



**Starvation as a Weapon:**  
**Famine in Gaza Between International Law and**  
**Humanitarian Catastrophe**

**June 2025**

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# Starvation as a Weapon: Famine in Gaza Between International Law and Humanitarian Catastrophe

## Introduction

Since March 2, 2025, Israeli occupation authorities have intensified the comprehensive blockade on the Gaza Strip, effectively suffocating all aspects of life by sealing off all border crossings and preventing the entry of food, fuel, and humanitarian aid. This siege goes beyond a mere security measure; it has become a deliberate tool to starve over 2.2 million people - most of them women and children. Although Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a *formal* approval in May 2025 to allow aid into Gaza, the actual amount permitted remains severely limited, falling far short of minimum needs. Aid deliveries are deliberately obstructed through delays and restrictions, making it nearly impossible for supplies to reach those in desperate need.

Against this backdrop, the Palestinian government officially declared Gaza a famine zone on May 7, 2025, prior to the publication of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) report on May 12, 2025. The IPC report classifies Gaza's food insecurity situation<sup>1</sup> from May 11 to the end of September 2025 as follows: the entire territory is in Emergency (IPC Phase 4), with 470,000 people (22 percent of the population) in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5), over one million people (54 percent) in Emergency (IPC Phase 4), and approximately 500,000 people (24 percent) in Crisis (IPC Phase 3). The report warns that, "under this reasonable worst-case scenario, food insecurity, acute malnutrition and mortality would surpass the IPC Phase 5 (Famine) thresholds," placing the whole Gaza Strip at risk of famine. According to the World Food Programme and the World Health Organization, over 71,000 children and 17,000 women require immediate therapeutic intervention due to acute malnutrition.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the relentless efforts of both local and international humanitarian organizations, the continued denial of regular access to food and fuel has caused near-total paralysis of Gaza's health and humanitarian infrastructure. In this light, the famine sweeping Gaza today cannot be seen as a natural disaster or unforeseen emergency, but as the direct outcome of a systematic starvation policy aimed at dismantling Palestinian society through slow extermination.

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<sup>1</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), "Gaza Strip: Acute Food Insecurity Situation May – September 2025", Accessed June 4, 2025 <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1159596/>

<sup>2</sup> World Food Programme (WFP), "Risk of Famine Across All of Gaza, New Report Says", Accessed June 4, 2025. [https://www.wfp.org/news/risk-famine-across-all-gaza-new-report-says?utm\\_source](https://www.wfp.org/news/risk-famine-across-all-gaza-new-report-says?utm_source)

## Starvation as a Weapon: A Grave Violation of International Humanitarian and Criminal Law

Starvation is defined as the intentional deprivation of civilians from essential life-sustaining materials such as food, water, and medicine - whether by destruction, prevention, or obstruction. It is not considered a collateral outcome of conflict, but a standalone crime when used deliberately as a weapon of war or political coercion. In Gaza's case, the policies imposed by the Israeli occupation since March 2025 are not incidental consequences of warfare but constitute a deliberate, ongoing act of starvation against civilians.

This act is explicitly prohibited under international humanitarian law, particularly Article 54 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1977), which forbids the use of starvation as a method of warfare by targeting or destroying items indispensable to civilian survival. According to the ICRC (Study of Customary IHL Rule 53), the use of starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare is prohibited, as is attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population is prohibited (rule 54). Moreover, Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) defines the deliberate starvation of civilians -through deprivation or obstruction of aid- but this provision applies specifically to international armed conflicts (IAC). However, the broader customary international humanitarian law as codified by the ICRC extends this prohibition to both international and non-international armed conflicts. According to ICRC Rule 156, using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including by impeding relief supplies, is a war crime in all types of armed conflict.

The material elements or the *actus reus* of these crimes are present in Israel's actions: the closure of all crossings, restriction of food and medical supplies, destruction of agricultural infrastructure, and systematic targeting of civilian life-support systems. While the *mens rea*, or criminal intent, is evidenced by repeated and calculated policies aimed at impeding aid deliveries, despite full awareness of their life-threatening consequences for millions of civilians.

Even after Netanyahu's announcement on May 19, 2025 to permit aid entry for the first time since March 2, 2025, on-the-ground implementation reveals this to be a façade. For nearly two full months, Israel completely barred the entry of humanitarian aid. The quantities allowed in are negligible and erratic and have yet to reach northern Gaza, where the siege is most suffocating and famine is most acute. The sole viable access route—Netzarim Corridor—remains under Israeli military control, and no safe passage has been granted for aid convoys or trucks.

Despite growing international calls, including public demands from EU countries to open the crossings and ensure unimpeded aid flow, Israel continues its obstruction, refusing to meet even the most basic legal and humanitarian standards. This persistent hindrance, even after announcing a formal allowance, reveals the deliberate and methodical nature of the crime and nullifies any claim that these actions are merely dictated by fluctuating security conditions. What is unfolding in Gaza is not a manageable humanitarian crisis—it is the explicit use of starvation as a means of extermination, a legally defined war crime that demands formal accountability and cannot be dismissed as administrative failure or procedural error.

