



Season 3 Episode 3 Counting the Death Toll in Gaza *Episode Transcript*

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Teaser Clip: Every day 100 civilians are killed in conflict and countless more are harmed, yet their perspectives are often missing from the stories we tell about war. This is the Civilian Protection Podcast. A monthly podcast produced by CIVIC and PAX.

Annie: Hello everyone, and welcome back to the Civilian Protection Podcast. I am Annie Shiel, US Advocacy Director at Center for Civilians in Conflict, or CIVIC. And today I am joined by Thomas van Gool, PAX's Project Lead for Israel and Palestine, who will co-host today's episode. Thomas, do you want to introduce yourself?

Thomas: Thanks a lot, Annie, thanks for having me. I am indeed PAX's Project Lead for Israel and Palestine and in that capacity supporting our Israeli and Palestinian partners, and of course conducting a lot of advocacy and awareness raising efforts, especially over the last few weeks, mainly focusing on Europe and specifically the Netherlands.

Annie: Today's episode focuses on the conflict and civilian harm in Gaza, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Thomas: 2023 was already an extremely violent year, with over 100 Palestinians killed in the West Bank. And this escalated dramatically on October 7, when Hamas attacked, killing 1,200 people and taking more than 200 people hostage. The Israeli response has been extremely fierce, with bombardments on Gaza and the ground offensive, as of this episode's recording date reportedly killing over 13,000 Palestinians, including 5,500 children. The destruction is of course immense.

News clips by – in order – Fox 26 Houston, France24 and ABC News:

Fox 26 Houston: *Gaza's health ministry says the Palestinian death toll now exceeds 10,000. Israeli ground troops are surrounding Gaza City this morning. The troops are expected to enter the city today ... [fade out]*

France 24: *Dozens of Palestinians lie dead, covered by body bags. This is the aftermath of Israeli bombing on the town of Deir al-Balah in the Central Gaza Strip. "We were displaced from Northern Gaza, we came to stay here with my aunt. It was night, I was just sitting there when the bombing happened. We found ourselves in the midst of the debris. They pulled us out from under the rubble. You can see the children, young boys and girls, they are all martyred."*

ABC News: *UNICEF is calling for a ceasefire, saying Gaza is now a quote 'graveyard' for thousands of children. UNICEF says over 420 kids are being killed or injured every single day amid increased*

destruction to civilian infrastructure, including refugee camps and hospitals. Now they want an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to allow for the flow of aid and for abducted kids to be released.

Annie: As organizations focused on the protection of civilians, both CIVIC and PAX have been calling for adherence to International Humanitarian Law and the protection of civilians and civilian objects in Gaza, as well as an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to de-escalate and prevent further harm. We will talk more about that and other calls at the end of the episode.

As Thomas noted, the scale of civilian harm reported out of Gaza has been staggering. And so to help us make sense of these numbers, we are very pleased to welcome Emily Tripp, Director of Airwars, the civilian harm watchdog. Welcome, Emily, and thank you so much for joining us.

Emily: Thanks for having me.

Annie: Emily, can you start by introducing yourself and your organization? Airwars plays a pretty unique role in monitoring conflict and civilian harm around the world. So when you say you are a civilian harm watchdog, what does that mean?

Emily: Thanks Annie. So, we are a civilian harm watchdog organization. We have been around for about ten years now. We really started looking at the untold stories of civilian harm. So somewhere between the numbers that were estimated by militaries themselves perpetrating harm and the numbers that were being reported out by local media and organizations. We have worked on different conflicts, so looking at Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and also we looked at the Gaza Strip in May 2021 as well.

Annie: And when and how did Airwars' work on Gaza begin, and especially around the current offensive, and what does that look like?

Emily: So after the events on October 7, which have been well described in the introduction, as an organization, we really took a long time to think through exactly how we can add value in this conflict. As I said, we monitored civilian harm in May 2021. But the scale already of what we were seeing within those first few days was immense. And so we had a conversation as a team: it took us about three or four days to kind of really go through everything and think, you know, 'Where are the gaps here?'. And then we saw, I think it was by the end of that first week, that organizations that we normally see reporting on civilian harm, organizations like Al Mezan, they were unable to go about their usual work because of the access limitations, and because of the security constraints. We also saw at the same time that the number of bombs that the Israelis were saying that they were dropping was intense. So we really felt at the same time, our methodology was able to kind of make sense of this very complicated environment at a time when it seemed that nobody really knew what was happening. And claims from some areas were being combated by claims from other areas. In general, it was creating an information environment that was essentially losing the civilian toll.

Thomas: Thanks Emily. And in terms of top line analysis, what have you found so far?

