

# Al-Shifa Hospital: Witness to the collapse of health care in Gaza

## Şifa Hastanesi: Gazze'deki sağlık hizmetlerinin çöküşünün tanığı

### Abstract

Al-Shifa Hospital, the largest hospital in the Gaza Strip, has served as a vital healthcare provider for the Palestinian people for 78 years. Since the Israeli offensive began on October 7, 2023, Shifa Hospital has become the heart of Gaza's human rights abuses. The hospital has faced a surge in patients and a shortage of medicine. Israeli attacks on the hospital and its surroundings have put healthcare workers and patients at risk. On November 3, 2023, the entrance to Shifa Hospital and an ambulance convoy were bombed, killing at least 60 people. On November 15, 2023, Israel raided the hospital, threatening thousands of patients and displaced civilians. Israel demolished parts of the hospital before withdrawing. The hospital experienced a shortage of oxygen and medicine, leading to the deaths of many patients. On March 18, 2024, Israeli forces launched a second raid on Shifa Hospital, where more than 7,000 patients and displaced Palestinians had sought refuge. After the Israeli army completely destroyed the hospital and withdrew, mass graves with burnt human remains were discovered. Al-Shifa Hospital is a symbol of the collapse of health care in Gaza, the inhumanity of Israel's attacks, and the violation of international law. The world cannot remain silent on the human tragedy of Shifa Hospital and the people of Gaza.

**Keywords:** Gaza strip; hospital; human rights abuses

### Öz

Gazze Şeridi'nin en büyük hastanesi olan Şifa Hastanesi, 78 yıllık geçmişiyle Filistin halkının sağlık hizmetlerinde önemli bir rol oynamıştır. İsrail'in 7 Ekim 2023'te başlattığı saldırılarla birlikte Şifa Hastanesi, Gazze'deki insan hakları ihlallerinin merkezi haline geldi. Hastane, artan hasta sayısı ve ilaç eksikliğiyle karşı karşıya kaldı. İsrail'in hastane ve çevresine düzenlediği saldırılar, sağlık çalışanlarını ve hastaları tehlikeye attı. 3 Kasım 2023'te Şifa Hastanesi'nin girişi ve ambulans konvoyu bombalanarak en az 60 kişi hayatını kaybetti. 15 Kasım 2023'te İsrail hastaneye baskın düzenleyerek binlerce hastayı ve yerinden edilmiş sivil tehdit etti. İsrail, hastanenin bazı bölümlerini yıkarak çekildi. Hastanede oksijen ve ilaç eksikliği yaşandı, çok sayıda hasta hayatını kaybetti. Dünya Sağlık Örgütü, İsrail'in saldırılarının uluslararası hukuku ihlal ettiğini belirtti. İsrail güçleri, 18 Mart 2024'te 7.000'den fazla hastanın ve yerinden edilmiş Filistinlinin sığındığı Şifa Hastanesi'ne ikinci bir baskın düzenledi. İsrail güçlerinin hastaneyi tamamen yerle bir edip çekilmesinin ardından, yanmış insan kalıntılarının bulunduğu toplu mezarlar keşfedildi.

Şifa Hastanesi, Gazze'deki sağlık hizmetlerinin çöküşünün, İsrail'in saldırılarının insanlık dışı boyutunun ve uluslararası hukukun ihlalinin simgesidir. Dünya, Şifa Hastanesi'nin ve Gazze halkının yaşadığı insanlık dramına sessiz kalmamalıdır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Gazze şeridi; hastane; insan hakları ihlalleri

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## INTRODUCTION

Al-Shifa Hospital, a government complex under the Palestinian Ministry of Health, was located in the Rimal neighborhood in the northern Gaza Strip. It is the largest hospital in the Gaza Strip. It was established in 1946, two years before the establishment of Israel. Originally a military barracks belonging to the British army, the building fell into the hands of the Israeli authorities after 1967 with the occupation of the Gaza Strip. It remained so until the Palestinian Authority took it over in 2007 after the Oslo Accords. Before 1967, the hospital was expanded under Egyptian rule, expanded again under Israeli rule in the 1980s, and continued to be expanded and developed by the Palestinian Authority after 2007. (1)