## The Human Cost: Famine as a Tool of Slow Death

Famine in Gaza is not just a statistic - it is a lived reality etched into every moment for civilians, particularly children, women, and the elderly. Eyewitness testimonies depict a harrowing scene: children dying silently from hunger while the world watches; mothers feeding their children spoiled flour; families surviving on sporadic meals or enduring days without food. This crisis, driven by Israel's blockade and its systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure -including farmland, bakeries, water networks, and supply chains- deprives Palestinians of their basic right to food, water, and medicine. Starvation is thus weaponized as a form of both psychological and physical warfare - one as brutal as direct violence.

Legally, depriving civilians of food is not merely a violation of their right to life and dignity. When employed systematically and with intent to destroy a civilian population, it constitutes both a war crime and a crime against humanity. According to the May 2025 IPC report, “nearly 71,000 annual cases of acute malnutrition<sup>3</sup> among children aged 6 to 59 months, including 14,100 severe cases, are expected to occur between April 2025 and March 2026.” This is not just a number - it is a moral alarm, a desperate cry for immediate intervention.

Starving children does more than deprive them of food. It leaves them vulnerable to grave complications like severe malnutrition, which stunts physical and cognitive development and significantly increases the risk of early death. Under this siege, heart-wrenching stories of children losing siblings and parents to starvation have become tragically commonplace. Homes have turned into silent graves, and society itself has become a battleground between life and death.

This kind of systematic starvation leaves psychological and social scars as devastating as physical harm. Survivors face profound trauma, hopelessness, and a loss of future vision - deepening the suffering and fuelling cycles of violence and despair.

### ➤ The Shift in Aid Delivery: From Humanitarian Coordination to Politicization and Control

Prior to May 2025, humanitarian aid in Gaza was delivered through the UN-led Cluster System in coordination with Palestinian and international NGOs. This system, though not without challenges due to Israeli restrictions, was largely transparent and effective in meeting civilian needs based on the principles of neutrality, independence, and impartiality. However, this mechanism has come under increasing constraint. Delays and outright denials of aid entry have become more frequent, and humanitarian workers have been targeted. On April 1, 2024, seven international aid workers -both foreign and Palestinian- were killed in an Israeli airstrike on their clearly marked convoy in Deir al-Balah, despite having coordinated their movement with the Israeli occupation forces. This led to the

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<sup>3</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), “Gaza Strip: Projected Acute Food Insecurity Situation, April – July 2024”, Accessed June 4, 2025. <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1159597/>

suspension of World Central Kitchen's operations in Gaza and prompted global condemnation.

In May 2025, the United States and Israel announced the creation of the so-called *Gaza Humanitarian Foundation* (GHF), registered in Switzerland but later deregistered, now operating solely under U.S. registration, to oversee aid distribution in Gaza. While presented as an alternative to UN coordination, this move raises serious concerns about the politicization of humanitarian work. The plan includes four distribution hubs -three in southern Gaza and one in Israeli-controlled Netzarim- with aid distribution managed by private security firms. This model imposes strict security procedures, including the collection of biometric data from aid recipients -raising major privacy and neutrality concerns. The so- called GHF began operating on May 26, 2025. However, implementation has failed to meet basic humanitarian standards, and at least 27 Palestinians were killed while attempting to access aid.<sup>4</sup> Since then, fighting and airstrikes have intensified around aid sites:<sup>5</sup>

- On June 10, Israeli fire near a central Gaza humanitarian hub killed at least 17 Palestinians, with several airstrikes striking residential areas.<sup>6</sup>
- On June 14, a major escalation resulted in at least 35 deaths at and around a Netzarim corridor distribution site.<sup>7</sup>
- By June 15, health officials reported at least **79 civilians** killed in these aid-related incidents, with over 274 killed and more than 2,500 wounded since the GHF began operations -described by Gaza's Ministry of Health as "execution sites."<sup>8</sup>

GHF faces ongoing legal challenges in the United States. Its model violates Article 59 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which obliges occupying powers to allow the free passage of humanitarian relief without conditionalities or demographic manipulation. Any measure that coerces civilians to remain in specific areas or impedes their return constitutes forced displacement - a war crime under international law.

