



U.S. Officials Should Stop Using Hamas's Casualty Figures

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Hamis disinformation about the number of civilian casualties in Gaza is being taken at face value and cited by U.S. officials, including U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who [testified](#) before Congress on February 29 that Israel has killed over 25,000 Palestinian women and children during its campaign in Gaza. In addition to being factually wrong, repeating Hamas-provided estimates implicitly legitimates Hamas's casualty figures, which fail to distinguish between civilians and combatants.

To prevent Hamas's propaganda figures from being propagated further—and remaining uncorrected for future historians and critics of Israel to cite—the Department of Defense should issue a formal correction of Secretary Austin's remarks and initiate a process to correct the official committee hearing transcript.

What Happened?

- On February 29, at a House Armed Services Committee hearing, Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA) asked Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, “About how many Palestinian women and children have been killed by Israel since October 7?” Secretary Austin [replied](#), “over 25,000.”
 - » In a March 3 interview with *CNN*, seemingly referencing Secretary Austin's figures, Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) [stated](#), “The killing has to stop of the innocent people there ... we have over 25,000 innocent people who have been killed in the process of rooting out Hamas.”
- Pentagon officials stated that Secretary Austin's 25,000 figure was referring to the total number of people killed in Gaza during the war, but failed to note that, according to Israel's public [estimates](#), 13,000 of those killed were terrorists.
 - » Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh [told](#) the *Jerusalem Post* on February 28, “during the hearing today, Secretary Austin was asked how many women and children have died in Gaza. To clarify, the Secretary's answer was citing an estimate from the Hamas-controlled health ministry that more than 25,000 total Palestinians have been killed in Gaza. We cannot independently verify these Gaza casualty figures.”
 - » Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder [said](#) the following day that Secretary Austin's answer “was citing an estimate from the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry. Over 25,000 people total have been killed in Gaza. We can't independently verify Gaza casualty figures ... We're, you know, certain that thousands of people have been killed.”

Why Is It Important?

- The fact that Hamas's figures were cited as fact in a congressional hearing underscores the effectiveness of Hamas's [propaganda campaign](#), which seeks to generate global pressure on Israel to force it to stop its campaign in Gaza. Recent reports indicate that Hamas's leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar has sent messages to Hamas leaders in Qatar emphasizing the tactical significance of [maximizing](#) Palestinian casualties in order for Hamas to achieve politically and diplomatically what it cannot do militarily, namely, prevent Israel from defeating it.
- Gazan casualty figures come from the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry, which is not a disinterested health agency tallying figures, but instead a propaganda wing of a terrorist organization with a well-documented history of [lying](#).
 - » President Biden [stated](#) on October 26, "I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed ... I have no confidence in the number that the Palestinians are using."
- Hamas's [disinformation](#) efforts aim to maximize both the perceived and real number of civilian casualties in Gaza in order to hamstring Israel politically and diplomatically and force it to prematurely end its campaign against Hamas.
 - » *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) on February 29 that during a recent meeting of Hamas leaders in Qatar, a courier delivered a message from Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's leader in Gaza, conveying Sinwar's belief that "high civilian casualties [in Gaza] would add to the worldwide pressure on Israel to stop the war."
- Secretary Austin's testimony that more than 25,000 women and children have been killed in the Gaza Strip during the war has no factual basis, even in Hamas's questionable estimates.
 - » Hamas [claims](#) that approximately 30,000 Gazans have been killed, and that at least 8,000 of those [killed](#) have been men. Therefore, even if one accepts Hamas's casualty figures, Secretary Austin's "over 25,000" figures for women and children killed in Gaza are wrong.
- Figures that do not distinguish between civilians and combatants are misleading, and advance Hamas's information warfare campaign by falsely implying, or making explicit in the case of Senator Durbin's March 3 [statement](#) that "over 25,000 innocent people" have been killed, that Israel is responsible for killing a disproportionately large number of civilians.
 - » IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari [asserted](#) on February 29 that Israel has killed more than 13,000 terrorists in Gaza.
 - Israel's [claim](#) that it has killed over 13,000 terrorists is likely an undercounting, as an unknown number of terrorists have been killed in tunnels eliminated in IDF strikes.
 - Hamas officials have [admitted](#) that at least 6,000 of its terror operatives have been killed thus far in the war, representing, even by Hamas's highly dubious figures, a roughly 4:1 civilian-to-combatant ratio. Even this ratio would be on par with—and significantly lower than some—[other ratios](#) in modern warfare.
 - » According to U.S. intelligence community (IC) [estimates](#), 20 to 30 percent of Hamas's fighters have been killed. Assuming even low-level intelligence estimates of Hamas membership—approximately 25,000—before the war, at least 5,000 Hamas members have been killed in the war, per the IC.
 - » The IDF has maintained a strikingly low civilian-combatant ratio despite operating in one of the most [densely-populated](#) localities in the world, and in an [unprecedented](#) battle

