

Starvation as a Weapon of War in Gaza

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Introduction

Gaza is facing a genocidal war characterised by deliberate and intentional targeting of civilians combined with widespread hunger and deprivation. Nearly the entire population of 2.2 million has been plunged into acute food insecurity as a result of conflict and blockade. By late 2024, 100% of Gaza's residents were classified in "Emergency" (IPC Phase 4) food insecurity, with about 1.84 million people in Crisis or worse (IPC Phase 3+), including 133,000 in Catastrophe/Famine (IPC Phase 5) (WHO EMRO, 2025). Households are enduring extreme food shortages, exhaustion, and acute malnutrition rates have skyrocketed to ten times pre-war levels (WHO EMRO, 2025). Traditional safety nets have collapsed: small-scale farming and fishing – once vital sources of food – are largely crippled by access restrictions, with one-third of farmland declared a no-go zone and repeated military actions (like herbicide spraying near Gaza's perimeter) destroying crops (WHO EMRO, 2025).

As of mid-2025, over two-thirds of Palestinians in Gaza suffer significant food insecurity (WHO EMRO, 2025). Children – who form over half of Gaza's population – are especially vulnerable: chronic under-nutrition has led to stunted growth in around 20% of children under two even before the latest war (WHO EMRO, 2025). Since October 2023, conditions have sharply worsened. UN agencies report malnutrition-related deaths escalating – by August 2025, at least 269 people (including 112 children) had died from malnutrition or hunger-related conditions, with the majority of those deaths occurring in just the

prior several weeks (UNOCHA, 2025). Hospitals, already overwhelmed by war injuries, struggle to treat severe acute malnutrition amid critical shortages of therapeutic food and medical supplies (OCHA, 2025). The entire population is now aid-dependent for basic sustenance, yet relief convoys meet only a fraction of needs. For example, in summer 2025, humanitarian deliveries averaged only ~18,000 tons of food per month, far below the 62,000 tons needed to cover basic requirements (UNOCHA, 2025). Even with the World Food Programme pre-positioning supplies in the region, access constraints mean Gaza receives only a trickle of the aid required. Consequently, diets are extremely unbalanced and inadequate, heightening the risk of disease on top of starvation (UNOCHA, 2025).

Compounding the crisis, mass displacement and infrastructure destruction have left basic services in ruins. By mid-2025, roughly 90% of Gaza's population had been displaced at least once, often sheltering in overcrowded camps with little food or clean water (UNOCHA, 2025a). The lack of electricity, fuel, and safe water (all restricted under the blockade) further aggravates food insecurity and health risks. In short, Gaza's humanitarian emergency has reached a scale and severity that seasoned observers describe as "catastrophic starvation", with some aid agencies warning that hunger-related deaths could soon outnumber deaths from direct military violence (WHO EMRO, 2025). This dire situation provides the backdrop for examining how starvation and resource deprivation have been systematically employed as weapons of war in Gaza.

The IPC Food Security Scale



Source: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). <https://www.ipcinfo.org>

Phase 1 None/Minimal
Households are able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in atypical and unsustainable strategies to access food and income.

Phase 2 Stressed
Households have minimally adequate food consumption but are unable to afford some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in stress-coping strategies.

Phase 3 Crisis
Households either:
• Have food consumption gaps that are reflected by high or above-usual acute malnutrition; or
• Are marginally able to meet minimum food needs but only by depleting essential livelihood assets or through crisis-coping strategies.

Phase 4 Emergency
Households either:
• Have large food consumption gaps which are reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality; or
• Are able to mitigate large food consumption gaps but only by employing emergency livelihood strategies and asset liquidation.

Phase 5 Catastrophe/Famine
Households have an extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs even after full employment of coping strategies. Starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels are evident.
(For Famine Classification, an area needs to have extreme critical levels of acute malnutrition and mortality.)

International Legal Framework on Starvation Tactics

International law unequivocally prohibits the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare. This norm is codified in multiple instruments and recognised as customary humanitarian law. Article 54 of Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Geneva Conventions explicitly states that “*Starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited*” and forbids attacking or destroying objects indispensable to survival (such as food stocks, agriculture, or water infrastructure).

