

Editorial: Human cost of war: Why does recording civilian casualties matter? Iraq 2003–2023 and Gaza 2023–2025

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The universal charter for recognizing every casualty of armed violence is based on the principle that no person should die unrecorded, and it requires states to uphold this principle for all victims of armed violence (Every Casualty, 2020). It applies in cases of armed conflict, widespread lethal criminality, or any other breakdown in civil security. States are called to ensure that all men, women, and children killed are quickly recorded, correctly identified, and publicly acknowledged. They bear responsibility for civilians under their control or endangered by their actions, and they are tasked with alleviating the distress caused by not knowing the fate of loved ones. This includes enabling transparent and reliable monitoring of armed violence, giving a human face to victims, providing essential information for all parties to protect civilians, upholding victims' rights, ensuring greater compliance with international humanitarian, human rights, and refugee law, and supporting post-conflict recovery reconciliation.

Casualty recording is a process of systematically and continuously attempting to document and record incident- or individual-level information about direct deaths from armed violence. It is crucial for the respect of human dignity, for the sake of surviving family members, and for establishing the facts. Publicly accessible casualty records that are transparent, detailed, and reliable are essential for ensuring accountability, and can positively contribute to post-conflict reconstruction and stability. (Every Casualty, 2020, p. 2)

Casualty data can also help humanitarian responses and can support civilian harm mitigation plans.

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Key data that casualty recorders should collect, as a minimum standard, are location, date and time of the incident, numbers killed, names (if possible), ages of victims, gender, manner of death, weapons used, and perpetrators.

There are international legal obligations upon parties of armed conflict to search for all missing civilians and collect all casualties (Breau & Taylor, 2022). According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, parties must use all means at their disposal to identify the dead. The Plan of Action for the years 2000–2003, adopted by the 27th Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1999, required that parties ensure that every effort is made to identify dead persons (International Humanitarian Law Databases, Rule 114). IHL rules are governed by due diligence to monitor conduct during hostilities, and to protect civilians and persons *hors de combat*. Article 3 of the 1907 Hague Convention (IV) and Article 91 of Additional Protocol I state that a state is responsible for all acts committed by persons forming part of its armed forces. The Geneva Conventions specify that state responsibility exists in addition to the requirement to prosecute individuals for grave breaches (International Humanitarian Law Databases, Rule 149).

Iraq 2003–2023

Iraq Body Count (IBC) has been recording the violent deaths of civilians resulting from the 2003 military intervention in Iraq by the US-led coalition. Its detailed public database includes deaths caused by the coalition, by Iraqi government forces, and terrorist and paramilitary attacks. IBC’s data is drawn from media reports and supplemented by integrating hospital, morgue, NGO, and official figures or records. The minimum details extracted are the number killed, where, and when; names, demographics, weapons used, and data on perpetrators are collected whenever possible.

Invasion deaths

IBC recorded nearly 8,000 invasion deaths in its database (Iraq Body Count database, n.d.). Among those civilians killed were the 19 men, women, and children killed on 31 March–1 April 2003, in an airstrike.

19 by Coalition air strike in Al-Ishaqi, south of Tikrit

Incident	a6384
Type	Coalition air strike involving two missiles
Deaths recorded	19
Targeted or hit	Group of families sheltering in a farm compound
Place	Al-Ishaqi, south of Tikrit
Date and time	31 March 2003–1 April 2003, Around Midnight
Sources	Eyewitness <i>Single-sourced record.</i>

Individuals for whom personal or identifying details were reported

IBC page	Identifying details (number if more than one)	Age	Sex
a6384-zv3670	Lina Wail Mwafaq Mosa Tabra	14	Female
a6384-sz3485	Mohammed Wail Mwafaq Mosa Tabra	9–10	Male
a6384-ev3496	Sameera Rasheed Faraj	40–50	Female
a6384-dv3539	Ban Rasheed Faraj	37–38	Female
a6384-ue3666	Aseela Sami Mohammed	5–8	Female
a6384-dz3481	Mother of Mayyasa and Mohammed Bashar (Pregnant)	20–40	Female

