

Why is flawed Gaza data in top US journal?

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 13.08.2025

The journal *Foreign Affairs* is one of the most prestigious academic journals in the world. It is published by the Council on Foreign Relations, headquartered in New York. Articles submitted to it undergo strict peer review before publication. Recently, the journal published an article by a respected professor from the University of Chicago, Robert A. Pape, on Israel's fighting in Gaza.

In our view, the article suffers from fundamental flaws in the professional standards required in any academic publication, especially in one so highly respected. Here we will focus only on the numerical data given by the author.

The data on which the article is based come from reports by Hamas's health authorities. To the author's credit, he explicitly notes this. However, he then proceeds to rely on this data without raising the obvious question of its reliability. By omitting such a statement, he sends a clear message that, in his view, these are genuine figures – as if they were reports from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The starting point of the article is the figure disseminated by Hamas, according to which the number of Palestinians dead in Gaza exceeds 61,000, and more than 145,000 have been seriously wounded. How many of them are "Hamas fighters" and how many are "uninvolved civilians"? The author acknowledges that Hamas does not make that distinction, and he follows suit.

Flawed and misleading information

The author does not bother to pose to his readers the obvious question: Why does Hamas not present a clear distinction between "combatants" and "civilians"? Are these truly "real figures"? Or is it simply convenient for Hamas to present a blurred picture, hoping that public opinion will tag them as "civilians" – just as the author of the article does?

This "implicit" message already appears in the subheadline: "Why Punishing Civilians Doesn't Produce Strategic Gains." Later, he explicitly states that Israel's

tactic in the war is the “punishment of civilians.”

Only with such a label can the esteemed author define Israel’s military activity in Gaza as “slaughter.” Does this approach meet the standard required of reliable academic research? To us, it seems not.

The author does not stop there. He claims that the number of Palestinian deaths is much higher. Citing a medical study conducted earlier this year, he asserts that tens of thousands more are buried under the rubble of buildings in the Gaza Strip. Beyond that, many others died because they could not receive proper medical care due to Israel’s damage to Gaza’s healthcare system.

The author does not address the obvious question: Could the medical study on which he relies be conducted in the Gaza Strip without close Hamas supervision? What does that imply as far as the credibility of the research is concerned?

And so, step by step, the author concludes that the real number of casualties in Gaza exceeds 186,000. Simple arithmetic leads to the chilling conclusion that Israel has caused the deaths of 5%-10% of the Strip’s prewar population of 2.2 million. A horrifying number by any measure.

The author examines other cases in the history of warfare and concludes that Israel’s attacks on Gaza’s civilian population constitute “the most lethal case of a Western democracy using the punishment of civilians as a tactic of war.” Just like that.

The author does not bother to note that in at least some of the European wartime events, the fighting took place between regular uniformed armies, with most of the war conducted on the front lines between soldiers – rather than against a civilian population.

The author does not bother to inform his readers that Israel is probably the only state in the world that feeds its enemy during a war and gives warnings to civilians before launching a strike.

We have not addressed the article’s findings as a whole but only the issue of the numerical data on casualties. The picture that emerges is, admittedly, deeply troubling. Hard to believe, but even among the finest of the academic journals, “the flame has faltered.”

Of course, there is room - ample room - to criticize Israel's policy in Gaza. Nevertheless, in light of such a publication, it is difficult not to wonder: Does this reflect the state of the academic world in the United States as a whole? If so, there is good reason to be deeply concerned about Israel's standing among powerful intellectual circles in the Western world.

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