



Israeli Organ Theft

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Sawtuna
Our Voices

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“The same authority withholding Palestinian bodies for years now boasts unprecedented [organ] ‘donation’ figures. Did this generosity appear overnight? Or are there silent bodies excluded from the celebration [of record numbers of organ transplants]? The occupation has stolen organs from the bodies of Palestinian martyrs.”

Dr. Munir Al-Bursh

Director-General of the Palestinian
Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip.¹



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Timeline of Israeli Organ Theft



© Sheba Medical Center

01

Timeline of Israeli Organ Theft

Israeli organ theft is not a new phenomenon, although it has been largely ignored by the international community and media.²

1954

Israel establishes the so-called ‘National Institute of Forensic Medicine’, also known as the ‘Forensic Institute’ and ‘Abu Kabir’ – after the ethnically cleansed Palestinian village where the centre is built – to perform autopsies. The centre performs around 2,000 autopsies per year.³

This is the primary occupation institution that has carried out organ and tissue theft from Palestinian martyrs’ bodies.⁴

1987-1993

During the first Intifada, Israeli institutions “consistently and freely” harvested the organs of Palestinians killed by the IOF.⁵

A Palestinian physician, Dr. Hatem Abu Ghazaleh, testified to a US reporter about Israel’s organ theft in 1990, but this was largely ignored outside Palestine.⁶

1996

Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburgh, the influential leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch sect, endorsed Israeli organ harvesting from non-Jewish bodies.⁷

2001

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, an American anthropologist and the co-founder of Organs Watch, testifies at a US Congressional subcommittee hearing about reports by Palestinian human rights groups that Israeli pathologists were stealing tissue and organs from the bodies of Palestinian martyrs.⁸

2003

An Israeli international organ trafficking network was uncovered by South African police, which had arranged over 100 illegal transplants for Israeli patients.⁹

2005

The Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute from 1988 to 2004, Yehuda Hiss, admits to the theft of organs, bone, and tissue from at least 125 bodies in the 1990s.¹⁰ He is removed from his position, but remained at the Institute on a higher salary as a Senior Pathologist.⁹¹

2009

Donald Boström, a Swedish journalist, published an article identifying the Forensic Institute as a central component of a human organ trafficking ring through which the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) abducted Palestinians to harvest their organs.¹¹

Timeline of Israeli Organ Theft continued...

2010

Yehuda Hiss admits to keeping tissue and organs from the body of murdered American activist Rachel Corrie in 2003.¹²

2013

Scheper-Hughes and Boström publish an article detailing Israel's history of abuse of Palestinian dead bodies, including organ theft, during the period between the First Intifada and Israel's 2012 attack on the besieged Gaza Strip.¹³

2019

The occupation's Supreme Court ruled that the IOF could hold onto the bodies of Palestinian martyrs to use as bargaining chips in exchange deals with the Palestinian resistance.¹⁴

2021

The occupation Knesset passed legislation allowing the IOF and occupation police to retain the corpses of martyred Palestinians.¹⁵

2023

The Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute, Chen Kugel, was one of the primary individuals responsible for the myth of Palestinian resistance fighters "beheading babies" on 7 October – a lie which manufactured consent for Israel's genocide in the besieged Gaza Strip, during which Israel escalated its theft of Palestinian tissue and organs across the occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank.¹⁶

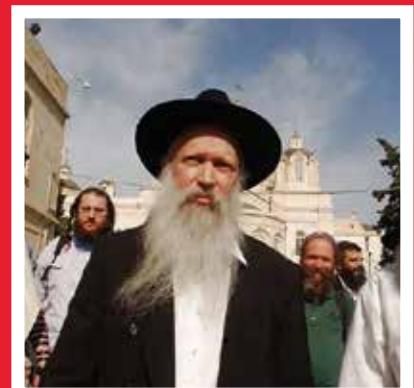
Throughout the genocide, the IOF significantly increases its organ harvesting from Palestinian corpses and prisoners.¹⁷

Every accusation is a confession.