IBC page	Identifying details (number if more than one)	Age	Sex
a6384-zs3492	Mayyasa Bashar	10	Female
a6384-xe3543	Mohammed Bashar	2	Male
a6384-za3678	Hajji Abbas	65–75	Male
a6384-xa3477	Wife of Hajji Abbas	60–75	Female
a6384-ea3488	Khalid Abbas	30–40	Male
a6384-dx3547	Relative of Hajji Abbas Family	<i>Unrecorded</i>	Female

Weapons

The IBC-type recording has supplied data on the kinds of weapons used, as in this 2007 suicide car bombing documented in incident k5655.

37–38 by suicide car bomb, Mutanabi Street, Baghdad

Incident	k5655
Type	suicide car bomb
Deaths recorded	37–38
Targeted or hit	book market
Place	Mutanabi Street, Baghdad
Date and time	5 March 2007, 11:45 AM
Sources	REU 06 Mar AP 05 Mar

Individuals for whom personal or identifying details were reported

IBC page	Identifying details (number if more than one)	Age	Sex
k5655-nv671	Hadi Hussein	Adult	Male
k5655-fn802	Mohammed al-Hayawi, brother of Nabil al-Hayawi	Adult	Male
k5655-hx745	Yahye, son of Nabil al-Hayawi	Adult	Male
k5655-kz1851	Sons of Haji Muhammad (5)	<i>Unrecorded</i>	Male
k5655-hr1789	Brother of Abdul Rahman	Adult	Male
k5655-bc1804	Son of Abdul Rahman	Adult	Male
k5655-nv1839	Mohammed, son of Mohammed Kadhemi al-Kashali	Adult	Male
k5655-fn1714	Sons of Mohammed Kadhemi al-Kashali (3)	Adult	Male
k5655-hx1785	Grandson of Mohammed Kadhemi al-Kashali	<i>Unrecorded</i>	Male
k5655-fm1800	Uncle of Maher Abu Khaled	Adult	Male

Other common weapons were roadside bombs, as in incident k2700, where five policemen were killed on 13 March 2006.

Six killed by roadside bomb in Tikrit

Incident	k2700
Type	roadside bomb
Deaths recorded	6
Targeted or hit	police patrol
Place	Tikrit
Date	13 March 2006
Sources	AP 13 Mar LAT 14 Mar

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

Number killed	Occupation	Age	Sex
5	Police	Adult	Male

Coalition killings

Coalition killings, totaling over 24,000, continued for years after the invasion. Incident a6262 from 2017 shows the severity of aerial attacks by the coalition in its battle against Islamic State.

14–16 by airstrikes in Bawabat al-Sham, west Mosul

Incident	a6262
Type	air attacks
Deaths recorded	14–16
Targeted or hit	Al-Aklat flour mill and house hit, casualties include women and children
Place	Bawabat al-Sham, Hay Al-Matahin, west Mosul
Date	14 February 2017
Sources	Airwars 2017 <i>Single-sourced record.</i>

Individuals for whom personal or identifying details were reported

IBC page	Identifying details (number if more than one)	Age	Sex
a6262-dx3523	Ali Khadr Thanon	47	Male
a6262-ec3650	Aisha Abdel Thanon	43	Female
a6262-dw3465	Hussein Ali Khadr	16	Male
a6262-zx3511	Afrah Ali Khadr	27	Female
a6262-sf3460	Noor Mohammad Hamid	20	<i>Unrecorded</i>
a6262-zw3445	Dalal Ayman Ahmed	5	Female
a6262-sb3646	Amina Ayman Ahmed	3	Female

The air attacks during the battle against ISIS, all carried out by drones, also demonstrated the effectiveness – or lack thereof – of this emerging form of remote warfare. Data gathered by IBC on drone attacks has raised public awareness of the impact of drone wars and challenged this so-called “ethical” killing and claims of “precision” or “surgical” strikes.

