

21st Century Genocide

Dr Lily Hamourtziadou

The 'genos' is a primary and universal institution of mankind and it is clear that mankind spent most of its history within the framework of this social unit. It was here that the original esprit de corps, the way of life, the traditions, the forces of cohesion and solidarity were born. It was also here that the spirit of exclusiveness, suspicion, and hatred of other groups was bred. Thus, the genos is both the unit against which the crime is directed and the unit from which it originates.

Raphael Lemkin (cit Jones, 2024: 501)

Genocide, an internationally recognised crime where acts are committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, is one of history's defining features, overlapping central historical processes: war, imperialism, state-building and class struggle. Virtually all definable human groups have been victims of genocide and are vulnerable in specific contexts today. Equally, most human collectivities have proven capable of inflicting genocide. Genocides have often been designed not only to eradicate enemy ethnicities, but also to exploit some of their members.

Groups targeted for genocide develop their own terms to denote and memorialise their experiences. Here are some examples:

Genoktonia. The systematic killing of the Greek and Pontic populations of Anatolia carried out 1914-22 by Ottoman and Turkish forces.

Gukurahundi. The mass murder of over 20,000 Matabele citizens of Zimbabwe 1983-87 by the Shona Fifth Brigade under President Mugabe.

Holocaust. Derived from the Greek word meaning a sacrificial offering completely consumed by fire, the term today is used for the Nazis' attempted destruction of Jews in the 1930s and 1940s. The word 'holocaust' has also been used to describe especially destructive genocides.

Holodomor. The Ukrainian 'famine-extinction' of 1932-33 at the hands of Stalin's Soviet regime. It combines *holod* (hunger) with *mor* (exterminate).

Itsembabwoko. The Rwanda genocide of 1994: from the verb *gutsemba* (to exterminate) and *ubwoko* (ethnic group, clan).

Medz Yeghern. The 'Great Crime' in Armenian, refers to the Armenian genocide of 1915-17 by the Ottomans.

Nakba. In Arabic, the 'Catastrophe' of the Palestinian people uprooted and dispossessed in 1947-48 by the forces of the new Israeli state.

Porrajmos. The 'Devouring' -Romani term for the holocaust of the Roma/Sinti population of Europe by the Nazis 1941-45.

Shoah. The Hebrew word for 'Catastrophe'. The word refers to the killing of millions of Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the Second World War.

Until the Second World War, genocide was a 'crime without a name', in the words of British Prime Minister Churchill. The man who named the crime and demanded action was a Polish Jewish jurist, a refugee from Nazi-occupied Europe, named Raphael Lemkin (1900 – 1959). He

coined the term 'genocide', to denote a coordinated plan aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national or ethnic groups, with the aim of annihilating them. Such plans generally involve the mass killing of civilians.

Genocide by a non-state actor: IS massacres of Yazidis and Shia Muslims in Iraq 2014-2018.

In the 21st century, the terrorist group ISIS committed genocide against the Yazidi minority, when it seized control of Iraq's Nineveh province in 2014. Thousands fled their homes as the militants systematically killed men and older women, and enslaved younger women and children. More than 5,000 Yazidis were killed in the genocide.

'A landmark moment has been reached in our work, with initial case briefs completed in relation to two key investigative priorities,' said Karim Asad Ahmad Khan, Special Adviser and Head of the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (UNITAD), in a briefing on the sixth report of the Team (document [S/2021/419](#)). 'I can confirm to the Council that based on our independent criminal investigations, UNITAD has established clear and convincing evidence that genocide was committed by ISIL against the Yazidi as a religious group,' he said, noting that the intent to destroy the Yazidi population, physically and biologically, was manifest in its ultimatum to convert or die (UN Security Council, 2021). Thousands were killed pursuant to this ultimatum, either executed en masse, shot as they fled, or dying from exposure as they tried to escape. Thousands more were enslaved, with women and children abducted from their families and subjected to the most brutal abuses. Male children were routinely conscripted into the armed group from the age of 8, and frequently 'executed' for cowardice, when they were unable or unwilling to kill. Starting in June 2014, the group also targeted unarmed Shia air cadets and personnel from Tikrit Air Academy, filming as they captured, tortured and murdered over 2,000 of them. Based on its independent investigative work, the UN Team concluded that these acts constituted the war crimes of murder, torture, cruel treatment and outrages upon personal dignity. It also concluded that the video released in July 2015 showing these mass killings constituted a direct and public incitement to commit genocide against Shia Muslims.

