EDITORIAL: The human cost of war

Keeping track of the death toll in war zones

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Civilians are the main casualties in conflicts. Norms and mechanisms to protect civilians should be strengthened, according to the report of the Commission on Human Security (Commission on Human Security, 2003), which requires strategies linking political, military, humanitarian and development aspects. In 2023 the UN Human Rights Council in its 53rd session declared casualty recording vital for the promotion and protection of human rights (Human Rights Council, 2023).

The latest report from Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) reveals a surge in civilian fatalities and incidents of explosive weapon use globally in 2023, with a 122% rise in global civilian fatalities compared to 2022, highlighting an escalation in modern warfare tactics, with a significant impact on civilian populations in populated areas.

- Air strikes were reportedly responsible for 67% of civilian fatalities.
- In towns and cities, 90% of those harmed by explosive weapons were civilians.
- Operation Swords of Iron in Gaza contributed substantially to the increase, with 37% of all civilian casualties globally attributed to it.
- 2023 saw the highest number of civilians harmed since AOAV’s records started in 2010, with 33,846 civilians killed or injured.
- Air-launched attacks increased by 226%.
- Ground-launched attacks rose by 56%.
- Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) incidents increased by 30%.
- State actors were responsible for 77% of civilian casualties from explosive weapons.

Israel and Russia were the most injurious state actors. (Action on Armed Violence, 2024)

In the 21st century, approaches to security are increasingly people-centered, but how do we keep track of civilian deaths?


The old man was Iraqi and his country, Iraq, had been invaded and at war for three weeks. The killing was recorded and documented in a public database by Iraq Body Count (IBC) (n.d.): it was Incident x045. The old man died with 14 others in an incident that was reported by journalists writing for the Associated Press, Le Monde, CBC and other Western media. A New York Times article on 11 April even provided details of two of the other victims: brothers Wadhar and Bashar Handi, owners of a tannery. Between March 2003 and March 2005, IBC recorded the deaths of 24,864 civilians, based on reports by journalists, by also – and primarily – mortuary officials and medics.
Press and media reports relied on primary sources on the ground in Iraq for their data, and police became increasingly significant as primary sources. Iraqis were the ones who most clearly articulated their experience of war to the world. All these sources enabled IBC casualty recorders to extract incident data (date, time, place, target, number of killed and injured, weapons used, perpetrators, media sources, primary witnesses) and personal data (name, age, gender, marital status, parental status, occupation) for the next 20 years.

Reporting on casualties by Western media dwindled after 2010, when US troops withdrew from Iraq, only to rise during the ISIS occupation years, 2014–2017. After reporting on ISIS atrocities, Western media left it to Middle Eastern journalists, medics and police officers to provide testimony and report the daily killings.

As a casualty recorder, I thought I had seen the worst in state aggression, when Iraq was invaded by the US–UK coalition, claiming the lives of 7,500 civilians in six weeks. That all changed in October 2023, when Israel began its latest and deadliest assault on Gazans. A comparative table prepared by IBC shows the figures for the first month.

The figures for Gaza were provided by the Palestinian Ministry of Health, which reported 6,747 fatalities from 7 to 26 October, in a detailed report, with names, ages and ID numbers. 2,665 of the victims were children. Based on victim demographics, IBC created this table.

“The Hamas-run Health Ministry in Gaza has released a list of 6,747 people it said had been killed in Israel’s relentless bombardment of the Palestinian territory in retaliation for the Hamas-led raid on October 7 that killed more than 1,400 people in Israel” reported the New York Times (New York Times, 2023). US President Biden expressed “no confidence” in those numbers (Reuters, 2023). From the very first casualty report, Western press and politicians would include variations of this caveat: Hamas-run, Hamas-reported, Hamas-led. Recently, the BBC highlighted the heartbreaking death of 6-year-old Hind Rajab, killed fleeing with family members and the ambulance crew that responded. The report concluded, “Israel has previously accused Hamas of using ambulances to transport its weapons and fighters” (BBC, 2024).

Since the Ministry of Health document, there has been no shortage of sources of information on casualties. Data and photos (submitted by family members and people who
First weeks of civilian deaths in Iraq (2003) and Gaza (2023) compared by day number.

Civilian deaths during the 2003 Iraq invasion are from iraqbodycount.org/database and based predominantly on figures from hospitals and morgues reported to press and media.

Numbers of killed in Gaza are from the Gaza Ministry of Health, as reported daily by UNRWA unrwa.org/resources/reports and OCHA ochaopt.org.
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... (knew the victims) are provided daily by @Gaza_Shaheed and @GazaMartyrs on Twitter, as well as shireen.ps and airwars.org. IBC created a spreadsheet linking to and detailing online photographic tributes to 1,198 people killed from 7 October 2023 to 2 February 2024 (Iraq Body Count, 2024).

While it is mostly non-Western sources that report those daily deaths, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (based in Switzerland) also provides figures, reporting 28,951 civilian deaths, including 12,345 children and 113 journalists, on 13 January 2024, updating to 30,571 civilians, including 13,642 children and 121 journalists on 3 February 2024 (Euro-Med Monitor, 2024). On social media we find detailed accounts, identifying, contextualizing and memorializing each death, like those of five children killed with their mother, provided by Gaza Shaheed:

Martyrs, child angels: Hassan Mohamed Salah, 10 years old, Ismail Mohamed Salah, 9 years old, Hanan Mohamed Salah, 5 years old, Majd Mohamed Salah, 3 years old, Lian Mohamed Salah, one and a half years old. Five young children, less than ten years old. Innocent children who excel in their studies. Obedient, polite, well behaved. The five siblings loved each other very much and were always with each other until they left this life together. Their mother was very interested in raising them in the best possible way, until their mother left with them. (Gaza Shaheed, 2024. Translated from Arabic by Google)

Each child is pictured smiling.

It is easier than ever to keep track of casualties, with transparency, accuracy and speed – even more so than when Iraq was invaded in 2003 – and the recording of civilian deaths in armed conflicts is now practiced globally. When it comes to Gaza, numbers and – more importantly – identifying details are freely available and continuously updated.

What is less easy is the will to suspend our own prejudice that stops us from trusting the data, or that makes us excuse/justify/support the killing of innocents. It often comes down to which side we support. We trust Memorial Platform (n.d.) reporting on the horrific deaths of Ukrainians; we trust Children of War (n.d.) when it reports the suffering of Ukrainian children in the two years since the Russian invasion:

531 dead
1,231 wounded
2,120 missing
19,546 deported or forcibly displaced
13 sexually abused

We condemn the killing of Ukrainian children whose photos we see: smiling, playing, proudly showing a school certificate. Those photos too were provided by their devastated families and shared online. And while pain and loss are universal, it seems that what many of us want to believe is that only our allies tell the truth.

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