

Israeli Deceit & the Ongoing Battle of Shifa Hospital

By Gareth Porter - November, 2023

“...the claim that the largest medical center in the Gaza Strip provides cover for Hamas is the longest running theme in Israeli war propaganda, dating back nearly 15 years.”

- ***Biden defends Israel incursion into al-Shifa hospital against Hamas ‘headquarters’ — The Hill.*** ***“You have a circumstance where the first war crime is being committed by Hamas by having their headquarters, their military, hidden under a hospital. And that’s a fact, that’s what’s happened,” Biden said on Wednesday.***
- ***Nearly 24 hours after hospital raid no command centre, hostages, Hamas fighters nor arsenal is found — POLITICO (AP)***
- ***‘Israel has yet to produce findings that corroborate its claims that al-Shifa sits atop a Hamas headquarters and was central to the militant group’s operations in northern Gaza.’ – Washington Post, Thursday 2pm EST.***

The Israeli military has attacked and is occupying parts of al-Shifa hospital in an ongoing operation in northern Gaza. It is the biggest and most modern hospital in Gaza, which has ceased to function normally because of a lack of power, while tens of thousands of displaced Gazans take shelter in it.

An attack on a hospital is normally considered a clear violation of the rules of war. The Israeli Defense Forces is justifying it by claiming that Shifa has long served as civilian medical cover for the command center of the entire Hamas war operations and weapons storage.

That IDF claim has been cited constantly in Israeli propaganda as an argument that Shifa — and other hospitals in Gaza — should not be accorded the normal legal hospital immunity from attack.

Israeli forces closed in on Shifa while demanding for the last few days that the staff and patients remaining in the hospital be evacuated immediately. CNN reported Monday night that “the Biden administration has now signaled that it supports the Israeli position, as National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan declared on CNN’s State of the Union Sunday: ‘You can see even from open-source reporting that Hamas does use hospitals, along with a lot of other civilian facilities, for command-and-control, for storing weapons, for housing its fighters.’”

Those Sullivan remarks were an obvious green light for the IDF to press on for complete evacuation of the hospital.

The problem with that “open source reporting” is that it is never anything more than unsupported claims based on mere supposition. In fact, when the history of

supposedly damning revelations about Shifa hospital providing cover for Hamas military activities are examined more carefully it becomes clear that it has been no more than a thinly veiled excuse for the IDF to attack and close down Gaza's most important provider of medical care for the population of Gaza.

A History of Deception

The Israeli claim that Shifa hospital was providing such a cover for an Hamas military presence there is in fact the longest running theme in Israeli war propaganda on Gaza, dating back nearly 15 years to the first days of the Gaza war of January 2009.

That was when Yuval Diskin, the head of Israel's domestic intelligence service Shin Bet, told Amos Harel of *Haaretz* newspaper that "many" senior Hamas officials were "believed" to be hiding in the "basements" of Shifa hospital, and that the Israelis knew all about those underground levels of the hospital, because they had originally been built by the Egyptians before 1967 and extensively refurbished by the Israelis themselves in the mid-1980s.

Diskin also explained to Harel that Hamas was confident that it wouldn't be attacked, because of the patients on the upper floors.



Yuval Diskin in 2013. (Ziv Koren, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

Apart from the fact that Israel's intelligence service had admitted that it only suspected Hamas' military presence under the hospital rather than having actual knowledge, Harel was, however, honest enough to report that his Palestinian contacts were telling him senior Hamas leaders never stayed in the same location but constantly moved from one location to another — a revelation that obviously made far more sense than the claim that those same senior Hamas officials were hanging out in a basement that was obviously well known to the Israelis.

Harel's report also included a revelation — apparently from a Palestinian source — that raised problems for the nascent official Israeli propaganda line: "Some of the bunkers they are using," Harel wrote, "were linked by tunnels Hamas built in recent years."

The existence of numerous bunkers that could be used for command were thus independent of Shifa hospital, which the Israelis would always be able to invade.

That reality clearly implied that it would make no sense for Hamas to depend on Shifa hospital for that purpose.

IDF Tale Resurfaces in *Washington Post*

Nevertheless, during the next Israeli-Palestinian war in July 2014, the IDF tale of the Hamas leaders' secret hideaway in the basement of Shifa hospital re-emerged as if it were an unassailable fact that justified IDF threats to attack the hospital.