Non-state actors, including ISIS, executions

Most of the casualty data collected by IBC researchers concerns civilians killed by non-state actors such as Al Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS, Sadr militia, and the Popular Mobilization. More than 40 groups have been involved in hostilities in Iraq since 2003. Out of 210,000 civilian deaths recorded by the IBC, these groups are collectively responsible for 182,000. ISIS alone has killed around 50,000, mostly through “executions”, as in the incident below, where 26 young men and boys were killed for attempting to escape forced recruitment in February 2017.

26 executed in Mosul’s Right Coast, west Mosul

Incident	a6214
Type	gunfire, executed
Deaths recorded	26
Targeted or hit	young men and boys executed for trying to cross the Tigris River to flee from the forced recruitment into IS forces
Place	Mosul’s Right Coast, west Mosul
Date	6 February 2017–9 February 2017
Sources	AIN/The Times 09 Feb <i>Single-sourced record.</i>

Individuals for whom personal or identifying details were reported

IBC page	Identifying details (number if more than one)	Age	Sex
a6214-eh3457	Abu Muqdad relatives (4)	16–40	Male

Government attacks

Democratically elected Iraqi governments since 2006 have taken the lives of thousands of Iraqi civilians, as recently as 2019, as the 2019 IBC annual report revealed:

The greatest identifiable perpetrators of violence against civilians this year were government and state-associated forces, who killed some 500 protesters during May, September, October and November ... The number injured in protests ... was reported in December to have reached more than 22,000 (Hamourtziadou, Dardagan, & Sloboda, 2019).

Meticulous casualty recording helps us understand the impact of armed conflict, with its actors and its weapons, on vulnerable populations, such as those of Iraq, human beings who were more than numbers.

Gaza 2023–2025

The number of casualties in Iraq was significant, with some estimates reaching 1 million in the 20 years following the 2003 invasion. The casualty figures in the current war in Gaza, however, broke records several times in a much shorter period. The background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dates back to the early 20th century. Pinpointing the start of the tensions could spark a historical unraveling. However, many believe that the origin of the issues goes back to 1947, when Resolution 181 was adopted by the United Nations, dividing Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. In 1948, the creation of the state of Israel triggered the first Israeli-Arab war, leading to ongoing conflict in the region ever since.

The recent war in Gaza started with Hamas' attacks on 7 October, which came during a significant Jewish holiday, the Simchat Torah. It also occurred 50 years and one day after Egyptian and Syrian forces launched an assault during the Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur. The assaults were conducted by Hamas, an Islamist militant organization recognized primarily for its armed opposition to Israel. Article 7 of the Hamas Charter articulates that the mission of Hamas is to serve as part of the ongoing struggle against the Zionist invaders, stating it is a link in the chain of the Islamic Resistance Movement.

A report from Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) in December 2023 estimates that when Hamas militants stormed across the border into Israeli communities in a surprise attack on 7 October 2023, they caused a total of 1,269 Israeli and foreign national casualties. Of these 1,269 victims, 816 were civilians; 59 belonged to the police, 382 to the military, and 13 to emergency services (Westlake, 2023). In the same incident, more than 250 people, including 38 children, were taken hostage.

Following the Israeli state's response to the 7 October attack, all prior casualty records were shattered. In the first year of its Gaza campaign, the Israeli Defence Force struck homes approximately every four hours, tents and temporary shelters roughly every 17 hours, schools and hospitals every four days, and aid distribution points and warehouses every 15 days (Oxfam, 2024).

The official Palestinian Health Ministry count as of 29 September 2024 was 41,595 Palestinian deaths, amounting to about 10 times its count of losses in all previous Gaza conflicts since 2008. By the end of July 2025, the death toll passed 60,000: "1,137 were senior ladies, 1,791 were senior men, 10,271 were women, 28,543 were men, 7,801 were girls, and 10,656 were boys" (Palestinian Datasets, 2025).

