

## Assassinating the Witnesses: Why Is Israel Targeting Gaza's Doctors?



American historian Alfred Crosby reminds us that wars are not won solely through conventional weapons, advanced technology, or military strategies. Other factors—often underestimated—can be equally, if not more, decisive in the long run than bullets, bombs, or missiles.

Crosby, who held prestigious academic posts at the University of Texas at Austin, Harvard University, and the University of Helsinki, argued that the spread of disease, the collapse of healthcare systems, and the deliberate creation of conditions conducive to epidemics often play pivotal roles in the theater of war.

He cited the Spanish conquest of Latin America, where the introduction of smallpox and the systematic dismantling of local medical infrastructure proved crucial in subjugating indigenous populations.

Beyond the economic and social devastation caused by the epidemics, the sharp rise in mortality rates severely weakened the natives' capacity to resist—especially following the sudden death of their leader, Huayna Capac, which delivered a crippling blow to their morale and accelerated their collapse before the colonizers.

Since Israel launched its war on Gaza on October 7, 2023, it has become increasingly evident that the health sector has been placed squarely within the scope of Israel's strategic targeting—and possibly at the very top of its priority list.

From day one, hospitals, medical centers, healthcare workers, paramedics, patients, their families, and displaced civilians sheltering in these facilities have all come under relentless attack.

International law grants special protection to medical facilities and personnel during armed conflict, as outlined in the Fourth Geneva Convention, the First and Second Additional Protocols of 1977, and the 1954 Hague Convention.

Yet Israel's insistence on treating Gaza's entire healthcare infrastructure as a legitimate military target—brazenly and in full view of the international community, despite widespread condemnation—raises urgent questions about its military doctrine and strategic objectives behind this campaign of destruction.

### The Systematic Demolition of Gaza's Healthcare Sector

The destruction of Gaza's hospitals and medical facilities has not been random or incidental. Rather, it reflects a meticulously coordinated strategy involving Israel's political, military, and intelligence institutions, aimed at dismantling the health sector from its foundations—clinically, structurally, and pharmaceutically.

### Northern Gaza: Reduced to Ruins

The war machine effectively razed northern Gaza's healthcare system. Most hospitals and clinics there have been rendered completely nonfunctional. The assault began with Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahia, which was subjected to repeated attacks. The most devastating came in December 2024, when Israeli forces stormed the hospital after a prolonged siege, set fire to its facilities, and forced medical staff and patients—numbering around 350 people, including 75 injured and 180 medical personnel—to strip down in the freezing cold before being taken to unknown locations.

In the same city and timeframe, the Indonesian Hospital was also targeted. Its CT scanner, oxygen stations, and power systems were destroyed. Patients, the injured, and displaced civilians were forcibly evacuated before Israeli forces stormed the facility. It was declared out of service entirely by January 2025.

At the start of 2025, the Israeli military laid siege to Al-Awda Hospital in Tel al-Zaatar, Jabalia Camp, cutting off medicine and fuel supplies after torching nearby homes. Medical staff were threatened with bombing unless they evacuated, and the threat was carried out.

### Gaza City and Central Gaza

In Gaza City, Al-Shifa Medical Complex suffered multiple assaults, the most severe being the two-week siege in March 2024. Following the withdrawal of Israeli forces, the complex was left in ruins. Entire departments were burned, equipment destroyed, and more than 300 decomposed bodies were recovered, according to Palestinian sources.

In the Zeitoun neighborhood, the Baptist Hospital was bombed on October 17, 2023, killing nearly 500 patients, wounded individuals, and civilians seeking refuge. It was struck again 18 months later, disabling it completely and forcing patients onto the streets.

Rantisi Children's Hospital, specializing in dialysis for children under 14, went out of service after its dialysis unit was destroyed, leading to the death of several children receiving treatment.

In November 2023, Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital, Gaza's only cancer treatment facility, was heavily bombed. It had been treating about 80 patients at the time.

#### Southern Gaza: No Safe Haven

In Khan Younis, Nasser Medical Complex was bombed repeatedly, most recently on March 23, 2025. Israeli forces stormed the facility, destroying its infrastructure, including water, electricity, sewage systems, and the oxygen station, rendering it completely inoperable.