Emily: So we found now that we have got about 1,000 civilian harm allegations that we have yet to go through. So by that I mean: a single time in place and space where a civilian was said to be injured or killed. And then each of those allegations, we then go through those and assess them and put them on our website. This is so far in terms of just the top line result, the most intense campaign we have ever monitored. And that is including really, really intense campaigns of Mosul, of Raqqa, of Russian strikes in Syria and parts of Ukraine. We are also seeing mass casualty events. I mean our monitors are looking at 25 to 30 individual incidents a day since October 7. And in many of these cases, we are looking at dozens and dozens of casualties in each strike. But one of the big, standout features I think of this conflict, is the number of people who are dying alongside their family members. We have been trying to identify family units where we can try and make sense of overall death tolls. And we are finding in so many of these cases that indeed individuals are dying alongside brothers, cousins, parents. And I think that is one of the most challenging things that we are dealing with at the moment.

Thomas: And are there specific elements of this campaign that are causing the majority of harm?

Emily: I think, unfortunately, it is an extremely predictable thing. But it is the fact that this is a very dense urban area we are talking about. We have seen this in Mosul, in Raqqa, in Aleppo: when these explosive weapons are used with such intensity in such urban areas, the harm is huge. In many cases, we are seeing that even the initial casualty estimates that we find from one particular strike is probably an under-report, because we are seeing so many additional claims of people still in the rubble. And this kind of damage, the infrastructure and the rubble and the kind of physicality of the Gaza Strip, is really making casualty recording in this conflict extremely challenging.

Thomas: And we, of course, also see a lot of misinformation being spread. You mentioned that you are looking at the casualty numbers. Can you maybe walk us through the process of how you do that, and also how you verify these numbers?

Emily: Maybe just important to note: this is not the first conflict that has unfolded online. As an organization, we primarily work with an open source methodology. So our system is essentially to aggregate every single bit of information that exists in the online environment around a moment in place and time where harm occurred. The May 2021 campaign was called the "TikTok War", if you remember, because of so many harm claims that were being put out on social media. And of course, with social media comes misinformation. So our approach: we stay away from the word 'verify', because we do not believe in absolutes, especially in very complicated conflict environments. But instead, what we do is kind of aggregate all of the information and categorize that information. And as soon as you start categorizing information around a civilian harm event, we are able to show really what is likely to have occurred. And we are able quite quickly to also remove cases that may be from other conflicts or may be from information that is not necessarily relevant to what is unfolding in Gaza.

Thomas: You see that there is this controversy, nevertheless, so how do you see this? What kind of numbers are being protested? By whom? And how do you interpret this?

Emily: The main controversy at the moment is around the death toll, the death toll of civilians. And I think this is something that, as I said, you know that this is not the first conflict, it is definitely not the first war in the Gaza Strip. And it is not the first time the Ministry of Health has come out with numbers. I think the controversy in this case is very particular because of two reasons. One of them is that the harm is so high. I mean, it is almost unbelievable. The numbers in the thousands and the thousands of deaths in such a short space of time. I mean, these are really numbers that are very difficult to comprehend, no matter where you are in the world. But I think the second one is that as an official health ministry, the structure of the Gaza Strip is such that it is linked to the governing authorities who are Hamas. And so there has been this kind of politicization of the numbers, which has been used on all sides. And I think that it is one of those cases that is very understandable and very natural, but also is quite worrying. Because as soon as we start to disbelieve certain numbers, or we start focusing really on overall statistics, we really start to lose sight of the humanity and the human lives lost in war.

Thomas: You mentioned indeed that we kind of lose sight of the humanity. What are the implications of this or what could be the implications?

Emily: For us as an organization, for example, while we try and focus on bringing together a casualty range so that we can really understand exactly the scale of what is happening, which is very helpful for different types of understanding: it helps us understand how certain weapons have certain impacts on civilian populations, or how civilians move through space and time in war in a way that can then help humanitarian organizations feed into their own kind of strategic planning. It also helps us understand maybe a gendered impact of war, or the impact of war on children.

But I think the implications when we really focus overall on these statistics, is that we are really losing that kind of connection between us on the outside of war and those people who are suffering in the middle of it. And I think it is a good reminder to all of us, you know: wars are often fought in the names of the people that they are trying to protect. And I think it is important for everyone really around the world to understand that this most lethal arm of the state, you know, what does that actually mean in terms of collateral damage, or justifications, or legitimization of certain violent behaviors? I think it is important for us all to keep in mind that there are other people and other humans on the flip side of that.

