

Numbers That Stagger the Imagination: There's No Way to Quantify the Suffering in Gaza

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According to a report conducted with World Bank participation, the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip account for 80 percent of all people worldwide who are facing famine and severe hunger. 14,000 children have been killed, and 17,000 children remain without adult accompaniment

Destruction following an Israeli strike in Rafah, southern Gaza, this week. The higher the number, the less we can comprehend what that means. Credit: Mohammed Salem / Reuters

Due to the limitations of the human imagination (as opposed to the imagination of warmongers and weapons developers), and in the absence of a different dictionary, there's no real way to describe the destruction and loss in Gaza after six months of war.

Theoretically, it would be sufficient to view the hundreds if not thousands of video clips that show the trembling children - [unable to control their trembling](#) - after Israeli bombings: in hospitals, in the street, some of them sobbing, some unable to utter a word. Covered with dust and bleeding. That's one detail that's sufficient to represent the disaster. Anyone who takes pleasure in revenge, please: Let them watch the video clips, one by one.

Practically speaking, in the newspaper words have to suffice. That means that due to the limitations of words we find refuge in numbers. As of late January, [17,000 children are walking around the Strip without adult accompaniment](#), according to UNICEF. Their parents were killed, they weren't extricated from among the ruins. Or the children got lost during all the mass marches to the south.

And that's not including the 14,000 children (of about 33,000 known dead) who were slain so far by Israeli bombings. Added to them are thousands of children who have lost limbs, are suffering from burns, are walking around with wounds that have become infected in the absence of bandages and medicine, and will suffer from PTSD for the rest of their lives. What's their future? It's impossible to quantify the suffering. Is it possible to quantify the cost of treating them and their special needs, and their effect on the economy?

'Palestinians in Gaza now make up 80 percent of all people facing famine or severe hunger worldwide.'

In every number of dead, wounded and orphans who aren't ours, there's a catch. It's general, it's abstract for us. Even when it comes to 44 members of a single family, who were killed in a single bombing, like the family of Dr. Abdel Latif al Haj, about whom [I previously wrote](#). The higher the number, the less we can comprehend what that means. Psychologically, we can avoid comprehending the gaping hole caused by the Israeli bombings in a society towards which our sentiments range from ignoring our domination over it to our hatred of it.

But if we forget about the number and tell a single story - that would be one story. And it would have to meet a threshold of the most horrifying story of all in order to be comprehended. When I get to the single story in the end, I'll say: It's a representative detail, that contains the whole. And it's not the most horrifying.

Following is another number: "Palestinians in Gaza now make up 80 percent of all people facing famine or severe hunger worldwide," according to the joint interim report of the World Bank, the European Union and the United Nations, which was published last week.

Palestinian children ride bicycle amid destruction in the northern Gaza Strip, this week. Credit: Mahmoud Issa / Reuters

Compare this assertion with the statement in the High Court of Justice of Lt. Col. Nir Azuz of the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories unit, according to which "as far as we're concerned, the amount of food that is entering [Gaza] allows for a reasonable solution for the population."

The officer was called to defend the government's position against a petition by Israeli human rights organizations to allow unlimited aid deliveries, in order to check the spread of hunger and [death by starvation in Gaza](#). The gap between the two assertions - or between the reality and the denial - requires a definition that is lacking in the existing lexicon.

The purpose of the joint report is to submit an estimate of the material damage thus far, as a basis for the initial rehabilitation efforts. The data on material damage is easier to quantify, and perhaps easier to comprehend as well.

As of late January 2024, the physical destruction in the Strip was estimated at about \$18.5 billion. That's the cost of 50 fighter jets the Biden administration is interested in selling to Israel, subject to congressional approval, as reported by CNN. It's the sum of compensation that Canada agreed to pay to 300,000 people due to the discrimination and neglect suffered by the children of indigenous peoples in the school system, between 1991 and 2022. It's 92.5 million average monthly salaries in Gaza (about \$200, before the war).