Likewise, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines the “intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare” as a war crime (Dannenbaum, 2022). In particular, Article 8(2) (b)(xxv) of the Rome Statute criminalises depriving civilians of objects indispensable for survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies (Dannenbaum, 2022). (Originally applicable to international armed conflicts, this prohibition was extended to non-international conflicts by unanimous amendment in 2019, reflecting the global consensus that starvation tactics are never permissible in war (Dannenbaum, 2022))

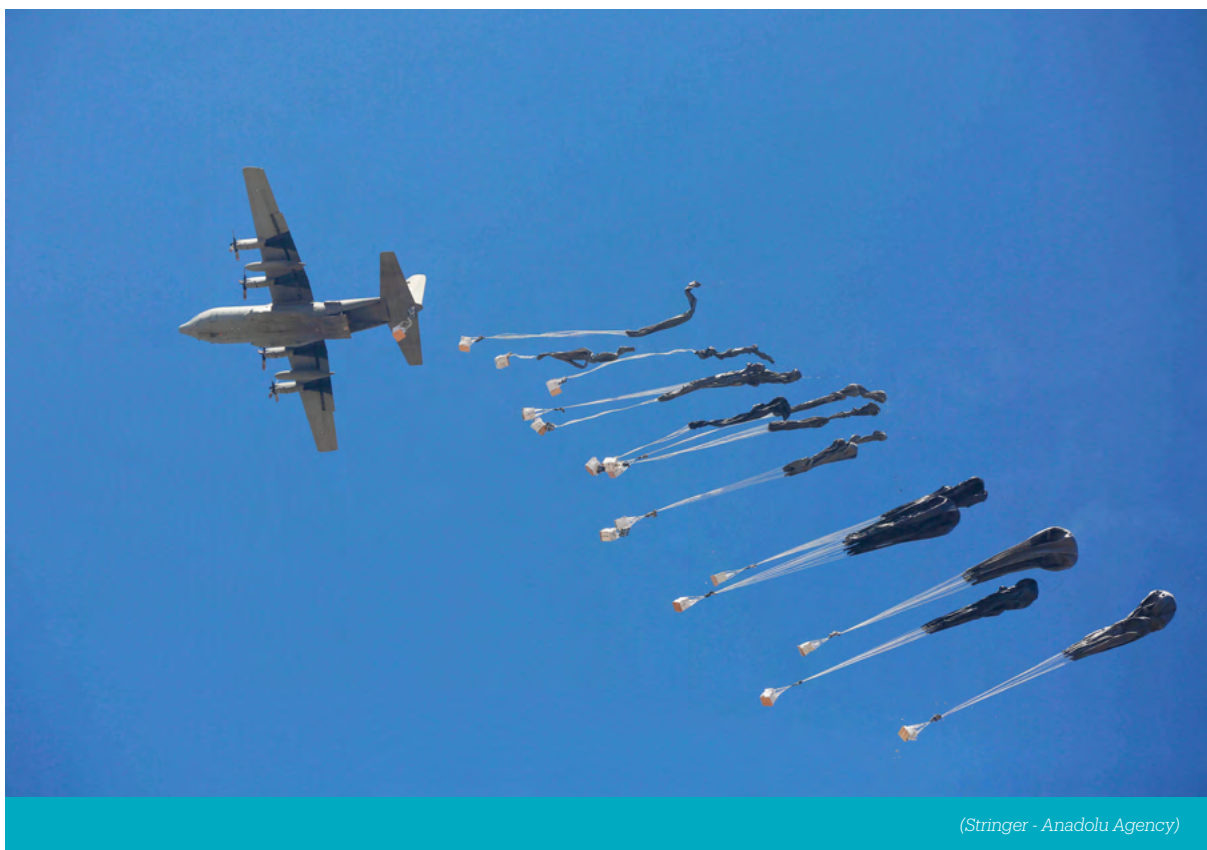
In addition, the UN Security Council, in Resolution 2417 (2018), strongly condemned the use of starvation of civilians as a weapon of war, underscoring that such acts violate international humanitarian law and “may constitute a war crime” (Global Rights Compliance, 2022). UNSC 2417 links conflict-induced food insecurity to internation-

al peace and security, and it calls on all parties to armed conflicts to comply with their obligations to spare civilians and allow unimpeded humanitarian access (Global Rights Compliance, 2022). This resolution also created an early-warning mechanism – the UN Secretary-General is tasked to alert the Council when the risk of conflict-driven famine and starvation arises. It was a landmark in norm-setting, signalling that the world is watching such abuses. Furthermore, customary law (as noted by the ICRC and others) reinforces that starvation tactics and attacks on objects indispensable to survival are prohibited in all conflicts. The prohibition is also tied to potential charges of crimes against humanity or even genocide if starvation is implemented with the intent to destroy a population “in whole or in part”. For instance, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about a group’s physical destruction (which includes withholding food and medicine) is listed as an act of genocide under Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention.