“If a Jew needs a liver, can you take the liver of an innocent non-Jew passing by to save him? The Torah would probably permit that. Jewish life has infinite value. There is something infinitely more holy and unique about Jewish life than non-Jewish life.”

Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburgh

leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch sect in 1996.¹⁸



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Israel's Withholding of Palestinian Bodies



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02

Israel's Withholding of Palestinian Bodies

For decades, the IOF has systematically withheld the bodies of martyred Palestinians killed by the IOF in direct combat or inside Israeli torture chambers.¹⁹

Israel is also withholding the bodies of Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Moroccans, and Iraqis martyred by the IOF.²⁰

Often, when Palestinian bodies are returned by the IOF, they have been withheld for such a long period of time that they have already decomposed to the extent that it is impossible for Palestinians to perform investigations that would determine the extent of organ theft.²¹

The IOF also routinely keeps corpses of Palestinians in subfreezing temperatures—sometimes below 40 degrees celsius—in order to ensure that they remain undisturbed and to likely hide the theft of organs.²²

When these frozen bodies were returned, they are often so solid that it would take days for them to defrost. As medical forensic work cannot be carried out until at least 24 to 48 hours of dethawing, and this is often too long for the families of martyrs to wait for answers, many bodies are unable to be tested.²³

Israel's practice of withholding Palestinian bodies is protected by the occupation's legal system. In 2019, the occupation's Supreme Court ruled that the IOF could hold onto the bodies of Palestinian martyrs to use as bargaining chips in exchange deals with the Palestinian resistance, and in 2021, the Knesset passed legislation allowing the IOF and occupation police to retain the corpses of martyred Palestinians.²⁸

Since the beginning of Israel's genocide in the besieged Gaza Strip, the IOF has escalated this policy to include the withholding of hundreds of Palestinian bodies stolen from hospitals, cemeteries, and other raids across the besieged Gaza Strip.²⁴

Israel is currently withholding the bodies of around 1,700 Palestinian martyrs, of whom only 799 have been identified.²⁵

Amongst the martyrs whose bodies are currently being withheld by the occupation are Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas, Walid Daqqa, a Palestinian writer and revolutionary, and at least 38 children.²⁶

“[The IOF] allowed [the Institute] to harvest organs from Palestinians using a military regulation that an autopsy must be conducted on every killed Palestinian. Autopsies were accompanied with organ harvest. [...] Many of the workers [at the Institute] referred to the First Intifada (1987–1993) as the ‘good days,’ when organ harvesting was conducted consistently and freely compared to other periods.”

Meira Weiss

former employee of the
Forensic Institute, in her book
Over Their Dead Bodies.²⁷



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Historic Israeli Organ Theft



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Historic Israeli Organ Theft

Israeli organ theft from Palestinians has taken place since at least 1969. Israelis themselves are reluctant to donate their organs or skin for religious reasons.²⁹

Israeli organ theft was particularly prolific during the First Intifada from 1987 to 1993.³⁰

During this period, Yehuda Hiss was head of the Forensic Institute, and openly permitted the theft of organs, as he would later state on record.³¹

Despite testimonies from Palestinians about Israeli organ theft since at least 1990, the practice was entirely ignored outside of Palestine for over a decade.³²

In 1999, medical students working under Hiss were allowed to practice on bodies sent to the Forensic Institute for autopsy, and that body parts were transferred for transplant and medical uses without permission from families.³³

In an interview in 2000 with Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Hiss freely admitted to taking skin, bones, cardiac valves, corneas, and other human materials from bodies during autopsies.³⁴

During the interview, Hiss stated:

“the question of harvesting organs – it’s strange. Not only here, in Israel, but elsewhere it all depends on the personal approach of those in charge of pathology or organs harvesting. In my case, when I was a resident in Tel Hashomer – a hospital linked to the [IOF] – we would collaborate with the army and we would provide the army with grafted (harvested) skin for burn victims, and, from time to time, they would ask us for cornea. So, I would be involved in it because I was in charge, with two others, and we would provide this. [...] We did everything off the record, highly informal. We never asked for the families’ permission. [...]