The hospital was located at an intersection west of the central area of Gaza City and included three hospitals - the Surgical Hospital, the Internal Medicine Hospital, and the Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital - on an area of 45,000 square meters. There was also a dialysis department, emergency room, intensive care unit, operating rooms, administrative building, radiology department, blood bank, and an incubator for premature babies. (2,3) Before it was destroyed in the human rights abuses, the hospital employed about 1,500 people - 500 doctors, 700 nurses, and nearly 30 pharmacists - and had about 700 beds for patients, including premature babies. The hospital had advanced radiological equipment, a dialysis center, and qualified doctors, and it provided services in many fields, such as internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, gynecology, obstetrics, and ophthalmology. (2)

Before the human rights abuses, Al-Shifa Hospital was the best hospital in Gaza and a world-renowned teaching and research hospital. (3) The hospital was not only better equipped than most other hospitals in the Gaza Strip, but it was also a meeting point for the city and a national landmark. Before the human rights abuses, it was the beating heart of Gaza, surrounded by restaurants, libraries, and two universities, all within walking distance of the hospital. (4)

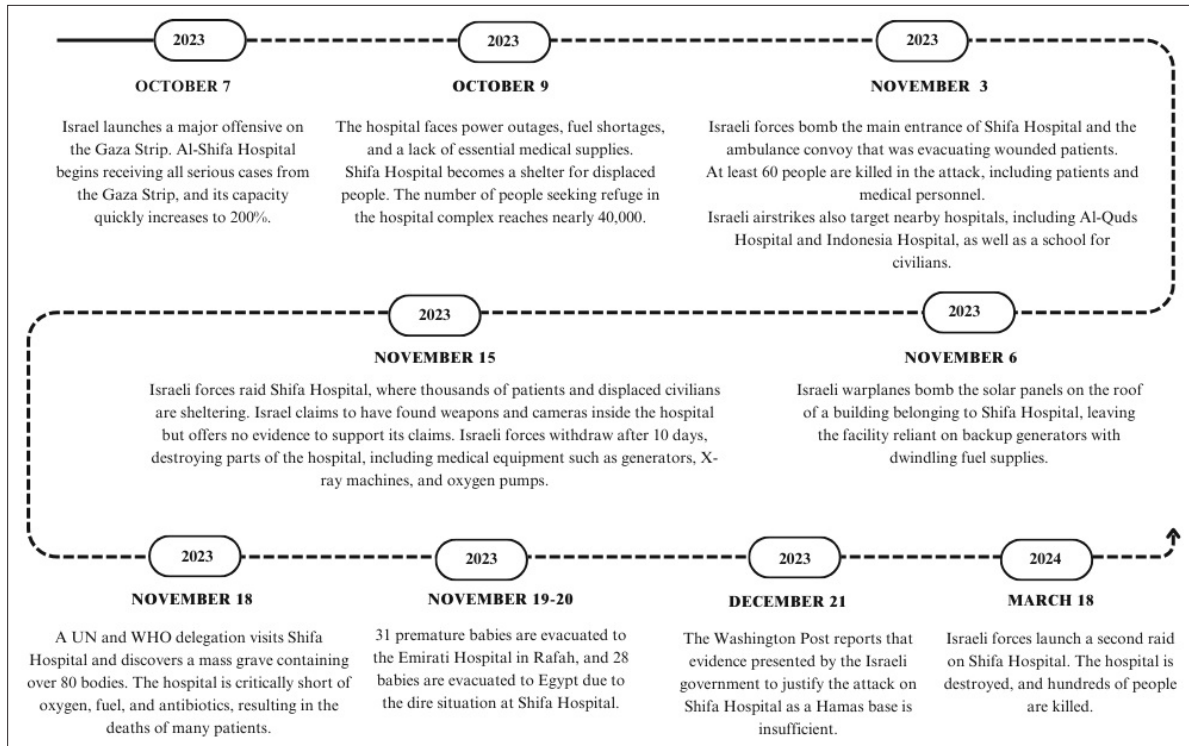
### **The history of the collapse of Al-Shifa Hospital**

Since the beginning of the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023, the hospital has been receiv-

ing all serious cases from the Gaza Strip, and its capacity has steadily increased, reaching 200 percent. Despite being in the midst of unprecedented chaos, with power cuts, and severe shortages of fuel and medicines, it continued to serve with great dedication from the staff. A few days later, it also became a shelter center for displaced people. The number of people sheltering in the hospital compound reached nearly 40,000. In the following days, Israel claimed that Hamas' main base of operations was located under Shifa Hospital and launched attacks on the hospital, the roads leading to it, and many of its key points. Gaza's Health Ministry announced that it would open the hospital's doors to any delegation, international committee, or independent investigative committee to refute the Israeli army's claims. Human Rights Watch said it found nothing to substantiate the Israeli military's allegations that the basements of the Shifa Hospital in Gaza City are the headquarters of the Hamas movement. (2)

The timeline in Figure 1 illustrates a chilling picture of the siege on Al-Shifa Hospital, underscoring the devastating impact of Israel's offensive on Gaza's healthcare system and its civilian population.

