

## EDITORIAL

## Is there International Humanitarian Law for Gaza?

Ali Khaji, MD, PhD<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Iranian Research Center on Aging, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran*Is there International Humanitarian Law for Gaza?*

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has dominated recent headlines. However, to fully understand the current crisis, one must acknowledge that its roots extend over 70 years, beginning with the initial occupation of Palestinian territories by Zionist forces. The dire conditions in Gaza began to escalate around two decades ago, when the occupying regime imposed a blockade, trapping over two million people within just 365 square kilometers, creating one of the most densely populated regions in the world.

Since October 27, 2023, Gaza has endured continuous and large-scale military assaults. The scale and intensity of the bombardments are comparable to those used during World War II to destroy civilian infrastructure. As a result, trauma-related deaths from military operations are estimated to be approximately 64,260 within the first nine months of this new phase of the conflict. This figure does not account for the majority of victims, who succumbed to indirect causes of death, including limited access to food, water, medical care, and other essential services due to the ongoing siege.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing the medical and health needs of civilians in conflict zones is crucial in reducing mortality. Three key factors are essential for delivering effective medical care in these settings.

First, the presence of operational medical facilities is fundamental. Second, adequate human resources are vital. Doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals must be available in sufficient numbers and possess the necessary skills and expertise to respond to the complex demands of war-related injuries and illnesses. Finally, the availability of essential medical supplies, equipment, and medications is critical.

Together, these three components—facilities, personnel, and supplies—form the backbone of any humanitarian medical response in conflict zones.

**Historical Shortage of Medical Supplies in Gaza**

For more than two decades, the Gaza Strip has faced severe shortages of essential and life-saving supplies due to long-standing restrictions and the blockade. Among the most critical shortages and challenges are:

- Fuel
- Spare parts

- Medical supplies
- Targeted killing and imprisonment of medical staff
- Lack of access to safe drinking water
- Widespread malnutrition, which has escalated into famine
- Failure to transport patients out of the besieged area

These systemic deficiencies have rendered Gaza's healthcare infrastructure extremely fragile. Today, with direct military attacks on hospitals and healthcare workers, the system has nearly collapsed.<sup>2</sup> For instance, al-Shifa Hospital—Gaza's largest medical center—has been destroyed, with some of its staff either killed or arrested.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, the director of Kamal Adwan Hospital, was reportedly arrested and subjected to torture.<sup>4</sup> These are just a few examples that illustrate the broader reality.

**International Humanitarian Law**

According to Article 19 of the First Geneva Convention, all medical units—whether military or civilian—must be protected. This includes medical personnel, supplies, buildings, and installations that serve the wounded, sick, and shipwrecked.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Article 18 of the Fourth Geneva Convention explicitly states that under no circumstances should civilian hospitals, which provide care for the wounded, sick, disabled, and mothers, be targeted by military forces.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the principle of medical neutrality stipulates that during armed conflict, healthcare professionals must be permitted to treat all individuals in need, regardless of their political affiliation. It also requires all parties to refrain from targeting, obstructing, or abusing medical personnel, facilities, and transport.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these well-established legal and ethical principles, the situation in Gaza constitutes a clear violation of international humanitarian law. The majority of hospitals and health facilities are now non-functional. Those that remain have ceased mainly operations due to staff shortages, movement restrictions, and overwhelming humanitarian conditions, creating unbearable circumstances in the region.<sup>8</sup>

What is happening in Gaza can no longer be described merely as a conflict. The deliberate targeting of civilians and healthcare systems points to a systematic and intentional

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campaign, amounting to genocide.

This raises a critical question: What is the responsibility of humanity, and particularly of medical professionals, in the face of such blatant crimes against humanity? Perhaps it is time to reconsider and redefine these principles.

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