We were free to take skin from the back of legs. We took cornea. [...] In the beginning of the 1990s, we began to take some long bones from the legs. Then we were asked for cardiac valves, and we did a few of them. [...]

*Then, beginning in 1995, we started to do it more formally. It was done according to a certain list of priorities, established by various medical centres and specific departments.”*³⁵

Historic Israeli Organ Theft continued...

In 2002, it was reported by the Israel National News that,

“Over the past years, heads of the Institute appear to have given thousands of organs for research without permission, while maintaining a ‘storehouse’ of organs at Abu Kabir.”³⁶

In 2005, Hiss was removed from his position as Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute due to a second investigation for organ theft, for which he admitted guilt, and given a new role as Senior Pathologist, with a higher salary than before.³⁷

According to Hiss’ successor as Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute, Chen Kugel, Israeli surgeons worked to hide the evidence of this organ theft from the families of the deceased,

“by putting pipes and glass eyes, and broom sticks, and toilet paper and plastic skull caps to cover the place where the brain was removed, and so on.”³⁸

Kugel stated that the easiest victims for organ theft were Palestinians, because

“if there were any complaints coming from their families, they were the enemy and so, of course, they were lying and no one would believe them”.³⁹

Another employee of the Institute, Meira Weiss, also confirmed the Forensic Institute’s practices in an interview:

“During my time at the institute, I saw how they were taking organs from the body of a Palestinian, but not from the [IOF] soldiers. They were taking corneas, skin, and heart valves, [but] non-professionals would not notice the theft of these organs, as they would put something plastic in place of the corneas and take the skin from the back so that the family would not see it.”⁴⁰

In 2010, it was revealed that Hiss had kept tissues and organs from the body of American activist Rachel Corrie, who had been crushed to death by an IOF bulldozer in 2003, for examination and testing without informing her family.⁴¹

In 2015, the Palestinian Representative to the United Nations, Dr Riyad Mansour, testified to the Secretary General that Israel had stolen corneas and organs from Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem.⁴²

“We started to harvest corneas ... whatever was done was highly informal. No permission was asked from the family. [...] The symbolism, you know, of taking skin of the population considered to be the enemy, [is] something, just in terms of its symbolic weight, that has to be reconsidered.”

Yehuda Hiss

former Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute.⁴³



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Israel’s “Cemeteries of Numbers”



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04

Israel's "Cemeteries of Numbers"

Since the late 1960s, Israel began establishing mass graves known as "Cemeteries of Numbers" to bury the corpses of Palestinian martyrs, inside closed military zones that are legally and physically inaccessible to Palestinians.⁴⁴

The bodies are dumped in graves without headstones and names, only concrete blocks, sticks, or small metal plates with identification numbers, akin to the identification numbers used by the Nazis to demarcate Jews during the Holocaust.⁴⁵ Some are buried without any documentation or identification at all, in order to prevent later identification by Palestinian families.⁴⁶

Additionally, the IOF often wrote identification numbers with felt-tipped marker pens on plastic bags used to cover their bodies, which quickly rubbed away from the soil underground. Moreover, the metal plates used to identify graves are often not installed properly, and are easily dislodged by the weather.⁴⁷

One of the largest of these cemeteries is known as Jisr Adam Cemetery, also called the 'Cemetery for Enemy Casualties' in Hebrew, and is located in a military zone in the occupied Jordan valley, near to the border with Jordan.⁴⁸

As of 2013, Israel maintains at least five other 'cemeteries of numbers', including Amiad Cemetery close to Safed.⁴⁹

Some of Israel's cemeteries of numbers have also closed, such as Jisr Banat Yaqub Cemetery close to the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, which held the remains of 243 fighters from Syria and Lebanon until it was closed in 2001, when the bodies were moved to Amiad Cemetery.⁵⁰ Here, the bodies were buried directly in the ground without any material to protect them from water damage, meaning that rainwater entered the graves and bones of the martyrs.⁵¹

For example, the corpse of Palestinian fighter Dalal Mughrabi, who was martyred in 1978, was unable to be returned during a body exchange deal in 2008 because it had allegedly been swept out of the cemetery by a mudslide and was not able to be found.⁵²

“[Organs were] taken from ... Muslims, ... from stone throwers, from terrorists. [...] If there were any complaints coming from [Palestinian] families, they were the enemy and so, of course, they were lying and no one would believe them.”