Palestinian receive food aid, in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, in November. Credit: Hatem Ali / AP

If that sum sounds attainable, we should recall that reconstruction needs are more expensive than the cost of the damage, as noted in the report. For example, in the 2014 war in Gaza there was damage to the tune of \$1.4 billion. The reconstruction needs cost \$3.9 billion. In the earthquake in Turkey and Syria in February 2023 the damage was estimated at \$3.7 billion. The reconstruction needs: \$7.9 billion.

The volume of the debris in the Strip, which will need to be cleared away in order to begin

reconstruction, is 26 million tons. It will take years to clear it, according to the report. How many years? The report makes no promises, since this isn't a precise measurement.

First, the extent of damage since early February has yet to be measured (it includes, for example, the ruins of Al-Shifa Hospital complex and the surrounding houses). Second, for obvious security reasons, the teams can't walk around there and the assessment is done from a distance. Third, we don't know how long the war will continue.

Video

Among the debris there is unexploded ordnance, which makes the process of clearing away and recycling more dangerous, longer and more expensive. If Israel imposes the [same restrictions and difficulties](#) on bringing in raw materials and equipment as in the past - the process will take even longer.

The cost of the environmental damage, one of the sectors examined by the report, is estimated at about \$411 million. The truth is that it's not clear how they arrived at this calculation, but the immediate and long-term consequences are easy to understand: the additional contamination of the groundwater, the pollution of the air and the ground with dangerous waste including ordnance, the toxic chemicals emitted from all the bombs, medical waste scattered all around, pollution caused by the untreated sewage that floods the streets and ends up in the sea.

Of all the destroyed sectors (water and electricity infrastructure, the health care system, schools, factories and stores, farms. In short: everything), the cost of damage to homes is the highest: \$13.3 billion. As of the end of January, 62 percent of all the houses in the Strip were totally or partially destroyed: 290,820 housing units.

I'm guessing that "partially destroyed" is like the damage to the apartments and houses of some of my friends in Gaza: They are now without interior walls, without a roof, without windows and doors, without pipes, without floors, without stairs, with crooked exterior walls that are full of cracks. "Totally destroyed" is like the apartment of a friend, on the seventh or eighth floor, in a housing complex that in a single bombing turned into a pulp of crumpled concrete.

The quantification doesn't include the contents of the apartments. Simple or elegant. Gold jewels or private libraries, so dear to the hearts of their owners. Their books were used at a certain point as kindling, in lack of fuel or wood.

Destruction near the Al-Shifa Hospital complex in Gaza City, this week. Credit: AFP

The quantification suggested by the report of course doesn't include: longing for the sight of the sea as seen from the window, the stories and poems that were recorded on a desktop computer without backup. The paintings. The importance of home to people who grew up on the [formative disaster](#) of the 1948 war: leaving home and expulsion from it. Memories of one's daughter's first step. The pride and joy when slowly accumulated savings added up to an apartment separate from parents or siblings.

The lucky ones - as people in Gaza keep saying today - were indeed uprooted from their homes at the beginning of this war but are living with the rest of the extended family in an apartment rented at an exorbitant price [in Rafah](#), or in the home of relatives, with a density of about a dozen or more per room. We hear more and more about quarrels and tension inside this pressure cooker. "I'm sick of it. I'm thinking of moving to a tent with my children," said a friend. Her attempts to get to Egypt have been futile so far.

Even those who have gone abroad aren't really there. They're living the nightmare day and night. Like Mona (not her real name) the granddaughter of Naifa Al-Nawati. Mona, her mother, her husband and her children arrived in Egypt over a month ago. They tried to speak every day to the family remaining there, at the Al Islam 3 building, on Ahmad Bin Abdel Aziz Street, west of the maternity ward building of Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza.

They spoke to their aunts and uncles, and to their children. They couldn't talk to their 94-year-old grandmother: she suffers from Alzheimer's, requires nursing care, 24-hour supervision. "She can't even take a glass of water by herself." Because of her illnesses and her dependence, the family remained in Gaza City, in spite of Israeli orders to move to the south at the start of the war. "I have friends whose mothers died in a tent in Rafah," Mona told me on the phone, in a kind of unnecessary justification for why her grandmother wasn't dragged to the south.