### ➤ **Humanitarian aid through the militarization of civilian space and the collapse of public trust**

The Israeli government's decision to arm and empower informal armed groups within Gaza -publicly acknowledged by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in June 2025- has

<sup>4</sup> Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, "Israel Turns Aid Distribution Sites into Death Zones- Immediate Shutdown Is Essential", accessed June 18, 2025 <https://pchrqaza.org/israel-turns-aid-distribution-sites-into-death-zones-immediate-shutdown-is-essential/>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), occupied Palestinian territory, "Humanitarian Situation Update No. 296: Gaza Strip", accessed June 18, 2025. <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-296-gaza-strip>

<sup>6</sup> Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, "Israel Persists in Genocide and Continues to Kill Starving Civilians and Paramedics", accessed June 18, 2025 <https://pchrqaza.org/israel-persists-in-genocide-and-continues-to-kill-starving-civilians-and-paramedics/>

<sup>7</sup> MSN, "Israeli fire kills 35 people in Gaza, many at aid site, medics say," Accessed June 16, 2025. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/israeli-fire-kills-35-people-in-gaza-many-at-aid-site-medics-say/ar-AA1Glarq>

<sup>8</sup> Geneva Council For Rights and Liberties "Gaza Under Fire: Israel Kills Aid Seekers and Expels Civilians Amid Famine" Accessed June 16, 2025 <https://genevacouncil.com/2025/06/15/gaza-under-fire-israel-kills-aid-seekers-and-expels-civilians-amid-famine/>

contributed to the breakdown of internal security and the erosion of humanitarian protection mechanisms. These groups, many of which have a documented history of criminal activity, have been directly involved in looting humanitarian convoys, attacking civilians near distribution sites, and creating a climate of fear and insecurity among the local population.<sup>9</sup>

This militarization of the civilian sphere represents a severe breach of international humanitarian law. As the occupying power, Israel is obligated under Article 43 of the Hague Regulations and Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention to ensure the safety and public order of the occupied population. Instead, by arming non-state actors and enabling their operation in populated areas, the occupying power has knowingly contributed to the emergence of internal violence, lawlessness, and the fragmentation of civil authority in Gaza.

The result has been the effective collapse of civilian trust in aid distribution systems, widespread theft of relief items, and increasing reports of violence and intimidation at aid points. This constitutes not only a violation of the duty to facilitate humanitarian assistance (as required under Article 59 of the Fourth Geneva Convention), but also a dereliction of the obligation to protect civilians from foreseeable harm. The deliberate creation or toleration of such insecurity amounts to a form of indirect coercion and collective punishment, prohibited under customary international law.

## Impacts of Starvation on Women, Children, and Society at Large

Israel's policy of systematic starvation in Gaza does not only deprive the population of food - it produces catastrophic effects on the most vulnerable segments of society, particularly women and children. Pregnant and lactating women face severe deficiencies in calories and essential nutrients, putting them at risk of miscarriage, premature birth, and long-term health complications. Children, meanwhile, suffer from acute malnutrition, visible in rising rates of wasting, anaemia, and delayed physical and cognitive development.

This policy also takes a grave toll on psychosocial wellbeing. Families are plagued by anxiety and helplessness. Community support networks are crumbling under the weight of daily survival struggles.

As hunger deepens and food insecurity spreads, the social fabric begins to fray. Desperation has led to increased chaos, including attacks on aid convoys, theft driven by hunger, and the erosion of interpersonal trust. This societal collapse is not a collateral effect of war, but a deliberate outcome of using starvation as a weapon that strikes at the very foundation of community resilience.

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<sup>9</sup> *Financial Times*, "Netanyahu confirms Israel is arming Gaza clans to fight Hamas," June 2025, Accessed June 16, 2025. <https://www.ft.com/content/9705ecaf-4191-4d77-9ec9-4549cf6144ba>



## Recommendations

The use of starvation as a weapon in Gaza represents a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and intensifies the catastrophic humanitarian crisis endured by civilians. The legal and human dimensions of this emergency are inseparable: the right to food and to life is inviolable, under any circumstances. Despite international outcry, Israel continues to enforce its blockade and impose draconian restrictions on aid entry. More than 130,000 tons of humanitarian aid remain blocked at the border.

Immediate, concrete actions are needed to pressure Israel to lift the blockade and ensure the delivery of life-saving assistance. These actions should include:

1. **The full and immediate lifting of the blockade** and the opening of all crossings to allow unrestricted entry of food and medical aid to the entire population of Gaza, alongside an immediate end to all attacks on civilian infrastructure, including water, sanitation, agriculture, and healthcare systems.
2. **Holding the international community accountable** to its legal and moral obligations by pressuring relevant parties to end the use of starvation as a weapon of war and prosecuting those responsible at international levels.
3. **Establish independent international monitoring mechanisms** to ensure the safe, timely, and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid, and to guarantee that all parties comply with the provisions of international humanitarian law. This includes holding the occupying authorities and their local and international partners—such as the so-called "Gaza Humanitarian Foundation" accountable for crimes and violations committed against aid recipients. An independent international commission of inquiry should also be established to document these crimes and bring those responsible to justice.
4. **Strengthening humanitarian programs targeting the most vulnerable people, including women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities**, through urgent intersectoral interventions that uphold the humanitarian principle of “do no harm” and mitigate existing or imminent protection, health, and other risks for affected communities across Gaza.
5. **Enhance the role of the humanitarian system**, comprising United Nations agencies—chiefly the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and Palestinian civil society organizations in delivering essential services, while ensuring strict adherence to humanitarian principles that safeguard the dignity and safety of all service beneficiaries.