Iraq Body Count documented the crimes of ISIS against civilians in Iraq, as these two database entries from 2017 show.

Thirteen bodies found in a mass grave in Nergal area, east Mosul

Incident	a6219
Type	executed
Deaths recorded	13
Targeted or hit	bodies found buried in a secret tunnel connecting Nergal with the department of Nineveh relics and the road of the Cultural Group, the bodies included abducted Yazidis, Mosul residents and children

Place	Nergal area, east Mosul
Date and time	4 February 2017, AM

Individuals for whom only demographic or other non-personal information was reported

Number killed	Occupation	Age
4	Yazidi citizen	<i>Unrecorded</i>
2	<i>Unrecorded</i>	11

Three Yazidi girls executed in west of Mosul

Incident	a6130
Type	executed
Deaths recorded	3
Targeted or hit	Yazidi girls aged below 20, executed for trying to flee Mosul towards Badush
Place	between Mosul and Badush, west of Mosul
Date	29 January 2017

Individuals for whom only demographic or other non-personal information was reported

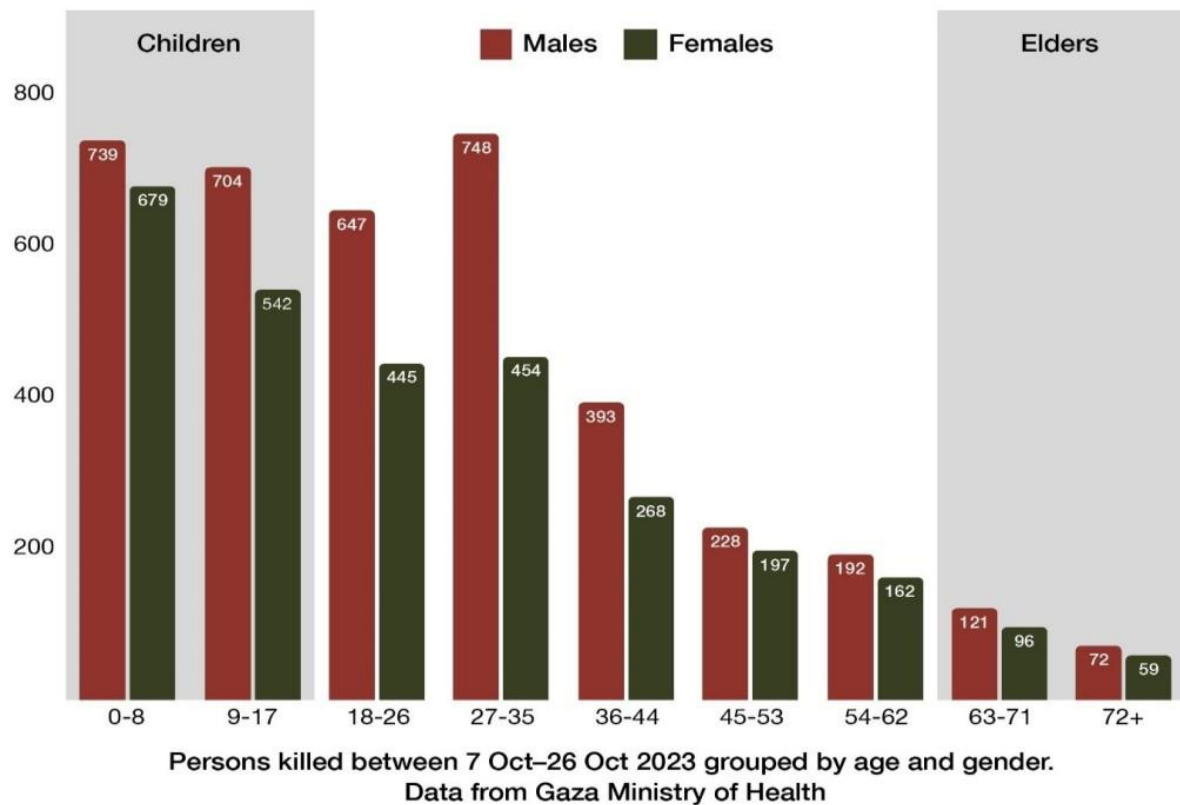
Number killed	Occupation	Age	Sex
1	Yazidi citizen	1-20	Female

Between 2014 and 2018, ISIS killed over 34,000 civilians in Iraq. In a brutal attack that shocked the world on 25 March 2016, an ISIS child recruit detonated his suicide belt in the midst of a trophy award ceremony in the Alexandria district, north of Hilla, killing 17 children, some as young as ten years old.