The remains of a home destroyed by an Israeli airstrike, in Rafah, this week. Credit: AFP

At the start of the ground incursion and during the battles in the area of Al-Shifa Hospital in November, the Al-Nawati family found shelter in eastern neighborhoods of the city. Later they returned to their building, which was partially damaged in the exchanges of fire. On March 18, the IDF once again besieged Al-Shifa, conducting battles there with armed men from the Palestinian militant organizations.

Because everything began with a surprise attack after midnight, the Al-Nawatis and other residents of the building couldn't get out, and remained entrenched in their homes, without enough food and water, for four days. And around them were exchanges of fire and the roars of tanks. "On March 21, at about 11 A.M., an IDF force broke into the apartment after blowing up the entrance door," Mona told me.

She told me what she heard in a fragmented conversation from her aunt in Rafah, while the phone connection with her was disconnected several times. The force that broke into the house gathered the men who were in the building into a separate room, where they were told to strip, were blindfolded and then were cuffed and interrogated.

Mona doesn't know how many there were, but she says they weren't many, because most of the residents in the adjacent apartments had already left the building. At the same time the soldiers ordered the women to leave their husbands and their adult children behind - and to move to the south. The women in the family asked the soldiers to let one of them stay in the house with the elderly grandmother, who's dependent on them.

Based on the report that she received from her female relatives, Mona told me that "the soldiers who broke into my grandmother's house behaved reasonably well, compared to [their behavior](#) in other places, and at least it was possible to talk to them."

The Al-Shifa Hospital complex following an Israeli military operation, this week. Credit: Dawoud Abu Alkas / Reuters

Everyone in Gaza is familiar with the sights and the reports, about the bodies of civilians found shot in the houses that the army entered. Everyone is familiar with the stories of humiliation, from the soldiers' own photos as well. Still, in spite of their relative niceness, the soldiers refused to let one of the women in the family stay with the grandmother in the apartment. They promised the women that they would take Al-Nawati to Al-Shifa Hospital, she said.

The women who were in the building arrived in the southern Strip towards evening, and at about the same time the men were released, and they didn't even know that the elderly woman had been left

behind. Since then, the family hasn't been able to find out what happened to the 94-year-old woman, and turned to Hamoked - Center for the Defense of the Individual, which last Thursday filed a habeas corpus petition in the High Court, with a demand that the IDF find out what happened to the woman who was in its custody.

The IDF spokesperson told Haaretz at the end of last week that it's unfamiliar with the story. Also last week, Mona wrote to me that after the army had cleared out the area - her cousins looked for her grandmother in the house itself and in what remained of the hospital, and found no trace of her. "Nobody informed them that she had entered Al-Shifa, and the residence was completely burned, and they didn't find her body there. Where did they take her? We reached a situation where we know that it's easier if she's dead."

When I asked her, Mona explained: "On Wednesday [last week] they saw all the rotting and intact and buried bodies located in Shifa. She isn't among them. In the building they found nothing except for the bodies of my 28-year-old cousin and her husband on the seventh floor. The roof is surrounded by glass windows. My cousin came from Germany - where her parents live - in order to marry in Gaza, two months before the war. She was pregnant with twins. We think that a drone killed them, and then the bodies were burned with the building. These are the only bodies that were found in the building. We didn't know what happened to them until now."

"And there's no trace of my grandmother", Mona continued. "We were afraid that they would find her body in the house, and that she died alone, and we were afraid that the tanks ran her over in the street, if they left her there alone so that she would get to Al-Shifa Hospital. We were afraid about everything. We were afraid about the extent of her suffering if she really died alone, and we were afraid about her suffering if she's still alive."

After the publication of this article in Hebrew, Mona wrote and informed me that her cousins searched the house again and found the burnt remains of her grandmother, in her bed.

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P.S.

• Haaretz. Apr 10, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-10/ty-article-magazine/.premium/numbers-that-stagger-the-imagination-theres-no-way-to-quantify-the-suffering-in-gaza/0000018e-c1db-d480-a99e-cfdf01240000>