

Hamas Fails to Show That Israel Struck Hospital.

Patrick Kingsley and Aaron Boxerman Oct. 23, 2023

A senior Hamas official says "nothing is left" of the munition that hit the Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza City last week, killing hundreds. Israel says the explosion was caused by a misfired Palestinian rocket.

Five days after Hamas accused Israel of bombing a hospital in Gaza City and killing hundreds of people, the armed Palestinian group has yet to produce or describe any evidence linking Israel to the strike, says it cannot find the munition that hit the site and has declined to provide detail to support its count of the casualties.

Within an hour of the blast on Tuesday night, the Hamas-run Gazan health ministry accused Israel of attacking the Ahli Arab hospital, a medical center in Gaza City where scores of families had been sheltering. The allegation was soon denied by Israel but quickly accepted and amplified by Arab leaders across the Middle East, setting off unrest throughout the region. The claim was widely cited by international news outlets, including The New York Times, before Israel issued its denial.

But in the days since, as new evidence contradicting the Hamas claim has emerged, the Gazan authorities have changed their story about the blast. Spokespeople have released death tolls varying from 500 to 833, before settling on 471.

The Hamas-run health ministry has also declined to release further details about those 471 victims, and all traces of the munition have seemingly vanished from the site of the blast, making it impossible to assess its provenance. Raising further questions about Hamas's claims, the impact site turned out to be the hospital parking lot, and not the hospital itself.

On Sunday, Hamas turned down requests by The Times to view any available evidence of the munition it said had struck the hospital, claiming that it had disintegrated beyond recognition.

"The missile has dissolved like salt in the water," said Ghazi Hamad, a senior Hamas official, in a phone interview. "It's vaporized. Nothing is left."

Salama Maroof, the head of the Hamas-run government media office, said in a text message: "Who says we're obligated to present the remnants of every rocket that kills our people? In general, you can come and research and confirm for yourself from the evidence we possess."

For Palestinians, the accusation of Israeli responsibility for the blast has cemented the perception that Israel's response to the Hamas-led terrorist attacks on southern Israel on Oct. 7 has been disproportionate and vengeful. The Hamas-run Gazan health ministry says that Israeli strikes have killed more than 4,300 Palestinians, 40 percent of them children, and the high reported death toll has undermined international support for Israel's counterattack.

But to Israelis, the accusation that Israel hit the hospital is part of a grand deception aimed at undermining the legitimacy of Israel's response to what officials say was the deadliest single attack on Jews since the Holocaust.

Roughly 1,400 people were killed by Hamas's raid on Oct. 7, the vast majority of them civilians, and more than 200 people were abducted to Gaza.

Israel said the strike on the hospital parking lot was caused by a misfired Palestinian rocket, citing intelligence intercepts and videos of the sky above Gaza at the time. The Israeli military said the rocket was fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, an armed group in Gaza allied with Hamas, before malfunctioning in midair and exploding when its propellant caught fire upon hitting the ground.

"According to our intelligence, Hamas checked the report, understood it was an Islamic Jihad rocket that had misfired and decided to launch a global media campaign to hide what really happened," said Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, in a press briefing on Wednesday.

The military also said that Palestinian armed groups had mistakenly fired more than 550 rockets into their own territory since the war began more than two weeks ago. The claim could not be immediately verified but Palestinian groups have previously acknowledged that their rockets land in Gaza; video last year showed one zigzagging through the air shortly after launch, before plummeting into a civilian area.

"We have made mistakes, I am not going to deny it," said Musab Al-Breim, a spokesman for Islamic Jihad, in an interview on Wednesday. "However, not mistakes of this size."

Israel has also turned down requests by The Times to provide logs of all its military activity in the area at the time of the strike, and declined to specify the video on which it based its assessment of Palestinian responsibility.

Israeli messaging about the rocket launch site has also been inconsistent: Admiral Hagari suggested the errant rocket was launched from a cemetery close to the hospital, while a map posted online by the military suggested the launch site was farther away.

But the Biden administration has backed Israel, with officials saying that multiple strands of early intelligence, including infrared satellite data, show a launch of a rocket or missile from Palestinian fighter positions within Gaza.

A visual investigation conducted by the Wall Street Journal strongly supported the Israeli interpretation, while investigations by the Associated Press and CNN also tentatively backed it. All three investigations cited television footage that they said appeared to show a misfired Palestinian rocket in the sky above the hospital, and experts who said the damage at the site did not resemble that typically caused by an Israeli missile strike.