On November 3, 2023, Israel bombed the main entrance of Shifa Hospital and the ambulance convoy that was to take the wounded to the Rafah border crossing. At least 60 people were killed in the massacre in front of Shifa Hospital. Israeli warplanes, which bombed the surroundings of Shifa Hospital and Al-Quds Hospital, also targeted Indonesia Hospital and a school for civilians in the immediate vicinity. (5) On November 6, 2023, Israeli warplanes bombed solar panels on the roof of a building belonging to Shifa Hospital, leaving the facility completely dependent on backup generators running on rapidly dwindling fuel supplies. (6) The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that dozens of premature babies could no longer be kept in incubators, and nearly 45 dialysis patients could no longer be connected to dialysis due to power outages and fuel shortages. (3) On the morning of November 15, 2023, Israel again raided the hospital where thousands of patients and displaced civilians were housed. Following the raid, instead of tunnels and arsenals, Israel presented as evidence rusty weapons and several cameras it claimed to have found in the building. It withdrew 10 days after the invasion, demolishing



**Figure 1.** Timeline of events at Al-Shifa Hospital during the Israeli offensive on Gaza

parts of the hospital. Sections of the hospital's medical equipment, including generators, X-ray machines, and oxygen pumps, were blown up. (7)

A team of United Nations (UN) and WHO representatives visited the hospital on November 18, 2023. They discovered a mass grave that was said to contain more than eighty bodies. Many patients died because the hospital lacked essential supplies such as oxygen, fuel, and antibiotics. On November 19, 2023, 31 premature babies were evacuated to the Emirati Hospital in Rafah, and on November 20, 28 babies were evacuated to Egypt. (8)

On November 16, 2023, an article published in *The Lancet* stated that prior to October 7, 2023, the health system in Gaza was in a very troubled state, with only 35 hospitals operating at full capacity and a total of 3412 beds serving a population of more than 2 million people, i.e. only 1.55 beds per 1000 people. It was stated that hospitals were demolished, hospital infrastructures and transportation systems were damaged after the Israeli attacks started, and the existing health system, which was already in a difficult situation, became even more troubled. The article also noted that

the triage system in Gaza's emergency rooms prioritizes war injuries over chronic conditions and non-emergency cases, making it even more difficult for patients with chronic conditions to access vital medical care. If these conditions continue, they will have serious consequences for public health and lead to an increase in preventable deaths. (9) An orthopedic doctor who was volunteering in Gaza also noted that since the beginning of the human rights abuses, there has been a disproportionate loss of limbs due to untreated chronic diseases such as diabetes. (10)

On November 23, 2023, the director of Shifa Hospital was detained by the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence agency, along with other health workers while traveling in a WHO convoy. He was released exactly 7 months later. (11)

On December 2, 2023, *The Lancet* published an article titled 'Save the survivors in Gaza - save the children,' calling for an immediate ceasefire. The article also reported that a meta-analysis conducted up to June 2020 found that 36% of children and adolescents in Gaza and the West Bank who were exposed to political violence suffered from post-traumatic stress

disorder (PTSD), but that there are challenges in conceptualizing and measuring PTSD in the Palestinian context, which has a history of sustained and cumulative trauma. It was also reported that 80% of children suffer from mental distress, 79% are bedwetters and 59% have reactive mutism. Considering that approximately 1 million of the Gaza population consists of children younger than 18 years of age and almost all Gazan children were exposed to traumatic events, it was emphasized how serious a problem this situation would pose. (12)

On December 21, 2023, in another article, the Washington Post reported that, based on its analysis of open-source images, satellite imagery, and all the material made public by the Israeli military, the evidence presented by the Israeli government was insufficient to show that Hamas used the hospital as a command and control center. He noted that the rooms connected to the tunnel network discovered by Israeli army units showed no evidence of Hamas military use. He also stated that none of the five hospital buildings identified by Israel were connected to the tunnel network and that there was no evidence that the tunnels could be accessed from inside the hospital wards. (13)

