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The Children of Gaza Are Freezing to Death



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From early December 2024 to early January 2025, the body temperature of eight babies fell below any acceptable amount and they froze to death. This condition is known as hypothermia. The most recent of these children to die, Yousef, was sleeping beside his mother because, as she told Al Jazeera, of the very cold weather. Temperatures in Gaza have fallen to just above freezing, which in the context of a lack of housing, blankets, and warm bedclothes is deadly. Body heat is the only protection, which is minimal for an infant. Yousef's mother said, "He slept next to me and in the morning I found him frozen and dead. I don't know what to say. No one can feel my misery. No one in the world can understand our catastrophic situation."

Each of these stories is incomprehensible. The al-Batran family in Deir al-Balah are living in a tent made of blue plastic. Their bedding is only acceptable to them because their entire household has been destroyed, and they have not received any relief. Twin brothers Ali and Jumaa were born during this ugly genocidal bombardment in November 2024, but then one after the other succumbed to hypothermia. When the father felt Jumma's head, it was as "cold as ice."

By early January 2025, studies by the United Nations and the Palestinian government showed that at least 92 percent of housing units in Gaza had been destroyed. Most Palestinians who remain in northern Gaza have no homes in which to shelter. They are living in makeshift tents, not even having access to the United Nations tents that are sparsely available. Because there are now no hospitals open in northern Gaza, children are being born in these tents, and they are not receiving any medical care. "The health sector is being systematically dismantled," Dr. Rik Peeperkorn of the World Health Organization told the United Nations Security Council on January 3. In the so-called "safe zone" of al-Mawasi, near Khan Younis, three babies died of hypothermia, mocking the idea that this is indeed a safe zone. Mahmoud al-Faseeh, the father of Sila Mahmoud al-Faseeh (who died in her third week), told Al Jazeera, "We sleep on the sand and we don't have enough blankets and we feel the cold inside our tent." The story is the same up and down Gaza's length: the cold has come at night, ceaseless rain has made everything damp, the tents are inadequate, the blankets are thread worn, and the infants—the most vulnerable—have begun to die.

The map of such suffering is not restricted to Gaza or to the Palestinians. Such stories of a parent walking to find their child beside them in an inadequate tent, with no blankets because of the lack of relief in a war zone, are sadly not unique. The children frozen in the Kabul slum of Chaman-e-Babrak in 2012 had names that are utterly forgotten outside their families. These were victims of a war that trudged on and threw these rural Afghans into cities where they lived in glorified plastic bags. Similarly, there is little memory of the precious infants who froze to death in the unnamed camps north of Idlib, Syria, along the Turkish border. The parents of these children went from tent to tent over a decade, trying desperately to find a stable life. Some of their children froze to death; other families perished as their dangerous heaters in these plastic tents set their entire families on fire.

Wars on Civilians

War zones are no longer places where combatants fight each other. They have become charnel houses for civilians, and entire populations taken hostage and brutalized. In May

2024, before the full toll of the Israeli genocide had been measured, the UN Secretary-General provided a report to the Security Council on civilian deaths. The data is stunning:

The United Nations recorded at least 33,443 civilian deaths in armed conflicts in 2023, a 72 percent increase as compared with 2022. The proportion of women and children killed doubled and tripled, respectively, as compared with 2022. In 2023, 4 out of every 10 civilians killed in conflicts were women, and 3 out of 10 were children. Seven out of 10 recorded deaths occurred in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel, making it the deadliest conflict for civilians in 2023.

The number regarding the Occupied Palestine Territory includes the Israeli violence from October to December 2023, but not the violence that intensified across the entirety of 2024. Those numbers will come later this year.

A look backward at the post-9/11 Western wars on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen shows the bleakness of the general attitude toward civilians in these parts of the world. The direct deaths from the bombs and the gunfire have been calculated to be nearly one million, an enormous underestimation but still a very large number. Adding in excess deaths, including from starvation and hypothermia, the toll is calculated to be nearing five million, also an underestimation but at least indicative of the impact on these parts of the world.

On August 29, 2021, two U.S. MQ-9 Reapers hovered over a white Toyota Corolla that had pulled into a parking area of a multi-family home in Kabul's working-class Khwaja Burgha neighborhood. The U.S. drone operators, who had tracked the car for the past eight hours, watched as a man left the car, as a group of people came to greet him, and as one person took out a black bag from the rear seat of the car. At that point, the U.S. decided to fire a hellfire missile at the man and the people around him. They were all killed. It turned out that the man, Zemari Ahmadi, was not a member of the enemy group ISIS-K, but was an employee of a California-based non-governmental organization called Nutrition and Education International (NEI). The people who came to greet him from inside the house were his children, grandchildren, and their cousins. The black bag, which the U.S. claimed might have had explosives, carried a laptop from NEI, and another bag carried water bottles. The secondary explosion that the operators saw on their video feed was not from a bomb but from a propane tank in the carport.

The list of people killed by the United States on that day should give one pause because of the youth of so many of them: Zemari Ahmadi (age 43), Naser Haidari (age 30), Zamir (age 20), Faisal (age 16), Farzad (age 10), Arwin (age 7), Benyamen (age 6), Malika (age 6), Ayat

(age 2), and Sumaya (age 2). This is the last U.S. drone strike before the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Not one U.S. soldier was charged with the murder, let alone found guilty. Not one Israeli soldier will be charged or found guilty of the deaths of the Palestinian children in Gaza. This is the impunity that defines the assault on civilians, including those little Palestinian babies freezing to death in their blue tents, lying beside desperate parents.

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Vijay Prashad's most recent book (with Noam Chomsky) is The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and the Fragility of US Power (New Press, August 2022).