Forensic Architecture, a London-based visual investigation group, disputed the Israeli account, saying that the munition had been fired from the direction of Israel. Al Jazeera, a

Qatari news channel, concluded that a Palestinian rocket had been intercepted by an Israeli air defense missile. Both are often critical of Israeli policies.

Without examining the munition that hit the parking lot, it may be impossible to draw a definitive conclusion about who fired it.

But by the time reporters arrived at the site on the morning after the blast, any remnants of the munition appeared to have been removed, preventing independent analysis of its origin. Reporters and photographers who toured the site that day found a shallow dent in the ground, but no deep crater of the kind usually caused by an Israeli precision-guided missile used in an airstrike.

The strike could have been caused by a different Israeli munition that causes a smaller impact, such as an errant interceptor fired by an air defense system or an artillery shell. But Israel said it does not fire interceptors into Gazan airspace, and that it was not firing shells toward that specific area at that time.

Munitions experts dismissed Hamas's claim that the munition had completely disintegrated on impact.

"One would expect remnants to be recoverable in all but the most extreme circumstances, and the available imagery of the hospital site suggests something ought to be identifiable on the ground," said N.R. Jenzen-Jones, director of Armament Research Services, a consultancy based in Australia.

For Palestinians, the debate over who is responsible for the hospital blast obscures a broader context in which Israeli strikes have devastated whole neighborhoods, displaced hundreds of thousands of Gazans and killed thousands of others.

"You ignore all the other massacres," said Mr. Hamad, the Hamas official.

Israel has cut almost all supply of electricity, food, water and fuel, exacerbating a humanitarian crisis in the enclave and leaving hospitals short of power and even baby formula. Scores of public institutions in northern Gaza, including hospitals like the Ahli Arab hospital, were warned by Israel to evacuate.

The World Health Organization reported on Saturday that at least 19 hospitals had been damaged since the war broke out on Oct. 7. Last week, the organization said that three hospitals had "sustained heavy damages to the point that they are no longer functioning." At least 16 health care workers have been killed and 28 injured, according to the WHO.

"We've never lived through a war this intense," said Motasem Mortaja, a Palestinian journalist who documented the aftermath of the hospital strike.

Israeli officials say their attacks are aimed at members of armed Palestinian groups and their military infrastructure, and that Hamas and its allies are to blame for civilian deaths because they construct many of their bases and rocket launchers in residential areas.

Israel also disputes the Palestinian death toll, saying that the number of people killed at the Ahli Arab hospital is lower than reported, without elaborating. American intelligence agencies have assessed that the blast killed 100 to 300 people.

The Gazan authorities declined to name any of the people killed in the blast, saying that many bodies still had yet to be identified.

The Rev. Fadi Diab, deputy chairman of the hospital's board, said it was hard to confirm the death toll. Father Diab said the hospital administration in Gaza had told him there were between 450 and 500 displaced Gazans sheltering at the hospital site before the blast, but that it was unclear how many of them were in the parking lot when the explosion occurred.

"Could the numbers be exaggerated? It's possible. But could the numbers also be correct? That's also possible," Father Diab said in a phone call. "No one is currently able to do verification," he added.

Yousur Al-Hlou contributed reporting from Cairo.

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U.S. Leans Toward Palestinian Rocket.

Julian E. Barnes and David E. Sanger
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American intelligence agencies released no new declassified imagery or other new evidence to make their case. Officials said their strengthened assessment was based on video evidence.

American intelligence officials said Tuesday they now had "high confidence" that the blast at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza last week was the result of a Palestinian rocket that broke up mid-flight, and that no Israeli weapon was involved in the explosion.

The officials said, however, that numerous mysteries still remained about the incident. Those include how many people were killed or injured when, by the U.S. account, the warhead of a Palestinian rocket landed in the parking lot of the hospital. But they said there was little damage to the hospital itself, and no collapse of the structure.

U.S. intelligence agencies released no new imagery or other new evidence to make their case. Instead, they said their strengthened assessment came from Israeli intercepts of Palestinian armed groups and publicly available video. Those videos, the U.S. officials said, allowed them to assess that the rocket was launched from Gaza and, after a "catastrophic motor failure," the warhead fell on the hospital's parking lot. The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information, said there was no evidence an Israeli launch could have been responsible.