Nevertheless, on the morning of March 18, 2024, Israeli forces launched a second raid on Shifa Hospital, where more than 7,000 patients and displaced Palestinians had taken refuge. After two weeks of siege, the government in Gaza announced that Israeli forces killed more than 400 Palestinians, detained more than 900, and demolished 1050 houses in and around Shifa Hospital. After the Israeli army completely destroyed the hospital and withdrew, mass graves with burnt human remains were discovered. (14) Palestinian search teams found hundreds of bodies in mass graves in the area; many of the bodies were decomposed and unrecognizable, and some bodies showed signs of execution, binding, bullet wounds to the head, and torture marks on the limbs. (15)

A doctor who returned to her hometown after studying medicine in Turkey and worked as an obstetrician at Shifa Hospital for many years said that before October 7, Israel only provided Gaza with electricity for eight hours a day and that they delivered babies in the neonatal department of Shifa Hospital with the help of generators. She said that during the human

rights abuses in Gaza, Israel first cut off the fuel and electricity to the hospitals, and sometimes, they had to perform surgeries and deliveries without anesthetics with telephone lights. She even stated that her daughter was pregnant during the attacks and that her daughter had a cesarean section without painkillers. (16)

### ***A health system crumbles: The impact of the siege on Gaza***

A comprehensive analysis published in February 2024 by the Global Nutrition Cluster found that the sudden deterioration in the malnutrition of children and pregnant and lactating women in the Gaza Strip poses serious threats to their health. Before the human rights abuses, underweight was rare in the Gaza Strip, with only 0.8% of children under 5 years of age acutely malnourished, but by the 5th month of the offensive, underweight among children under 2 years of age in northern Gaza had increased dramatically to 15.6%. The speed and scale of the destruction of items essential for survival in Gaza surpasses any other man-made famine in the last 75 years. It was reported that 90% of children under the age of 2 and 95% of pregnant and lactating women face severe food poverty, while at least 90% of children under the age of 5 are affected by one or more infectious diseases. The report stated that 70% of children had diarrhea in the last two weeks, 23 times more than in 2022. It was stated that it was unprecedented for a population of this scale to fall into such an emergency in a few months. (17)

On top of all the destruction and catastrophes Israel has caused, on May 7, 2024, Israel occupied the Rafah border crossing, cutting off Gaza's only land connection to the world. This not only deprived thousands of sick and wounded people of the opportunity to seek treatment outside the region but also prevented more than 15,000 aid trucks carrying food, water, and medical aid from entering Gaza. It prevented not only the passage of aid trucks but also the passage into Gaza of volunteer medical workers from international health organizations that make a significant contribution to the health system in Gaza. (10)

On 23 June 2024, the Gaza Ministry of Health and the WHO announced that poliovirus type 2 (VDPV2) was detected in six locations in sewage samples collected from Khan Younis and Deir al-Balah. The WHO

said that the collapse of the health system as a result of Israel's relentless attacks, coupled with the inability of 2.3 million Gazans to access food and clean drinking water, safe shelter, and sewage treatment in an area of 365 square kilometers, has led to this dire situation. It was stated that poliovirus type 2 (VDPV2) has not been seen in Gaza for more than 25 years and the vaccination rate was 95 percent before the human rights abuses. Approximately 2 months after this detection, the first case of polio was detected. It was a 10-month-old baby. To prevent the outbreak, a mass vaccination campaign was launched to vaccinate 640,000 children under the age of 10 in the besieged area. (18)

Another WHO statement said that as of 23 July 2024, at least a quarter, or 22,500, of those injured in Gaza have injuries that require rehabilitation services now and in the coming years. Many of those wounded have multiple injuries, with between 3105 and 4050 limb amputations. Despite this, it was stated that rehabilitation services are severely disrupted, specialized care for serious injuries is not provided, and immediate and long-term support is urgently needed to meet rehabilitation needs. (19)