Chen Kugel

Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute.⁵³



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Israeli Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism



Israeli Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism

Israel is the leader of the international organ trafficking market, and Israeli organ trafficking is not limited to occupied Palestine, but in fact extends across all continents.⁵⁴

The international Israeli organ trafficking network, known as “transplant tourism”, matches Israeli and Jewish patients with organs, often trafficked from poor and vulnerable communities worldwide.⁵⁵

The Israeli organ trafficking network reached its peak from 1997 to 2007, and has supplied thousands of Israeli and Jewish patients with the “fresh” organs and transplants they needed.⁵⁶

According to former Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute, Yehuda Hiss, Israeli transplant surgeons would travel abroad

“once a month for a few days and would perform five or six surgeries [for Israeli patents] there, and the patient would come back here to recuperate.”⁵⁷

These transplants for Israeli and Jewish patients would sometimes take place abroad, where there were cheaper or more readily accessible organs. Hiss stated,

*“sometimes our surgeons would accompany our Israeli patients to Russia, and they would perform the surgery there and the kidney was from a Russian. The surgery would be performed by Israeli doctors in Russia, with Russian kidneys. Some are leading transplant surgeons from Israel”.*⁵⁸

The current Chief Pathologist the Forensic Institute, Chen Kugel, has openly admitted that the Forensic Institute participated in organ trafficking for profit, and stated that the total cost to clients for all the organs from a body was just £2,500.⁶⁸

Kugel stated that while skin, heart valves, bones, and corneas were removed and used for transplants, solid organs – hearts, brains, livers –

“were sold for research, for presentations, for drills for medical students and surgeons.”⁶⁹

One of the main known organ traffickers, Israeli crime boss Ilan Peri, established organ trafficking and transplant deals, outlets, and connections across Türkiye, Moldova, the Ukraine, Brazil, Germany, South Africa, the Philippines, China, Kosovo, Azerbaijan, Columbia, and the United States.⁵⁹ As of 2010, Peri was still organising “transplant tours”.⁶⁰

Until 2007, the Israeli Ministry of Health had permitted Israeli medical insurance to reimburse living organ donors with transplants abroad, many of them trafficked from countries in the former Soviet Union.⁶¹

Israeli Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism continued...

Notable instances of Israeli organ trafficking and transplant tourism include:

2001

A *BBC* report finds that Israelis buy more kidneys per capita than any other country – while having the lowest donation rates in the world.⁹⁵ According to the report:

“Hundreds of Israelis have created a production line that starts in the villages of Moldova, where men today are walking around with one kidney.”⁹⁶

2003

In Brazil, two Israelis were arrested for their role in an international organ trafficking network stretching from South America to South Africa, while two other Israelis participating in the network were arrested in South Africa.⁹⁷

2007

An Israeli kidney transplant surgeon, Zaki Shapira, working as part of an organ trafficking network run by Peri, was arrested in Türkiye – alongside Turkish doctors and hospital staff – while attempting to traffic kidneys from two Palestinians to transplant into an Israeli and a South African.⁶²

Shapira had been harvesting the organs of Palestinians since at least the early 1990s, and used the kidneys of Palestinian workers for Israeli transplant patients in Tel Aviv. He disgustingly stated in 1996 that Palestinians were “pre-disposed” to sacrificing their organs.⁶³

Also in 2007, Israelis were reported to be persuading Palestinians with developmental disabilities or untreated psychiatric conditions to sell their kidneys, suggesting that marginalised and mentally challenged Palestinians were specifically being targeted by Israelis for organ theft.⁶⁴

2009

Rabbi Levy Izhak Rosenbaum, another associate of Peri, was arrested by the FBI in New York for running an organ trafficking ring for at least three years, spanning various organs, multiple countries, and multiple American doctors working in American hospitals who performed the surgeries.⁶⁵