A U.S. intelligence official said the analysis of the videos has focused primarily on one recorded by Al Jazeera, though there are multiple videos of projectiles in the skies and the explosion at the hospital. The U.S. intelligence analysis of the Al Jazeera video is at odds with a New York Times investigation, which found that the projectile shown in that video and others was launched from Israel and exploded well away from the hospital. A spokesman for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said The Times and intelligence agencies had different interpretations of the video.

U.S. officials said their assessment was also based on communications intercepts provided by the Israelis and images of the explosion and aftermath. Last week, U.S. officials said their early intelligence showed that the blast was caused by an armed Palestinian group, rebutting Palestinian claims that an Israeli strike caused the explosion. U.S. spy agencies did not release detailed evidence at the time to support their assessment.

On Tuesday, U.S. intelligence officials reaffirmed their assessment that Israel was not responsible for the explosion. The evaluation reflected a higher degree of certainty by U.S. intelligence officials that Israel was not responsible for the blast.

Israel has said the explosion, which resulted in a significant number of casualties, was caused by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a group allied with Hamas. The group said Israel's accusations that one of its rockets malfunctioned and hit the hospital were "false and baseless." Hamas has not provided any documentation of Israeli involvement.

The hospital blast prompted protests around the region. In an early claim, Hamas said that the hospital had been hit by an Israeli missile. President Biden, flying to Israel for a visit, said last week that preliminary evidence was that the strike had been "done by the other team," but that the conclusion was preliminary.

But the initial account by Hamas took hold, especially at a time when Israel was carrying out airstrikes in advance of a potential ground attack intended to eliminate Hamas after the terror attack that the Israeli government says killed more than 1,400 people. Israel's relentless artillery and bombing campaign in response has killed 5,700 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-run Gazan Health Ministry.

The latest American assessment is in part based on what has not been discovered. A senior intelligence official said there were no images of any Palestinians displaying an Israeli weapon from the bomb site.

U.S. officials said only light damage was sustained at the site, which is consistent with the premise of a Gaza-made rocket that broke up in flight, rather than an Israeli munition striking the hospital.

Images of a fireball at the hospital site, and pictures taken after the fact showing burned cars in the compound's parking lot, are consistent with a malfunctioning missile, according to U.S. officials.

The American assessment also relies heavily on intercepts provided by Israeli intelligence agencies. U.S. officials said the Israelis have provided multiple recordings that American intelligence agencies say they have authenticated. All of the recordings are secondhand accounts: members of Hamas discussing their belief that the explosion was caused by an errant or malfunctioning rocket fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad. U.S. officials did not provide recordings or transcriptions of these intercepts.

The declassified assessment provides no specific information on where U.S. intelligence officials think a rocket causing the blast was launched from inside Gaza.

But the senior official said the agencies were continuing to investigate. If the United States gets additional information that would point in a different direction, the official said, intelligence agencies will release it.

On Monday, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of Britain said his country's intelligence services assessed that a Palestinian rocket fired from Gaza and aimed at Israel was likely the cause of the deaths at the hospital.

"On the basis of the deep knowledge and analysis of our intelligence and weapons experts, the British government judges that the explosion was likely caused by a missile or part of one that was launched from within Gaza towards Israel," Mr. Sunak said.

Last week, U.S. intelligence agencies said that they were working to corroborate an Israeli assessment that the explosion resulted from an errant rocket fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The number of casualties from the explosion at the hospital remains in dispute.

U.S. officials estimated last week that between 100 and 300 people were killed, but said the death toll was likely at the low end of that range. On Tuesday, U.S. officials said they only had low confidence in that assessment. The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said the death toll was 471, a figure revised down from their earlier assessment of 500.

U.S. officials said on Tuesday that an accurate count of the people who died at the hospital was impossible to obtain because of a lack of independent sources.

Days after Hamas accused Israel of bombing a hospital in Gaza City and killing hundreds of people, the armed Palestinian group has yet to produce or describe any evidence linking Israel to the blast, says it cannot find the munition that hit the site and has declined to provide detail to support its count of the casualties.

The Hamas-run health ministry has also declined to release further details about those 471 victims, and all traces of the munition have seemingly vanished from the site of the blast, adding to the difficulty in assessing its provenance. Raising further questions about Hamas's claims, the impact site turned out to be the hospital parking lot, and not the hospital itself.

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