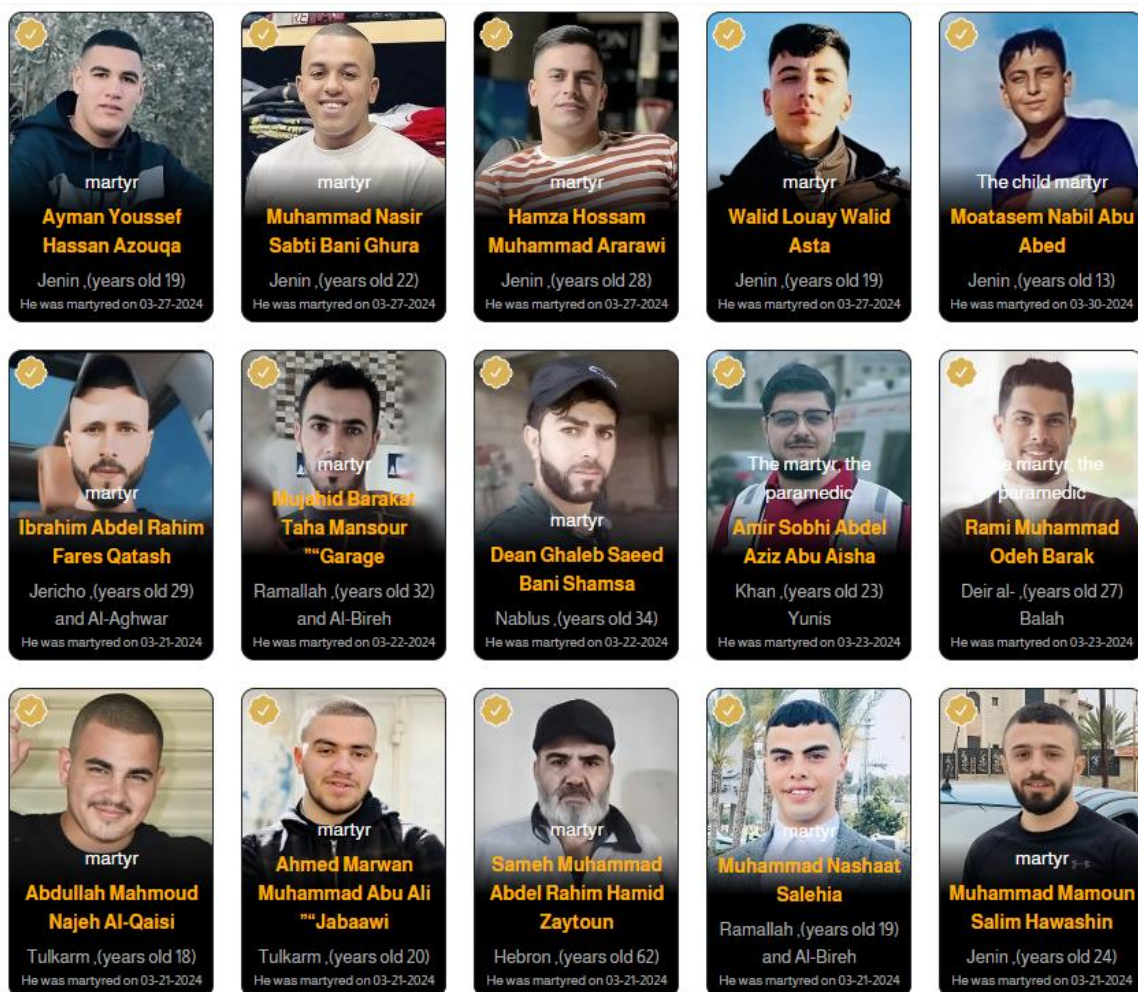
Genocide by a state: the killing of Palestinians by Israel in Gaza 2023-24.