And I think also just a final point on that, you know, it does not necessarily take someone with special skill or knowledge in terms of verification, or misinformation or open source analysis, or even expertise in the field of casualty recording, to understand that even when you start looking at the images and videos that are coming out of the Gaza Strip, that you know that what we are seeing is a profoundly dangerous and deadly environment for hundreds if not thousands of civilians.

Annie: Emily, you mentioned the sheer number of mass casualty events that you have been assessing in this conflict. One event that has received a lot of attention has been the multiple Israeli strikes on Jabalia refugee camp. And I know that Airwars just published an assessment of that case. Can you talk us through that incident and what the assessment process looks like and what you found?

Emily: So, this was a case on the 31st of October, it was the first of these major strikes, even though as you said, there have been multiple strikes in that location before and since. This assessment: we found that at least 126 civilians, we think, were likely killed. And that includes ten families. That includes almost 70 children. And we found 160 names, partial names or full names of individuals. Just to put that in context, I said, you know, as a casualty organization, this is kind of the business of what we do: we have been working for ten years, multiple different conflicts, and we have never, ever, in our research ever found a case where we found so many names identified of civilians who have been killed. So that gives you a bit of a reflection, and also the fact that this is not the only mass casualty event that we have monitored. At the moment, there is a case on my desk to review, which is also potentially 70 civilians who have been killed in a single strike that went largely uncovered by the international media, just over the weekend. So, the case of Jabalia also is a case that is not necessarily exceptional, but also devastating in its specificity.

The way that we really went around this assessment, we were trying to find exactly the numbers of people who were killed in a very complicated environment. So what we were seeing many times were, for example, interviews with relatives who were in quite some distress at their relatives who had been killed or injured in a strike. So what we were seeing was trying to identify, okay, "If you have got a mother at the corner of the crater who is screaming for her child, how do we count that as a casualty recorder?" So, we were kind of going through and diligently recording, "Okay, that must be one child then that has been killed." Our researchers have this kind of extremely difficult and very grueling job of finding family connections between people. So they found, for example, there was a man, Abdel Rayan, who held up on Reuters, a list, a piece of paper, and on the piece of paper was a list of fifteen names of his family members who were killed. And our Arabic language researchers, they took a screenshot of that list, and then found every single name from that list and looked for all of the biographies of people described and: one of them was a doctor, and one of them had a different profession that we found that was related to that person, this person. We gathered all of that information together to create a full picture of the Rayan family that we then recorded in the assessment. And that was really just a proportion of the cases we found. We found also a whole bunch of other individuals in that assessment who we do not know the names of at all. We just know them by either their grieving friends or grieving relatives or mentions in social media posts, as people were trying to kind of document the horror of that day.

Annie: I think that that kind of work is so important because one thing we wanted to talk about is, we have spoken so much about the numbers and the statistics, with the risk of losing sight of each of those numbers is a name, is a life, is a person. And so you have spoken quite a bit about this already, but I would love it if you can speak a little bit more about how Airwars is grappling with that in this conflict more broadly as well.

Emily: As an organization, looking at the open source world, there is so much information that we all have about ourselves online, whether you are in Syria, or whether you are in DC, or London, or wherever. And all of that information is open source. And so what we try and do is capture this, it has been called a 'digital ripple' in the past: you know, the kind of waves that individuals and human lives make in the online environment. And we try and capture that to preserve an obituary almost of each of the individuals that we find in the strikes. So for example, you know, we found a number of different cases where people were about to get married. And so there was all of this reporting about them and their families online. Because life goes on, you know, even in the middle of the most intense war, you still have these routine things that people are doing. And our researchers really try and capture all of that, all of those details, to make sure that, yes, you know, it is important for us as an organization to

come out with these ranges and the numbers and ensure we have these impartial kind of statistics of what is going on. But also, all of those things that exist out there anyway, about who we are and who individuals are. To make sure that when you are looking at those assessments, and you are reading them, you are really understanding that this was an individual who lived a certain life and was lost as a result of war.

Annie: And then the other side of that is we also do not want to miss the broader and longer impact for the entire civilian population of this conflict. And so, what has your work shown you about that? I think it seems that the overall impact is that nowhere is safe for civilians in Gaza right now. So what has Airwars' research revealed about that?