On October 9, 2024, The New York Times published an investigation by a trauma surgeon who worked in Khan Younis in Gaza in March and April after seeing a child shot in the head or chest almost every day. In a survey of 65 US medical professionals working in Gaza, most of them of Eastern descent, 44 of the 65 said they had seen more than one young child shot in the head or chest in Gaza. Witness doctors said they saw dozens of children aged between 5 and 12 with single gunshot wounds to the head, but almost all of them died. Gunshot wounds were often treated on the floor of the hospital due to lack of space, equipment, staff, and support, but many could not be saved. One of the pediatricians emphasized that the mothers in the delivery room had given birth prematurely due to malnutrition, stress, and infection, and were very weak and had very little milk. 52 health workers said they observed psychiatric distress in many of the young children and that some were suicidal or wished they were dead. Newborn babies were brought to the hospital severely dehydrated, infected, and hypothermic, and many babies died from 100 percent preventable causes. Another health worker reported that

women were forced to use tent debris, towels, and rags as sanitary pads, resulting in a serious health problem called toxic shock syndrome. Sixty-three health workers reported observing severe malnutrition in patients, health workers, and the general population. (20)

In another article published in the Lancet on July 20, 2024, it was stated that the total number of direct and indirect casualties of Israel's attacks on Gaza may be approximately 4 times the known figures. In the article, which stated that the number of people who lost their lives in Gaza as of June 19, 2024, was 37,396, it was emphasized that it was difficult for the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza to collect data due to the destruction in the region. It was emphasized that 35 percent of the buildings in Gaza were destroyed and the number of bodies still under the rubble is more than 10 thousand. It was stated that the number of indirect deaths would be 3 to 15 times higher than direct deaths due to the destruction of health institutions, lack of water, food and shelter, and lack of safe living spaces. The article stated that more than 186,000 deaths could be attributed to the attacks on Gaza, which is equivalent to 7.9 percent of the entire population, based on Gaza's 2022 population estimate of 2,375,259. (21)

### **Targeting healthcare: The failure of international law in Gaza**

Thousands of civilians and many health workers, including doctors and nurses, were killed in the attacks. The clinical chief of the orthopedic department at Shifa Hospital was one of them. The Palestinian Minister of Health stated that as of October 2024, Israel has killed 1047 health workers, detained more than 300, destroyed many hospitals, and rendered 130 ambulances unusable in its attacks since October 7, 2023. (22)

The Geneva Conventions and the rules of the international law of armed conflict make it clear that in international armed conflicts, health facilities and health workers in the conflict zone must be protected. The issue of Israeli attacks on hospitals was seen not only in the post-October 7, 2023 attacks on Gaza but also in the December 2008-January 2009 attacks on Gaza. In these attacks, it was found that the Israeli Army prevented the officials who wanted to intervene in the wounded and targeted hospitals and healthcare

professionals, especially Al-Quds Hospital, thus clearly violating the Geneva Conventions and the rules of the international law of armed conflict. This situation was also reported in the Goldstone Report adopted by the UN Commission on Human Rights. (23)

Article 8/e of Protocol I to the 1949 Geneva Conventions defines medical units as “military or civilian establishments and other units organized for sanitary purposes, such as the search for, collection, transport, diagnosis, and treatment of the wounded, sick and shipwrecked, including first aid treatment, or the prevention of disease.” This term also includes hospitals and other similar units. Since no distinction is made between military and civilian, both types of health facilities fall within the scope of protection. (24) Facilities covered by this definition are those structures that are strictly prohibited from being targeted and shot at during armed conflict. (25) These conventions protect not only the wounded and sick but also medical personnel, medical units, and medical transport vehicles. (26) In addition to not being the target of attacks, these structures are also structures that the parties have an obligation to protect. The commission of an attack or failure to protect against it constitutes a breach of the above-mentioned Geneva Conventions and gives rise to criminal liability for war crimes on the part of states and natural persons who commit or participate in such acts. In order to combat such violations, it is an absolute necessity under international law that such acts are investigated and those responsible are brought to justice and tried. The International Criminal Court and the UN Security Council, the institutions established for such violations in the international arena, should play an active role in ensuring that the rules of the law of armed conflict are urgently implemented. (27)

Gaza, and the Shifa Hospital in Gaza in particular, is one of the places where the Geneva Conventions and the rules of the international law of armed conflict have been most blatantly violated by Israel. It is unacceptable that a healing hospital, which was established 78 years ago to heal people like its name, was razed to the ground by a lawless terrorist state. It is essential for a just world order and peace that international law is immediately operationalized by those responsible and that the murderers receive the punishment they

deserve.

### **Conflict-of-interest and financial disclosure**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to disclose. The authors also declare that they did not receive any financial support for the study.

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