In summary, the international legal framework – from the Geneva Conventions to the ICC Statute and UNSC resolutions – bans starvation of civilians and related deprivations, calling them out as serious violations. In the context of Gaza, these laws provide a clear yardstick against which to measure the conduct of warring parties and occupying powers.



(Abdalkhem Abu Riash - Anadolu Agency)



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Hunger as a Weapon: Mechanisms in the Case of Gaza

In Gaza, starvation and resource deprivation have not been unfortunate by-products of war – they have been deployed as deliberate instruments of policy and military strategy. Several interlocking mechanisms illustrate how hunger has been weaponised in this context.

Blockade and Closure

Since 2007, Israel has imposed a comprehensive land, sea, and air blockade on Gaza, drastically restricting the movement of people and goods. This blockade – described by human rights experts as a form of collective punishment (WHO EMRO, 2025) – gives the controlling power near-total say over Gaza’s “food basket.” Israeli authorities have tightly rationed imports of food, fuel, and other essentials, at times using secret directives to cap supplies. Notably, a court-disclosed document revealed that Israeli officials calculated the minimum calories per person to avoid malnutrition and then used that to limit the number of truckloads of food allowed into Gaza (WHO EMRO, 2025). Such micromanagement of calories effectively “puts Gaza on a diet,” in the words of one Israeli advisor (Guardian, 2006),

demonstrating an intent to weaponise basic necessities by keeping the population at the threshold of humanitarian catastrophe. The blockade’s impact has been devastating by 2018, over 80% of Gaza’s people depended on humanitarian aid for food (WHO EMRO, 2025), and today virtually the entire population does. Even during lulls in fighting, the blockade has stunted the economy and kept food insecurity high; during active conflict, it becomes a chokehold that can be tightened at will (as seen with repeated “complete siege” orders halting all supplies).

Destruction of Agricultural Infrastructure

Repeated military operations have systematically targeted Gaza’s capacity to produce or obtain food. A UN fact-finding mission after Operation *Cast Lead* (2008–2009) concluded that Israel pursued a “deliberate and systemic policy” of targeting food production in Gaza (WHO EMRO, 2025). The assault devastated almost all of Gaza’s 10,000 family farms, obliterated half a million fruit trees, killed tens of thousands of livestock animals, and destroyed over one

million chickens and other poultry (WHO EMRO, 2025). Subsequent wars (2012, 2014, 2021, and beyond) saw similar destruction: orchards, fishing boats, water wells, and food warehouses hit by airstrikes or artillery. Israel has also long enforced buffer zones that commandeer prime agricultural land (making farming perilous or impossible in those areas) and a strictly patrolled coastal limit that cripples the fishing industry. Under the blockade, farmers cannot freely import fertiliser, seeds, or equipment, nor export their produce. In some documented instances, Israeli forces sprayed herbicides along the Gaza fence to kill vegetation, damaging Palestinian crops deep inside Gaza (WHO EMRO, 2025). The cumulative effect over the years is the dismantling of Gaza's food production capacity, forcing dependence on external aid that is then tightly controlled.

Control and Militarisation of Aid Distribution

In the ongoing conflict, even lifesaving humanitarian aid has been used as a tool of coercion and control. Israeli authorities have repeatedly obstructed or delayed international relief efforts – for example, by banning fuel or certain food items, and by requiring onerous security checks and approvals. Since May 2025, Israel has imposed a “militarised” aid distribution scheme whereby Palestinians in Gaza must retrieve food and water from a few designated distribution points under Israeli military oversight (Amnesty International, 2025). This scheme not only limits and funnels aid to selected areas; it has also had deadly consequences. Desperate civilians trekking to aid convoys or crowding at distribution sites have come under fire. Between late May and mid-August 2025, at least 1,889 Palestinians – mostly young men and boys – were killed while

seeking food, including over 1,000 shot dead near the militarised distribution centres and hundreds more attacked along supply routes (UNOCHA, 2025). According to the UN, there is no indication these civilians were engaged in hostilities – they were killed simply trying to obtain bread or basic goods (UNOCHA, 2025). Amnesty International's investigations likewise describe how Israel's policies have “turned aid-seeking into a booby trap for desperate, starved Palestinians,” as troops deliberately target people collecting food and as the limited aid delivered is “way below” what the population needs (Amnesty International, 2025). Controlling the distribution of scarce aid allows the occupying power to wield hunger as leverage – effectively forcing civilians to choose between starvation and risking their lives to retrieve supplies.