Emily: As in all wars, the fatalities and the injuries are really just the tip of the iceberg in terms of civilian harm. What we have been capturing, and this has been a long process, but it is essentially, all of the other references to certain damage of infrastructure in the civilian environment that happens around a particular fatality incident. So for example, we have been looking at healthcare, and looking at, "Okay, if this was an ambulance that was destroyed, or if this was a corner of a hospital that was destroyed, or if this was, maybe it was a doctor who was on their way to delivering some medical supplies, if that was impacted during this conflict, what does that then mean as a broader effect of war?" We have also done some studies last year: we looked at, with the organization Conflict Environment Observatory, we were really trying to understand, what does, for example, the actual physical infrastructure of the city of Gaza look like after this very intense campaign that happened in May 2021? And we were focusing on water supply particularly, because as you will see, in many of the reports that come out of the Gaza Strip, that have attacks on what are meant to be Hamas tunnel networks. So as soon as those tunnel networks are impacted, the whole infrastructure in the city infrastructure around them also gets impacted. So I think it is something that is really challenging to quantify and it is challenging to really account for and fully grapple with and understand the long-term effects of this kind of urban war. But as I was saying a bit before, unfortunately, we have quite a few case studies now of Mosul, of Raqqa, of other places, of understanding exactly the impact of these kinds of weapons on urban environments, far beyond the fatalities, to learn.

Thomas: Emily, I would be interested to hear a bit more about how you also include the Israeli hostages in your reporting?

Emily: It is a good question. For us a civilian is a civilian, no matter where they are from. So we have seen, in some cases, such as the Jabalia case, that there were seven hostages that Qassam, the militant group, said had died in that strike. So we included them in our casualty range, and we included them in the assessment. I think this is one of the real tragedies of the unfolding situation, but also one of the inevitabilities of such an intense urban campaign is that it is very difficult to distinguish between civilians and militants, when you have such an intense campaign in an urban area, particularly one as complicated as Gaza.

Thomas: Now, thanks a lot, Emily, for elaborating on that. Also reflecting on what you just mentioned, and kind of zooming out a bit: why is this important? Why is it important to do this casualty recording work? Why is it relevant?

Emily: Yeah, it's a good question. I think we all at Airwars remind ourselves of the importance of our work every day because it is really difficult. I think one of the big things for us is that it's important always to have a public record. For us to kind of maintain our humanity and perspective, we really need to know the consequences of the wars that are often fought in our names. But I also think that there are all of these kinds of different justice and accountability implications, whether that is an individual who is just seeking to understand what happened to their friend or their relative, casualty recording is really the first point of call for that. You can really understand what otherwise would be dismissed as the 'fog of war' or the chaos of information or collateral damage. As soon as you can understand it in a granular way, you can also facilitate individual routes to truth, or reparations, or whatever it might be. I think casualty recording has a huge variety of applications. But it is also often quite undervalued or underappreciated. When you look at the statements made by either President Biden, or other members of the US administration, in reflection to their own casualties resulting from their own actions across other areas of the world, it is always the contentious point. There is a kind of obstacle between an individual who has been affected by what must be the most traumatic moment of their lives, and the truth from the person who caused it.

Thomas: You already mentioned routes and reparations, is this also a direction where you see Airwars going moving forward? What are the next steps, and what do you also expect, or hope to see, from governments?

Emily: Yes, I mean, for us, we see our archive as a starting point for so many different things. The way that we do our work and the way that we document everything is meant to be entirely transparent, so that it can be replicated, whether you are an investigator or an individual or a government. And we hope that yes, that will support a variety of different routes to accountability. That can be reparations for some, it could be human rights litigation for others, or it could just be an individual, like I said, looking to know what happened to their loved ones.

Annie: And Emily, I think we would be remiss in ending this episode without talking about the roles of other countries in this conflict, including countries like the United States, the Netherlands, the UK. As an organization based in the UK, I am wondering if you can speak a little bit about the role that you see there. And, of course, we will talk about the other countries as well.

Emily: I think it has been a little forgotten but in November last year, more than 80 states, including the United Kingdom and the United States, signed on to quite a groundbreaking declaration at the time: it was a commitment from these states to address the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Annie: *As a quick aside, you can learn more about the political declaration on explosive weapons in populated areas in Season 2 Episode 3 of this podcast, in which our team traveled to Dublin to cover the declaration's signing.*

Emily: And the wording of the declaration is extremely interesting, and it was very profound at the time. We were on the back of several months of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. And there felt to be a sea change in geopolitics at that moment, at least amongst military-powerful states like the United Kingdom, where we said: "No more. The use of these weapons and explosive weapons in populated areas is causing undue harm to civilians. The proportion of people dying in these battlegrounds are in their majority civilians." And since then, disappointingly, there has been complete silence on this topic, not just from the United Kingdom, but also from so many of the other signatories who signed onto that declaration.