2009-2012

Three Israeli kidney traffickers ran transplant tourism pipelines in Costa Rica and Sri Lanka, mostly catering to Israeli transplant patients.⁹² Many of the kidney donors were unemployed or poor men from Costa Rica.⁹³

2014

The New York Times finds that Israelis have a “disproportionate role” in world organ trafficking.⁹⁴

2015

A report by the European Parliament found that Israeli physicians and patients were central to the international organ trafficking trade in Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Kosovo, the US, Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, and Colombia.⁸⁸

2015

An Israeli ringleader of another organ trafficking network operating in Kosovo, Moshe Harel, was arrested in Cyprus.⁶⁶ He lured vulnerable individuals from eastern Europe, Türkiye, and the former Soviet Union, to donate their kidneys, and transplanted them into Israeli patients. The donors were then left without proper medical care and treated “like waste”.⁶⁶

Israeli Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism continued...

2019

An Israeli doctor, Abilay Donbay, was arrested in Kazakhstan for organ trafficking, which targeted individuals from the poorest and most marginalised communities across Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.⁶⁷

2025

An Israeli agency called ‘MedLead’, run by Robert Shpolanski – who was indicted in 2016 in Israel for performing “a large number of illegal kidney transplants” in Sri Lanka, Türkiye, the Philippines, and Thailand – was found to be operating an organ trafficking and illegal transplant network in Kenya.⁸⁹ Many transplant clients were also Israeli. The organ donors were largely from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan.⁹⁰

“Organs were sold to anyone; anyone that wanted organs just had to pay for them.”

Chen Kugel

Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute.⁷⁰



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Israeli Organ Theft During the Genocide



© Fatima Shbair, AP

06

Israeli Organ Theft During the Genocide

Since Israel escalated its genocide in the besieged Gaza Strip from October 2023 onwards, the IOF has escalated organ theft from Palestinians martyred by the occupation and held hostage in Israeli torture chambers.⁷¹

November 2023

The IOF stole over 110 bodies from al-Shifa Hospital and a cemetery next to the Hospital's emergency department.⁷²

Medical professionals in the besieged Gaza Strip found evidence of Israeli organ theft in corpses released by the IOF to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), including missing cochleas, corneas, livers, kidneys, and hearts.⁷³

January 2024

Medical professionals in the besieged Gaza Strip again testified that the IOF had stolen organs from the bodies of Palestinian martyrs that were dumped at the Kerem Shalom Crossing after being stolen by the IOF during various raids across different areas of the Gaza Strip.⁷⁴

April 2024

Paramedics who recovered the corpses of Palestinians buried by the IOF in mass graves in the Nasser Medical Complex in Khan Younis reported evidence of organ theft.⁷⁵ The bodies were found with their abdomens cut and stitched in a different manner to wound closure techniques performed in the besieged Gaza Strip when treating injuries.⁷⁶

August 2024

Medical professionals in the besieged Gaza Strip again found that the IOF had stolen the organs and skin from the bodies of many of the 89 Palestinian corpses returned to the besieged Gaza Strip on 5 August.⁷⁷

October 2025

Ismail al-Thawabta, Director of the Government Media Office in the besieged Gaza Strip, testified that many of the 120 corpses returned to the ICRC by the IOF over the previous three days had had their organs stolen, including eyes and corneas.⁷⁸

“The occupation handed over 120 corpses through the International Committee of the Red Cross over the past three days. Most arrived in deplorable condition, showing evidence of field executions and systematic torture [...]

[Some were] blindfolded and bound by hands and feet, while others displayed signs of strangulation and rope marks around their necks, indicating deliberate killing.

Parts of many corpses were missing, including eyes, corneas, and other organs. [...] [The Occupation] stole human organs while holding the bodies.”