In a story published July 15, *The Washington Post* reported as unassailable fact that Shifa "has become the de facto headquarters for Hamas leaders, who can be seen in the hallways and offices."

Post reporter William Booth clearly did not see Hamas leaders in Al Shifa himself. Had he done so, he would have described the scene and identified one or two Hamas figures who had been pointed out to him at the hospital. So he was apparently passing on the self-interested claim of his Israeli interlocutors without informing *Post* readers that the information in question was far less reliable than it was made to appear.

IDF soldiers in Gaza on July 24, 2014. (Israel Defense Forces, Flickr, [CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

The IDF became fixated on closing up another Gaza hospital in July 2014. Just two days after that initial appearance of the Shifa-Hamas theme in the 2014 war, Israeli airstrikes bombed Al Wafa Rehabilitation and Geriatric Hospital in Gaza City and forced its closure.

The IDF specialists created a video distributed three weeks later aimed at defending the destruction of Wafa hospital as a necessary response to Hamas using the hospital for military operations. But they had resorted to multiple levels of trickery to make their political point, as this writer discovered in investigating the video.

The IDF propagandists had spliced together videos from five years earlier and from different times of day so as to suggest that firing from an unused building more than 100 yards away from the hospital was a recent Hamas rocket attack on IDF forces. Then they spliced in an audio clip from an entirely different incident in which the IDF returned fire to try to show that the IDF bombing of Wafa hospital was justified.

At the end of July 2014, the *Post* reaffirmed its support for Israel's primary propaganda theme in that six-week war. Terrence McCoy reported from Washington that Shifa Hospital had "become a de facto headquarters" of Hamas. That reporting reflected in turn the general readiness of much of the national press in Washington to accept the word of the Israelis as all they needed to know on that pivotal issue.

Eight years later, the same Israeli propaganda line immediately resurfaced after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, as the Israelis mounted a new propaganda offensive. On Oct. 27, IDF Spokesman Adm. Daniel Hagari, briefed the International press on the main lines of Israel's position regarding Shifa hospital and Hamas operations: He repeated

the line that a bunker underneath Shifa is Hamas' main base of operation, and that Hamas operates "several tunnels inside and under" the hospital.

Maximum Suffering

But Hamas' tunnels outside Shifa could obviously be used for the same function of command of military operations without having to bother with Shifa hospital.

So the drumbeat of Israeli concern about the alleged Hamas command bunker underneath Shifa appears to have been a phony issue from the start, aimed merely at bringing pressure to bear on the medical system, namely to close down Shifa as the largest, most modern and most effective hospitals in Gaza to create the maximum amount of suffering to the people of Gaza.

As of Tuesday, Shifa Hospital had ceased to function, as it had no electricity, having run out of fuel. The Israelis gallantly offered the hospital 300 liters of fuel — enough to function for about six minutes according to the hospital's calculation.

They thus failed to take any emergency action to save 36 babies facing possible death from the non-functioning incubators after three had already died. The scene at Shifa hospital early on Wednesday was eerie, as Israel tanks rumbled into the hospital grounds and Israeli troops entered the darkened main hospital building.

IDF spokesman Hagari would say only that Israeli forces were carrying out an operation "based on intelligence information and an operational necessity" and that it was in a "specified area in Shifa hospital".

Later Wednesday the IDF's Peter Lerner told CNN that the operation at al-Shifa hospital was "ongoing" and would say only that it had not found any sign of hostages in the hospital. The Gazans who have been staying in Shifa have been afraid to take the approved routes away from the hospital because of relentless Israeli attacks on civilians trying to do so. The IDF will no doubt continue to use force against the hundreds of thousands huddled there to make them leave.

And now that Israel has control over many thousand of military age males in the hospital, it is doubtful that they will allowed to go free, since they are considered as potential Hamas fighters.

The time has come for a reckoning on the long-running IDF propaganda ploy of claiming that Shifa has been used to hide Hamas's command center. Unless the IDF can show journalists convincing evidence of that long-claimed Hamas command presence under the hospital, the should stand for the truth and denounce that massive Israeli deception about Gaza.