

Pallywood Tactics: Al-Shifa Hospital and Israel's Propaganda Effort

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Global Research, November 24, 2023

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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It resembles a chronology of desperation, shifting narratives, and schoolboy howlers. From the outset, the mass lethality of Israeli strikes against Gaza and the collective punishment of its populace needed some justification, however tenuous. If it could be shown, convincingly, that Hamas and its allies had militarised such civilian infrastructure as hospitals, they would become fair game for vengeful air strikes and military assault. Thus, could Israel's soldiers demonstrate, not merely the animal savagery of Hamas, one indifferent to humanity and suffering, but the virtue of Israel's own military objectives. The forces of pallid light would again prevail against swarthy evil.

Interest quickly shifted to Al-Shifa Hospital, where the carnage has been horrific. This was said to be the wicked heart of operations, one depicted with exaggerated relish in a [video](#) titled "Home to Hamas' Headquarters, This is an IDF 3D Diagram of the Shifa Hospital". In an explanatory note, the Israeli Defence Forces state in the crude production that the hospital "is not only the largest hospital in Gaza but it also acts as the main headquarters for Hamas' terrorist activity." It goes on to note that, "Terrorism does not belong in a hospital and the IDF will operate to uncover any terrorist infrastructure."

This bit of amateurish theatrics suitably complemented another effort which made its debut on November 11. In its official Arabic account affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel [posted a selfie video](#) (now deleted) starring a Palestinian nurse indignant at Hamas' commandeering of the Al-Shifa hospital. A close inspection of the production could only engender doubt: a well laundered lab coat, appropriate positioning of implicating logos, crude simulations of background bombing, the unconvincing accent. "The only thing missing was a degree hanging in the background saying Tel Aviv Upstairs Medical College," a scornful Marc Owen Jones of *The Daily Beast* [wrote](#).

So [@israelarabic](#) deleted the tweet of the fake Al Shifa nurse claiming Hamas was taking over the hospital [#Gaza pic.twitter.com/dkrZhKeXud](#)

— Marc Owen Jones (@marcowenjones) [November 12, 2023](#)

Despite these stumbling efforts, support followed from Israel's staunch backers, the United States. In a press briefing held on November 14, NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications, **John Kirby**, [asserted](#) that

“we have information that Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad use some hospitals in the Gaza Strip, including Al-Shifa, and tunnels underneath them to conceal and to support their military operations and to hold hostages.”

The language used by Kirby, however, did not exactly suggest a thriving command and control centre at work, though he would go so far as to claim that the hospital served as a “command-and-control node”. “They have stored weapons there, and they’re prepared to respond to an Israeli operation against that facility.”

When the IDF eventually made its way into the hospital, the initial evidence was not promising. In videos and photos posted by the Israeli forces [none revealed](#) tunnels and evidence of a vast command centre. As Aric Toler of the *New York Times* [reported](#), a mere 10 guns were found at the first count. “The IDF has claimed that the ‘beating heart’ of Hamas’ operations is beneath Shifa. Presumably they’ll release more photos/videos?” In another [post](#), Toler identifies various “grab bags” with “guns and the body armor scattered around, and a laptop next to CD-Rs.”

In another round of public relations tripping, two new videos released by both the IDF and the Shin Bet security agency purported to document, as the *Times of Israel* [describes](#) it, a tunnel shaft with “a winding staircase from around three meters deep, continuing down for another seven meters until it reaches part of the tunnel network. The tunnel continues for five meters, before turning to the right and continuing for another 50 meters.” At the end of the tunnel lies an obstructing blast door, equipped with a hole for shooters.

“The findings,” an IDF [statement](#) claimed with weak conviction, “prove beyond all doubt that buildings in the hospital complex are used as infrastructure for the Hamas terror organization, for terror activity. This is further proof of the cynical use that the Hamas terror organization makes of the residents of the Gaza Strip as a human shield for its murderous terror activities.”

Despite some strained satisfaction in the statement, the picture Israel offers is gnarled and tattered. The IDF production teams continue to struggle in reviving a cadaverous narrative, [using their own soldiers as props](#) (because that’s convincing) to describe their first impressions on seeing “a terrorist tunnel”. Just as its cream-of-the-crop elite failed to get wind of the October 7 attack, suggesting an expertise drugged by hubris, Israel’s information strategy seems increasingly suspect, slippery and ever subject to qualification. Rifles, a truck, and a hostage or two, do not a central military command centre make.

Watch IDF 1LT Masha describe the moment she saw a terrorist tunnel underneath Gaza's biggest hospital. [pic.twitter.com/gGAnG8v7BE](#)

It is also worth noting that physicians and doctors working at the hospital – the authentic ones, in any case – have also been perplexed by the allegations that Al-Shifa serves as a throbbing command and control hub for Hamas and its combat operations. Norwegian physician Mads Gilbert, who has worked at the facility for 16 years, [told Democracy Now!](#) that there was “no evidence at all” that such claims were true. “If it was a military command centre, I would not work there.” At least we can be sure that Gilbert is not a stage extra.

In this bleak mess, it is worth stressing that even if the hospital proved to be a military facility, humanitarian protections would not mysteriously cease for those patients and staff within it. “Anything that the attacking force can do to allow the humanitarian functions of that hospital to continue,” [reasons](#) Adil Haq of Rutgers Law School, “they’re obligated to do, even if there’s some office somewhere in the building where there is a fighter holed up.” But the strategy against Al-Shifa was never humanitarian to begin with, starting with depriving Gaza access to fuel, food and water. The rest is Pallywood.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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