There is also an interesting thing happening in the United States. I think you have talked about it before on the podcast: this kind of civilian harm mitigation and response action plan, and the wording of the US administration, that is now being echoed around the world by the US allies, including the United Kingdom and the Netherlands and others, is that civilian harm, it can be mitigated and it should be accounted for, no matter the conflict theater. Whether it is an extremely complicated countering-terror, counterinsurgency campaign, or it is a peer-to-peer conflict, or it is, you know, whatever it may be, that there is still room for the protection of civilians in those campaigns. And I think the United Kingdom is not alone in its allies in being quite silent on that topic at the moment. And perhaps not quite remembering the commitments it signed up to less than a year ago.

Annie: To your point, Emily, in addition to the political declaration, as you just mentioned, the US has, in the last year or so, really tried to position itself as a leader and made these commitments around how it will prevent and respond to civilian harm after two decades of operations that have caused devastating civilian harm, as your organization has documented quite well. And that commitment has included doing that work with partners. And the credibility of that initiative really comes into question when we see some of the messaging, or lack thereof, that we are seeing around protection of civilians in this conflict.

The other thing that I think is important to note and Thomas, maybe I will ask you to talk about this when it comes to the Netherlands as well, is that the US and Israel have a very, very unique, very large security assistance relationship. And when it comes to explosive weapons in populated areas, we are very concerned about the transfer of explosive weapons to Israel with absolutely no conditions around their use. In fact, we have seen multiple statements from various officials in the US saying there are no red lines, there are no conditions, when it comes to US aid to Israel and that is deeply, deeply concerning. And a violation of US law and policy in fact.

News clips by – in order – the US Department of Defense, NPR, and Al Arabiya News.

US Department of Defense: *We have not placed any conditions on the provision of this equipment.*

NPR: *We are not putting conditions on the military assistance that we are providing to Israel.*

Al Arabiya News: *We are not going to create any conditions on the support that we are giving Israel to defend itself.*

Thomas: This is also very recognizable if you look at the Dutch context, where I am based, of course. I think what is really shocking, at least for a lot of people here in the Netherlands, is that the Dutch abstained at the UN General Assembly vote on the ceasefire. I think that also really showed where a lot of the European countries and the US also really isolate themselves from the rest of the world in not standing to protect civilians, and I think that is something that is causing a lot of harm, also in the future in other conflicts, right? So the accusation of double standards comes up a lot, which will further isolate the US and the EU. Also I think one of the reasons as PAX, I think we all, our organizations, all three of us, but also so many others, have been very vocal on calling for a ceasefire and protection of civilians.

Also, of course, something that we did not address yet is the hostages, the Israeli hostages that are still held in Gaza, which we all hope will be released. And we are also asking our governments to make sure that they will be released.

Thomas: *On the 22nd of November, after recording this episode, Hamas and the Israeli authorities announced having reached a deal that would allow for a four-day pause in fighting and the release of at least 50 women and children held hostage in Gaza, in exchange for the release of a number of Palestinian women and children held in Israeli prisons. Our organizations have welcomed the hostage release and the possibility for more humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip. We continue to push for a permanent ceasefire as this is the only way to protect civilians, the return of all hostages, and a long-term solution to the conflict that also seeks to address its root causes.*

And also if you talk about complicity of the state or state involvement, we also see in the Netherlands today even after the 7th of October, they continue to deliver spare parts for F-35 planes, which is also why we as PAX took the decision together with some other organizations to sue the Dutch state, because they keep continuing to do that. So, if you talk about state involvement, and especially the three current countries where we are living in, there is a lot to do still, unfortunately.

Annie: Emily, is there anything we did not ask you about that you think we should have?

Emily: Maybe I would just like to take the moment to amplify the network that we are part of which is the Casualty Recorders Network. We are not the only organization that does this work, we are not the only one with this approach. We are part of an organization called Every Casualty Counts, so the casualty network is within that. And there are the standards for casualty recording that they developed back in 2016. I think it is important, no matter how you are looking at the conflict, or how you are really understanding these casualties, to really take into account the fact that there is a network of organizations trying to do his difficult work. And we certainly feel that it is important, particularly at this time.

Annie: Thank you so much, Emily, for that work, and for joining us today. We really appreciate it.

Emily: Thank you.

Annie: That is it for today's episode of the Civilian Protection Podcast.

Thomas: The Civilian Protection Podcast is brought to you by Center for Civilians in Conflict and PAX – two NGOs working to improve the lives of civilians in conflict. Today's episode was written by Annie Shiel, Thomas Van Gool, Erin Bijl, and Hajer Naili, and produced by the Podcast Guru. Hajer Naili and

Matt Longmore made sure we are online. Thank you to our guest, Emily Tripp, for joining and sharing her expertise.

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