Together, these tactics amount to a comprehensive strategy of using hunger as a means of subjugation. Gaza's people have been systematically deprived of resources essential for survival – food, clean water, medicine, fuel – through both active measures (bombing farms, blocking supplies) and passive ones (inaction on obligations to ensure the welfare of the occupied population). The intent, as observed by the current UN Special Rapporteur on Palestine, appears aimed at destroying Gaza's social fabric and resistance through exhaustion and malnutrition (WHO EMRO, 2025). Indeed, in October 2024, the Special Rapporteur reported that attacks on Gaza's food system indicate an intent to starve the population, acts she characterised as potentially genocidal (WHO EMRO, 2025). This grim assessment underscores that Gaza exemplifies how starvation is employed as a weapon in modern conflict – not a side-effect, but a deliberate *modus operandi*.

The Gaza Development Foundation (GDF) and the Militarisation of Humanitarian Aid

Establishment and Purpose

The Gaza Development Foundation (GDF) was launched in early 2025 by Israel with U.S. support, officially presented as an “independent humanitarian initiative.” Its declared purpose was to bypass traditional UN-led mechanisms and deliver food directly to civilians in Gaza, on the

grounds that Hamas was allegedly diverting aid flows. GDF announced that it would establish “secure distribution centres” in southern Gaza to initially feed 1.2 million people, with the stated goal of eventually reaching the entire population. These centres were designed in coordination with the Israeli military, with security provided by private contractors.

Criticism and Concerns

From the outset, GDF faced sharp criticism from humanitarian actors. UN agencies and international NGOs argued that it undermined existing humanitarian coordination systems, politicised relief, and lacked the operational capacity to address Gaza's massive needs. Former GDF executives themselves admitted that the initiative could not comply with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Aid organisations further warned that GDF was effectively dependent on Israeli authorities: its convoys were routed exclusively through Israeli-controlled crossings, while Palestinian institutions were excluded entirely from its governance and operations. Funding flows were opaque, with estimates of monthly operating costs exceeding \$140 million and allegations that much of this was underwritten by Israel, raising serious concerns about transparency and independence.

Restrictions and Militarisation of Aid: With GDF's rollout, humanitarian access in Gaza became increasingly restricted and politicised. Israel shut down hundreds of pre-existing aid distribution points across the Strip and replaced them with just a handful of militarised GDF centres in the south. This forced over two million civilians to trek long distances, often through conflict zones, to reach food distributions. At these sites, desperate crowds were funnelled into fenced enclosures under the watch of armed Israeli forces and private contractors. Documented incidents show that distribution regularly devolved into deadly chaos: civilians were fired upon, leading to hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries, including women and children. International NGOs have described the system as a "death trap" that leaves civilians with the impossible choice of starvation or risking being shot while trying to access food.

A Compromised Initiative with Military Objectives

Though presented as a humanitarian initiative, GDF operates under close coordination with the Israeli government and military. Its distribution centres are fortified and militarised, while the absence of any Palestinian involvement underscores its lack of neutrality. Observers have emphasised that GDF functions less as an independent humanitarian actor and more as an extension of Israeli policy in Gaza, effectively weaponising aid distribution.

International Reactions

The UN, humanitarian NGOs, and rights organisations have condemned GDF as a violation of humanitarian principles. UN experts called for its dissolution, describing it as a "so-called humanitarian mechanism" that actually entrenches the siege. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, Oxfam, MSF, and dozens of other organisations have denounced GDF as an attempt to use hunger as leverage in warfare. In July 2025, over 170 NGOs issued a joint statement urging the immediate suspension of GDF operations and a return to UN-led aid coordination. The International Committee of the Red Cross likewise refused to participate, citing violations of neutrality and independence.

The case of GDF demonstrates how humanitarian aid can be instrumentalised as a weapon of war. Instead of alleviating suffering, the foundation has been widely criticised for reinforcing siege conditions, restricting access, and exposing civilians to lethal risks. GDF thus exemplifies how starvation and deprivation can be institutionalised under the guise of aid delivery.



(Abdalkhem Abu Riash - Anadolu Agency)

Accountability Gap and Enforcement Challenges

Despite the clear legal prohibitions, holding perpetrators of starvation crimes accountable has proven exceedingly difficult. The case of Gaza highlights a serious gap between international law on paper and enforcement in practice. Multiple factors contribute to this accountability deficit.