Between 7 October 2023 and 4 March 2024, Israeli forces killed 36,330 Palestinian civilians in Gaza -including 14,861 children- and injured 74,400. Among those killed were 771 health professionals, as 285 health facilities were destroyed by the Israel Defense Forces. 2,000,000 civilians have been displaced and 368,100 homes have been destroyed (Euro-Med Human

Rights Monitor, 2024). On 26 October 2023, Gaza's Ministry of Health release a document identifying over 6,700 Palestinian civilians killed in under 3 weeks. Iraq Body Count created a table, grouping those initial victims by age and gender.



Since the release of the Ministry of Health document, there has been no shortage of sources of information on casualties in Gaza. Data and photos (submitted by family members and people who knew the victims) are provided daily by [@Gaza_Shaheed](#) on twitter, as well as [shireen.ps](#).



Source: Shireen

On social media, accounts identifying, contextualising and memorialising each death, like those of 5 children killed with their mother, are 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).

More recently, the BBC reported the killing of 6-year-old Hind Rajab, as she tried to flee with family members in a car. The ambulance crew that responded were also killed (BBC, 2024).



Genocide in International Relations

Few concepts are as amorphous and as important as ethnicity. While ethnic identifications are fluid and mutable, ethnicity is still the dominant ideological impetus to conflict and genocide worldwide.

The core concern of International Relations is power: how it is distributed and used within states. Among the most influential investigators of state-directed mass killing are US political scientists R.J. Rummel and Barbara Harff, whose work clarified the scope and character of genocidal and democidal murder in modern times. Rummel coined the term 'democide' to describe government mass murder, including genocide as defined in the UN Convention of 1948. Rummel discerned an underlying 'Power Principle': The more power a government has, the more it can act arbitrarily according to the whims and desires of the elite, and the more it will make war on others (Rummel, 1994).

Barbara Harff (2003) offers a few key explanatory variables, the presence of which makes genocide more likely:

- Political upheaval
- Prior genocides
- Exclusionary ideologies and autocratic rule
- Ethnic character of ruling elite (represents minority)
- Low economic development

The most recent contribution is the Targeted Mass Killing Dataset for the study of genocide, politicide and similar atrocities, advanced by Charles Butcher and co-researchers in 2020. These scholars described targeted mass killing (TMK) as

the direct killing of noncombatant members of a group by a formally organized armed force that results in twenty-five or more deaths in an annual period, with the intent of destroying the group

or intimidating the group by creating a perception of imminent threat to its survival (Butcher et al, 2020).

Lemkin's greatest achievement was the UN Genocide Convention, as four years after he introduced 'genocide' to the world, the General Assembly unanimously passed a law banning it. But while the drive to prevent and suppress genocide has spawned a norm and a prohibition regime, it is applied weakly and inconsistently. The continuing killing of civilians in Gaza is the best and clearest example of 21st century genocide with impunity.

References

BBC (2024) 'Hind Rajab, 6, found dead in Gaza days after phone calls for help', 10 February. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68261286>

Butcher, C., Goldsmith, B.E., Nanlohy, S., Sowmya, A. and Muchlinski, D. (2020) 'Introducing the Targeted Mass Killing Data Set for the Study and Forecasting of Mass Atrocities', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol 64 (7-8). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022002719896405>

Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2024) Statistics on the Israeli Genocide in the Gaza Strip (07 October 2023-14 March 2024). Available at: <https://twitter.com/EuroMedHR/status/1768242389657715129>

Gaza Shaheed (2024) January 8 entry. Available at: https://twitter.com/Gaza_Shaheed/status/1744256649458491851

Harff, B. (2003) 'No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955', *The American Political Science Review*, vol 97 (1), pp. 57-73. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3118221?seq=11>

Incident a6219, Thirteen bodies found in a mass grave in Nergal area, east Mosul, Iraq Body Count database. Available at: <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/incidents/a6219>

Incident a6130, Three Yazidi girls executed in west of Mosul, Iraq Body Count database. Available at: <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/incidents/a6130>

Jones, A. (2024) *Genocide*. 4th edition. Routledge.

Rummel, R.J. (1994) *Death by Government*. Transaction Publishers.

Shireen, 'Martyrs of Palestine'. Available at: <https://www.shireen.ps/martyrs/year/2024>

UN Security Council (2021) 'ISIL/Da'esh Committed Genocide of Yazidi, War Crimes against Unarmed Cadets, Military Personnel in Iraq, Investigative Team Head Tells Security Council' Press Release 10 May. Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14514.doc.htm>