces unintentionally hitting innocent people in [the Gaza Strip](#)."

A girl carrying a bag of food from World Central Kitchen in Rafah in southern Gaza last month. Credit: Mohammed Abed/AFP

Israel's PR efforts can't justify the attack or obscure the repercussions - not only because of the identity of the people killed, but also because of [World Central Kitchen](#)'s importance in the process Israel has been advancing for months: hindering the work of [UNRWA](#) to the point of eradicating the refugee agency. And this is happening as malnutrition and starvation ravage Gaza - especially in the north - and as [the International Court of Justice](#) expects Israel to ensure Gazans access to humanitarian aid.

World Central Kitchen has been the main player getting aid into northern Gaza by sea. This is the route the United States has promoted for the north since Israel rejected requests from the aid groups to open the short, fast and inexpensive land route through the northern border crossings, sparing the long and dangerous trip from the [Rafah](#) and Kerem Shalom crossings in the south.

World Central Kitchen's first, experimental shipment of aid by sea, funded by the United Arab Emirates, arrived in Gaza at the beginning of March. The second shipment, also funded by the Emirates, arrived near the Gaza City shore only this past Monday. But of the 400 tons of food and

equipment for 1 million meals, only 100 tons were unloaded from the ships. Now, because of the attack and the organization's decision to suspend its operations in Gaza, the ships are returning full to Cyprus.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian aid via the southern crossings remains below the required minimum, 500 truckloads daily. The daily average in March was only 159 trucks, as reported by the United Nations. The highest number came on March 28 - 264 trucks. The trucks have to wait many days for their turn in the Israeli security inspections.

Humanitarian aid transported by World Central Kitchen arriving in Gaza last month. Credit: IDF via AP

And then only a small part of the cargo gets to northern Gaza because of the complex coordination with the IDF, the delays at the army's internal checkpoints, IDF fire and the dangers of raids by gangs. As long as World Central Kitchen's maritime route seemed safe, it was possible to downplay aid organizations' difficulties in reaching northern Gaza. The killing of the valiant workers from the group therefore damages Israel's efforts to appear it's carrying out the instructions of the International Court of Justice.

Even before the maritime pilot program in March, World Central Kitchen, which the Palestinians were unfamiliar with before the war, raised its profile. Since October, it has provided more than 35 million hot meals and established more than 60 community kitchens. People noticed that its kitchens had cooking gas, which other organizations didn't have, and that it offered fresh vegetables otherwise unavailable in markets, or only at exorbitant prices.

According to a source at an aid group, nearly overnight World Central Kitchen achieved an operation second in size only to UNRWA, which has been around since 1949. The swiftness of the launch suggests that the Israeli bureaucracy eased the process. That is, the drone operators struck an organization whose presence and work were important to Israel not only for humanitarian reasons but also politically: the aim to wipe UNRWA off the map.

Like every aid group in Gaza during the war, World Central Kitchen coordinated with the army. As with the other organizations, the IDF knows the location of each of its installations, its vehicles are marked with flags and tags, and its workers wear protective vests declaring who they are. The identity of each worker is known to the military authorities, who vet every volunteer. The route taken by every vehicle and convoy requires authorization by Israel. In the jargon of the army and aid groups, this process is called "deconfliction."

At the beginning of December, Israel announced the establishment of the deconfliction mechanism for protecting aid workers and civilians, in the wake of a demand by David Satterfield, [President Joe Biden](#)'s special envoy for Middle East humanitarian issues. Representatives of aid groups report to liaison people at Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, who coordinate with the military forces on the ground.

This wasn't the first incident during this war in which the IDF attacked vehicles and installations of international or local aid organizations; the UN believes that about 196 aid workers have been killed since the start of the war. Six Palestinians affiliated with Doctors Without Borders - aid workers and members of their families, among them two doctors and a little girl - have been killed by IDF fire, which has also damaged vehicles belonging to the organization. Palestinians who were inside a building of the British group Medical Aid for Palestinians were wounded. Fifteen Red Crescent paramedics were killed by Israeli fire as they were on their way to wounded people.

Gazans crowding around trucks carrying food aid in February. Credit: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

At least 16 times, Israel has fired at trucks bringing in food and at people crowding around them, whether because the men guarding the trucks were tagged as Hamas people or the soldiers in a tank felt their safety was threatened. That was the case when a tank crew fired on the masses surrounding a food convoy on February 29 – about 100 people were killed, some crushed to death by the frightened crowd, others by gunfire from the tank.

Most of these incidents were met by silence in the Israeli media, and the IDF didn't apologize or admit a mistake. This is because the dead, the wounded and the unhurt but traumatized were Palestinians, and because UNRWA and the Red Crescent are automatically labeled collaborators with Hamas.

The killing of the World Central Kitchen volunteers, an attack that's not the first of its kind, brings to the surface three basic elements in the IDF's operations in Gaza. The first is the lack of coordination among the various forces, despite declarations to the contrary. The second is the relatively low rank that has authority to kill from the air. The third is the IDF's great flexibility in what it considers collateral damage: the very large number of unarmed people, among them children, whom it's "permissible" to kill in order to hit "one legitimate target."

In the incident late Monday, the suspicion was that one "armed individual" (whose identity we still don't know) was present. This was enough to allow the IDF drone operators to kill seven people who weren't suspects or armed. This ease of opening fire is one of the explanations for the 14,000 children killed by Israel in Gaza so far, a figure provided by UNICEF.

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P.S.

• Haaretz. Apr 3, 2024:

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