environment, with soldiers facing the constant threat of ambushes from widespread hidden tunnel entrances across Gaza.

- Rep. Khanna’s question implied that terrorists are exclusively male and above the age of 18, and that women and those under the age of 18 are incapable of becoming active combatants. However, Hamas’s strategic use of women and child soldiers in terrorist operations is a deliberate part of its campaign to paint Israel as the aggressor and imply that Israel is indifferent, at best, to Gazan civilian safety.
 - » The IDF has uncovered [extensive evidence](#) of Hamas utilizing child soldiers in its current campaign, including inside Hamas’s terror tunnels.
 - » In Israel’s most recent campaign targeting Hamas in 2021, *The New York Times* ran a cover story profiling the deaths of ostensibly innocent Palestinian children. However, as JINSA [noted](#), at least one was an active terrorist.
 - » Between 2002 and 2006, as the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) has [demonstrated](#), at least 67 Palestinian women attempted to carry out suicide bombings, including seven women under the age of 18.
- Secretary Austin’s figure misleadingly assigns Israel blame for civilian casualties, though Hamas is both directly and indirectly responsible for causing Palestinian civilian deaths.
 - » To raise civilian casualties in order to vilify Israel, as law of armed conflict scholar and JINSA Distinguished Fellow LTC Geoffrey Corn, USA (ret.) has [noted](#), Hamas operatives “endeavor to exacerbate civilian risk by embedding their personnel and assets amongst civilians; actively preventing evacuation efforts by civilians; and routinely operating in civilian attire.”
 - » Hamas serially [operates](#) from civilian population centers, including [crowded refugee camps](#), [hospitals](#), and [shelters](#), in an effort to sizably increase the number of Palestinian civilian casualties. In addition, Hamas and other terror groups’ rocket [misfires](#) throughout the war have killed hundreds, and potentially thousands, of civilians.
 - » As the aggressor party that started the war and has persistently refused to surrender, at [great cost](#) to Palestinian civilians, Hamas is also responsible for the sum total of civilian deaths in Gaza. Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) has [noted](#) that “Hamas is 100 percent to blame” for every civilian casualty in Gaza.
- As JINSA has [noted](#), far from wantonly targeting civilians or disregarding civilian safety, Israel has undertaken unprecedented measures to protect Palestinian civilians.
 - » These measures include rushing oxygen tanks, incubators, and other medical supplies into active combat zones at great risk to IDF troops; cancelling airstrikes due to fears of collateral damage; sending millions of text messages to coordinate civilians’ evacuation from combat zones, and; publishing maps to preemptively warn civilians where the IDF is about to strike.
 - » On December 13, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby [lauded](#) the striking lengths Israel has gone to protect civilians, stating that Israel has “published online maps of places where people can go or not to go. That’s basically telegraphing your punches, and there’s very few modern militaries in the world that would do that. I don’t know that we would do that.”

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Department of Defense should request a correction be appended to the Secretary’s testimony and members of the House Armed Services Committee should submit Questions

for the Record (QFRs) to the Department of Defense calling for the department to retract and clarify Secretary Austin's remarks to ensure accuracy in final official hearing documents.

- » The Department of Defense should further clarify the issue by in its public engagements, conveying—if not endorsing—Israel's publicly announced casualty [assessments](#), namely, that at least 13,000 of the war dead are terrorists.
- As part of its ongoing [efforts](#) to combat misinformation, the White House should issue a White House Fact Sheet on the war's casualty figures, including Israel's estimates of how many terrorists have killed and the context that Hamas deliberately seeks to maximize civilian casualties.