In the initial months of the war, the death toll was determined solely by counting the bodies received in hospitals, with most of those killed identified by names and identity numbers. However, as the conflict continued with the destruction of much of the infrastructure (many hospitals and morgues ceased operations), collecting data became increasingly more difficult, and the authorities began to employ alternative methods for tracking fatalities. The reported numbers may not capture the full extent of the casualties, as many victims remain trapped under rubble. According to the Humanitarian Research Lab at the Yale School of Public Health, the actual figures are likely much higher than those released. It is estimated that around 10,000 bodies were unrecorded in this way. The UN Human Rights Office indicates that the numbers reported by the Palestinian authorities likely represent an undercount. This is not only due to the omission of bodies trapped under rubble but also because the figures predominantly overlook “indirect” deaths – those caused by infectious disease outbreaks, untreated medical conditions, and malnutrition (Farge & Mughrabi, 2024).

The increase in “indirect deaths” in Gaza is unmistakable: the healthcare system has been severely compromised; malnutrition is rampant, with the likelihood of full famine developing in northern Gaza; civilian infrastructure has been obliterated; access to clean water is limited; and a significant portion of the population has been forcibly displaced, often into overcrowded and unsanitary camps, frequently experiencing multiple displacements. Similar to the bodies hidden beneath the rubble, the true death toll may remain concealed or be deliberately minimized for years. However, what we can confirm is a harsh reality: it is mostly civilians who bear the consequences of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza.

Preliminary statistics from Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (an independent, non-profit organization) reveal a disturbing situation: at least nine out of 10 Palestinian deaths from Israeli attacks are civilian casualties. Tragically, 60 per cent of those lost are women and children. Among the deceased, 40 per cent are men, with a notable portion (65%) being civilians or elderly individuals. Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor highlighted that the rate of civilian deaths during Israel’s war in the Gaza Strip is alarmingly the highest in conflict areas around the globe in the 21st century. This situation raises serious concerns about protecting civilians, which is supposed to be a top priority according to human rights and international humanitarian law (Euro-Med, 2023).

These figures have been contested by the Israeli authorities, although they have been accepted as accurate by Israeli intelligence services (Prothero, 2024), the UN, and the WHO. In May 2024, the Israeli government offered its first estimate of the death toll in Gaza, saying its troops had killed 14,000 terrorists and 16,000 civilians. However, no evidence was provided for these numbers (VOA News, 2024).

The Israeli army’s conduct during the war in Gaza has led the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to rule that there is a plausible case for genocide. Israeli leaders assert that the destruction currently taking place is not a result of intentional actions but rather an unfortunate consequence stemming from Hamas’s tactics that involve utilizing “human shields”. They indicate that the militant organization has embedded itself within the civilian population, frequently executing operations from sites such as hospitals and schools (Willick, 2023).

The use of human shields is a common issue in modern warfare. Israeli authorities often accuse Hamas of deliberately using Palestinian civilians as human shields. However, this does not fully account for the high number of deaths and destruction observed in Gaza. The widespread civilian casualties and devastation in Gaza should not be attributed solely to the use of human shields but rather to Israeli policies and military practices. These actions have obscured the distinction between civilian and military targets, leading to a deliberately disproportionate level of destruction.

The use of human shields is a complex tactic that often emerges in asymmetric armed conflicts, particularly within densely populated urban environments like those in the Gaza

Strip. Israel contends that Hamas employs this strategy in two significant ways: first, by conducting military operations near residential neighborhoods and essential infrastructure – such as hospitals and schools – thereby complicating the decision-making process for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) regarding potential strikes. Second, it is alleged that Hamas utilizes Israeli civilian hostages to shield its senior leadership from possible attacks.

While there have been documented cases of Hamas fighters and weaponry positioned within or adjacent to civilian structures, these actions raise questions about intent and whether they are designed to deter attacks. It is essential to recognize the context in which these events occur: Gaza is one of the most densely populated regions globally, with around 2.3 million individuals crammed into a mere 140 square miles. The high population density results in a scarcity of open spaces, as most areas are densely inhabited and close to vital infrastructure. This proximity complicates issues related to military operations and civilian safety. Even if Hamas were utilizing human shields, it does not exempt Israel from its international legal obligations to protect civilians and to concentrate attacks on military targets. In fact, substantial evidence shows that Israel's conduct during the conflict has consistently violated fundamental principles of distinction and proportionality, often in a blatant manner and as part of a systematic policy (Tharoor, 2023).