Ismail Thawabta

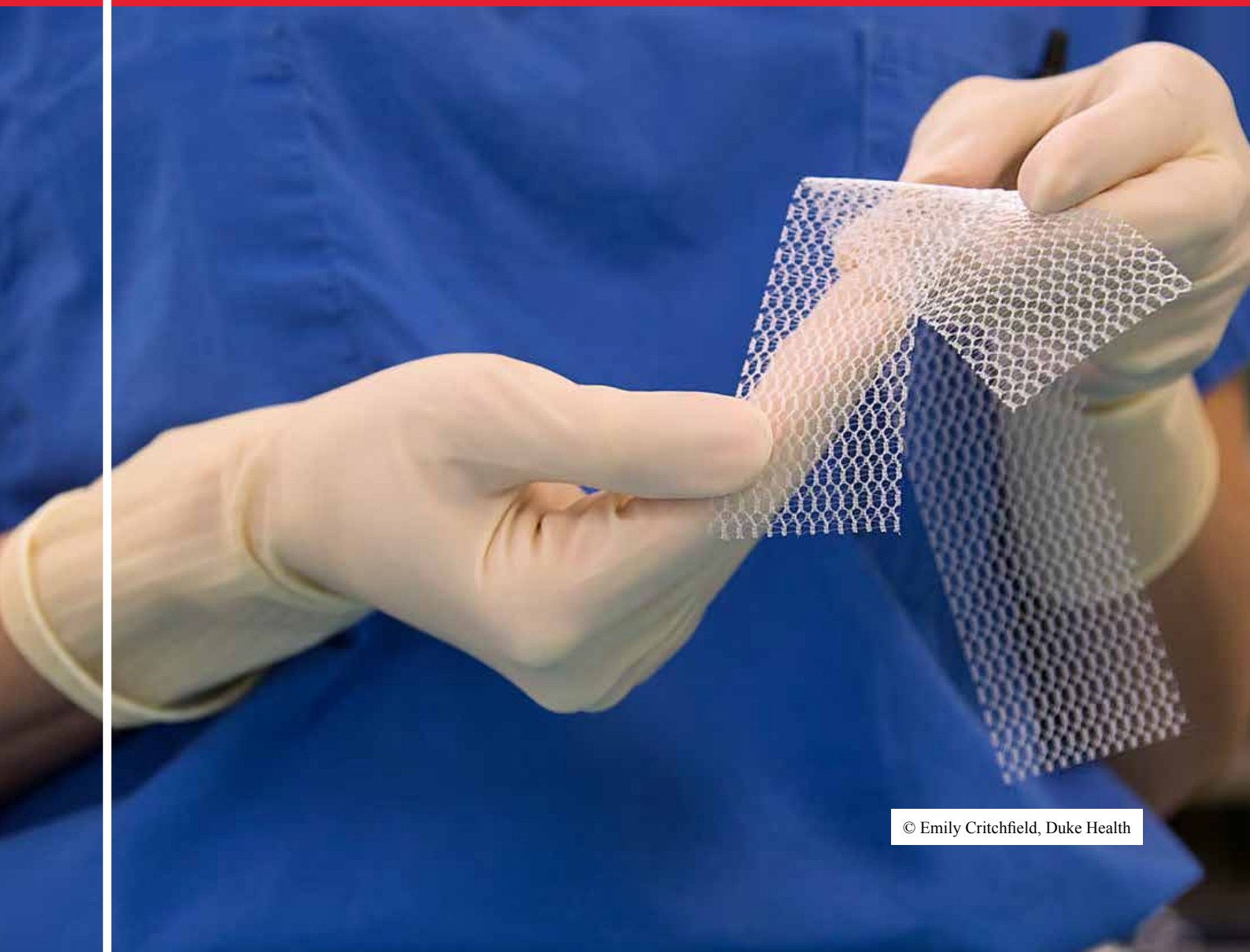
Director of the Government Media Office in the besieged Gaza Strip.⁷⁹



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Israeli Skin Theft



07

Israeli Skin Theft

Israel is also the leading country for skin theft and trafficking in the world.⁸⁰

In a 2000 interview, Yehuda Hiss, then Chief Pathologist of the Forensic Institute, explained how the institute steals and harvests skin for the IOF:

“In Israel, 100 per cent of the skin harvested goes to Hadassah Hospital’s skin bank – it is for military purposes only – no biotech firms have access. There is another skin bank in the south of the country, to which the Institute is not linked – but I know that if something happens – if one of the burn centres need skin for a private patient, say, they can take skin from the Hadassah skin bank, but they have to repay it.”⁸¹

He elaborated,

“Since six months ago, we have a new man working with us downstairs, who is a kind of mortuary assistant, and he is harvesting skin, bones, cornea, and bones. Before him, there was only an arrangement with the army – they used to send us here every week a plastic surgeon, who would come here to harvest skin for the skin bank in Hadassah. This lasted for many years. More than 12 or 13 years he did this. Since 1987-1988, every other week, a plastic surgeon would come here to harvest skin.”⁸²

In 2009, Israel announced that it maintains the largest human skin bank in the world.⁸³

In 2014, the director of the Israeli Skin Bank announced that the bank’s skin reserves amount to around 170 square metres.⁸⁴



It should be noted that the Israeli population largely refuses to donate organs, including skin, due to their religious beliefs, meaning that such high reserves can only come from Palestinian bodies.⁸⁵

“The bodies show clearly surgically removed lungs, heart, kidneys and liver – done in a professional, surgical way, using sharp bone saws, causing zero damage to surrounding tissues.

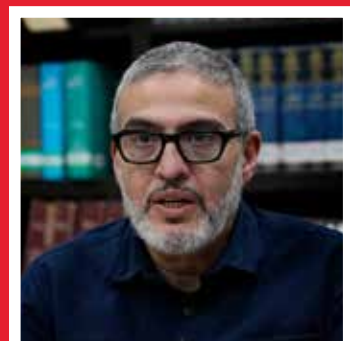
The first observation is that, in all the bodies that organs were harvested or removed are those that are now routinely transplanted: the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and corneas. The method of extraction - the rib cage and ribs were clipped with a sharp saw - a medical saw, a bone saw - and the sternum, along with the central part of the ribs, was lifted to allow for the removal of the heart and lungs without damage to the organs being taken.

The essential point is there was no damage to the remaining organs, meaning the extraction was carried out surgically by an experienced surgeon.

All of these bodies belonged to Palestinians whose families said they had been imprisoned alive. So, all of this is highly indicative of organ harvesting.”

Dr Ghassan Abu-Sittah

Palestinian-British reconstructive surgeon who served as a volunteer doctor in the besieged Gaza Strip during the genocide, on his professional opinion on images of mutilated Palestinian corpses.⁸⁶



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Western Media Bias

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THE  TIMES

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Israel attacks Glasgow University rector's 'grotesque lie' over Gaza bodies

Dr Ghassan Abu-Sittah, a surgeon who specialises in conflict injuries, claimed organs had been removed from dead Palestinians

08

Western Media Bias

Undermining clear evidence of Israeli organ theft

Despite clear evidence of Israeli organ theft, Western media outlets have used reductionist language that minimises Israeli organ theft to merely accusations, rows, lies, or an issue of permission.

 **NBC NEWS**

Israel Blasts Palestinians After Accusations of Organ-Harvesting

THE  **TIMES**

Israel attacks Glasgow University rector's 'grotesque lie' over Gaza bodies

The New York Times

A Clash of Religion and Bioethics Complicates Organ Donation in Israel

Western Media Bias continued...

BBC NEWS

Israel organs claim row deepens

CNN World

**Paper's organ harvesting article
causes Israel-Sweden rift**

HUFFPOST

**Guardian: Our Israeli organ harvesting
headline was serious error**

“For Palestinians, there is no humanity in life nor in death. Until you see the body of your loved one, until they are able to be washed and treated in compliance with religious and ethical norms, until those rituals of death are performed — the ache of yearning remains.

These rituals are often not afforded to Palestinians. It is one thing to grieve and process the trauma of murder by military might. It is another thing entirely not to be able to even do that because of the absence of a body, or the presence of an incomplete body. We are left with the collateral of occupation to delay our grief and our humanity in hopes that one day both will be afforded to us.”

Aminah Mohammed

whose family has not received the bodies of her uncle and grandfather, which are being withheld by the Israeli occupation.⁸⁷



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