Israeli troops also raided Al-Amal Hospital, operated by the Palestinian Red Crescent, in March 2024. Staff were forced to evacuate, and entrances were sealed with earth mounds. After limited services resumed, it was targeted again.

Kuwait Specialized Hospital in Rafah ceased operations in May 2024 following repeated strikes. Its medical teams were relocated to a field hospital in Al-Mawasi, which itself was not spared from attacks.

#### Targeting Medical Personnel

Israel's assault on Gaza's health system extends beyond infrastructure. Ambulances—180 in total—have been destroyed. Over 1,600 healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, technicians, and paramedics, have been killed. Another 1,400 have been injured, many critically. At least 362 healthcare workers have been detained, and thousands more have been forced to cease working.

The British Channel 4 documentary *Doctors Under Attack* revealed disturbing details of the crisis. Originally commissioned by the BBC—who later refused to air it, citing fears of bias—the 30-minute investigative film documents the systematic targeting of medical personnel in Gaza. Drawing on firsthand

testimony, it highlights severe violations committed against Gaza's 36 hospitals. Dr. Khaled Hammouda recounted how his home was bombed, killing ten family members. Survivors who took refuge elsewhere were attacked again. He and 70 other doctors were arrested and beaten in detention.

The film also featured the harrowing story of Dr. Adnan al-Barsh, who was stripped, tortured, and died in Israeli custody. Shocking footage depicted alleged deliberate attacks, secret arrests, and torture—including disturbing claims of mass rape by Israeli soldiers.

## Why Target the Doctors?

### Destroying the Last Refuge for Civilians

In wartime, hospitals and shelters offering medical relief serve as a final sanctuary—especially for children and women. Under international law, these spaces are considered sacred, untouchable, and vital for civilian protection.

When civilians flee to a hospital run by the UN or another humanitarian group, they do so believing it's a relatively safe haven, not requiring the same precautions as life outside. Thus, attacks on these sites are especially devastating, often resulting in high civilian casualties due to overcrowding.

The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor emphasized that systematically targeting Gaza's healthcare infrastructure represents a war crime and a crime against humanity. Such attacks mark a dangerous phase in what it called a "deliberate strategy to eliminate the last remaining sanctuaries" for Palestinians, including the wounded and the medical teams struggling to save them.

### Supporting a Strategy of Forced Displacement

Israel has deployed a range of tactics in its effort to depopulate Gaza—intense bombardment, infrastructure destruction, sieges, and starvation. Yet time and again, it was met with Palestinian resilience, as residents returned to their neighborhoods once Israeli forces retreated.

This prompted a new approach: the "scorched-earth strategy," targeting even hospitals and shelters—the last remaining refuge. The documentary *War on Hospitals: Doctrine of Displacement* traced this logic, linking hospital attacks to a longstanding policy of forced displacement. The film, supported by satellite imagery and data analysis, argued that the aim of clearing hospitals of displaced people was to render them uninhabitable, thereby facilitating mass expulsion.

Historian Dr. Johnny Mansour of Beit Berl College drew parallels with the 1948 Nakba, when Zionist militias attacked Palestinian hospitals and clinics, and dropped leaflets urging people to flee—just as Israeli forces do today.

Elise Baker, from the Atlantic Council's strategic litigation project, agreed. She pointed to the targeting of hospitals, demands to evacuate medical centers, and violence against health workers as clear signs of an orchestrated Israeli policy of forced displacement.

### Erasing the Evidence to Escape Accountability

In criminal investigations, perpetrators often try to erase the evidence—by destroying the crime scene or silencing witnesses. This is precisely what Israel appears to be doing by targeting doctors and health professionals, who are among the most credible eyewitnesses to war crimes.

Medical workers often command the trust of international human rights organizations. They are both victims and primary witnesses. The humanitarian nature of their work, especially in war, affords them a unique moral standing in global legal discourse. International law explicitly protects them and calls for their neutrality in conflict.

By killing, arresting, or intimidating Gaza's medical personnel, Israel seems intent on erasing witnesses—believing this will shield it from future prosecution. This concern is particularly acute now, as calls grow louder for senior Israeli officials to face justice for alleged war crimes in Gaza.