CNN journalists and various international human rights organizations provide clear evidence that Israeli occupation forces have repeatedly used Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and the beleaguered Gaza Strip as human shields, deliberately and unnecessarily placing civilian lives at risk. During the ongoing operations in Gaza, Israeli forces widely used this policy (Guardian, 2024; Haaretz, 2024). These reports include multiple accounts of Palestinian civilians being used as human shields by the Israeli occupation forces, who compelled them into perilous circumstances to safeguard their military personnel and operations in various locations, including within Al-Shifa Hospital (Krever, Diamond, & Salman, 2024).

Israel's current conflict with Gaza is becoming considerably deadlier than any previous confrontation. Given the unprecedented scale and brutality of the 7 October attack, there seems to be widespread consensus in Israel that its military must take all necessary measures to eliminate Hamas.

International human rights organizations have reported that the Israeli army applied collective punishments to the civilian population, deprived them of essential survival items, and utilized starvation as a means of oppression against civilians (Moench, 2024). In response, many Israeli politicians have advocated for the destruction of Gaza, its depopulation, and possible resettlement by Israel. While Israeli officials assert their efforts to minimize civilian casualties, the statistics present a considerably different picture (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

On 8 November 2024, the UN Human Rights Office released a report highlighting the tragic circumstances faced by the people of Israel and Gaza since 7 October 2023, emphasizing the need for justice regarding the grave breaches of international law that have occurred. The thorough examination of violations spans six months, from November 2023 to April 2024, focusing on civilian casualties and violations of international law that could potentially be classified as war crimes in numerous cases. If carried out as part of a widespread or systematic assault against civilians, following a state or organizational policy, these actions may be classified as crimes against humanity. The report highlights repeated statements from Israeli officials suggesting that the end of the conflict depends on the destruction of Gaza and the exodus of the Palestinian people. Additionally, it records attempts to justify discrimination, hostility, and violence against, and even the eradication of, Palestinians. "The violence must stop immediately, the hostages and those arbitrarily detained must be released, and we must focus on flooding Gaza with humanitarian aid", said the High Commissioner (UN Human Rights, 2024).

Most of this issue's contributors are concerned with aspects of war. Dibsedale, in "Beyond Human Judgment – the Morality of Machines: A Critical Examination of the Ethical and Moral Dimensions of Autonomous and AI Weapon Systems in Modern Warfare", examines the ethical and moral dimensions of autonomous and AI weapon systems in modern warfare. Condlyffe addresses hate crimes committed as a result of current conflicts in *The Impact of Wars in the East: how Ukraine and Gaza impact hate crime statistics against minority groups in the UK*. Barrett, more specifically, examines how 21st-century terrorism has fueled Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslims, and contributed to the creation of the Muslim identity as suspicious, in his article "The Impact of Terrorism on Islamophobia and Racist Hate Crimes in Birmingham". Watson, in "The Hall of Mirrors: Internal Forces Shaping Putin's Rationale for the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine. An Analysis of Russian Ideology, Oligarchs, and Key Figures Influencing Putin's Decision-Making", argues that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was deeply intertwined with historical grievances and ideological concepts originating from interest groups, influential figures, and members of Putin's inner circle. Blinder's article "Sidereal Entrepreneurs and Semi-Periphery: Privatization of Space in Argentina" examines the geopolitics of entrepreneurship in Argentina's private space sector, taking as a reference the cases of Satellogic and LIA Aerospace. Hetenyi, in "Right-Wing Extremism, Counter-Extremism Legislation, and Human Rights Considerations in the UK," critically engages with controversies around the concept of extremism and counter terrorism policies in the United Kingdom. Stasiowska, in "How Post-Soviet Conservatism Redefined Gender in Poland", identifies the links between the rise of the far-right populist movement since the collapse of communism, feminism, and social conservatism. Finally, in the insightful "Whose Peace is it Anyway? 80 Years of Attempted Peacebuilding in the United Nations", Skerritt asks, "What is peace, who is it for, and how is it made?"

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