Political Shielding and Lack of Jurisdiction

Israel is not a state party to the ICC, and while the ICC's Palestine investigation (opened in 2021) could, in theory, encompass war crimes in Gaza, there have been no charges to date specific to starvation or blockade tactics. Any attempt to prosecute Israeli officials for starvation-as-war-crime faces formidable political obstacles – including likely non-cooperation by Israel and diplomatic shielding by powerful allies in the UN Security Council. Thus, the ICC's legal framework exists, but activating it is a steep uphill battle. No individual perpetrators have yet been held to account for the deliberate deprivation policies in Gaza, emboldening their continuation.

Defiance of International Court Orders

Despite strong warnings from international courts and bodies, enforcement remains lacking. In January 2024, the International Court of Justice issued binding provisional measures ordering Israel to allow unhindered humanitarian relief into Gaza (WHO EMRO, 2025). Israeli authorities have brazenly defied these orders, continuing to block food, medicine, and fuel and even targeting aid convoys (WHO EMRO, 2025). UN Security Council resolutions – including 2417 – are similarly flouted without consequence, as divisions among major powers stymie effective Council action. The lack of a unified international response means there is little deterrent against using starvation tactics.

Evidentiary and Attribution Challenges

While the effects (mass hunger, malnutrition, death) are plainly documented, attributing criminal intent – required for a war crime conviction – can be challenging. States using starvation as a weapon often cloak it in security rationales (e.g. “siege necessary to isolate terrorists”). Proving *beyond a reasonable doubt* that officials intended to starve

civilians can require internal documents or statements. In Gaza's case, ample evidence of intentionality exists (the calorie calculations, explicit statements about “dieting” Gaza, etc.), but much of it is classified or denied. This, combined with limited access for investigators in an active conflict zone, complicates building legal cases.

Global Precedent of Impunity

Historically, starvation as a war tactic has rarely been prosecuted, leading to a culture of impunity. From Yemen to Syria, perpetrators of siege-starvation have mostly avoided legal consequences. This enforcement vacuum undermines the credibility of international law and fails to deter future violations. In Gaza, humanitarian and human rights organisations have raised the alarm – Amnesty International has explicitly accused Israel of committing the crime of starvation and even genocide against Palestinians in Gaza (Amnesty International, 2025) – yet these findings have not translated into formal sanctions or prosecutions. The UN's monitoring and naming-and-shaming mechanisms (e.g. reports by the Secretary-General or Special Rapporteurs) have not been matched by concrete punitive measures.

The result is an accountability gap: those employing starvation as a weapon operate with near impunity, and victims have no clear path to justice. This gap not only denies redress to Gazans but also weakens the deterrence value of international law globally. As starvation tactics resurge in conflicts worldwide (Dannenbaum, 2022), closing this enforcement gap is an urgent challenge for the international community.



(Abdalkem Abu Riash - Anadolu Agency)

Conclusion: Starvation as a Weapon of War in Gaza

The systematic weaponisation of starvation in Gaza is not a tragic byproduct of war but a deliberate strategy engineered to break a population's will to exist. Through the blockade's calibrated deprivation, the destruction of agricultural self-sufficiency, and the militarised control of humanitarian aid—epitomised by the compromised Gaza Development Foundation—Israel has transformed food, water, and medicine into instruments of coercion and collective punishment. This policy, executed with precise intent, has precipitated a man-made famine in one of the most densely populated territories on earth, where children now die of malnutrition and families forage for scraps amid rubble.

International law unequivocally prohibits starvation as a method of warfare, yet the enforcement gap remains stark. The International Court of Justice's provisional measures have been ignored; UN Security Council resolutions are undermined by geopolitical paralysis; and the ICC's potential investigations collide with political shielding. This impunity perpetuates a global precedent: starvation crimes may be condemned on paper, but perpetrators face no consequences.

Gaza's agony exposes deeper truths about the architecture of international order—where power trumps justice, and where human rights frameworks crumble before strategic interests. It also underscores the urgent need for:

- 1. Legal Accountability:** Strengthening mechanisms to prosecute starvation crimes, from universal jurisdiction claims to ICC action.
- 2. Humanitarian Reform:** Demilitarising aid and centring neutral, UN-led distribution to prevent the instrumentalisation of survival.
- 3. Political Courage:** Challenging the diplomatic protection afforded to violators and amplifying grassroots and judicial pressure.

Above all, Gaza reminds us that starvation is not a natural disaster but a political choice. As Palestinians resist annihilation through *sumoud* (steadfastness), their struggle becomes a demand for a world where humanity is not conditional on geopolitics. The question is no longer whether the law prohibits starvation, but whether the international community has the will to enforce it—or will continue to watch in silence as a people are erased, meal by withheld meal.

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