

How Israel is Using Food Deprivation as a Weapon of War - An Analysis

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Source: Middle East Monitor

Introduction

In the chronicles of history, the siege of Leningrad during World War II stands as a haunting testament to the devastating toll imposed on people intentionally by depriving them of essential resources. The survivor's pitiful words, "Bread in those days was like gold," highlight the historical brutality of using mass starvation as a weapon of war.² This strategy, reminiscent of past sieges, accentuates the severe consequences of collective punishment on innocent civilians.

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²Jehan Alfara, "Israel uses starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza", Middle East Monitor, December 23, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231223-israel-uses-starvation-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-gaza/>

In the contemporary context, the Gaza Strip is combatting a similar crisis as Israel on purpose handicaps the delivery of vital resources to its 2.2 million residents. Under Israeli siege since 2007, the situation escalated on October 9, 2023 when Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant declared a total blockade, marking a full-scale war on the Palestinian territory.³ It is essential to explore the distressing developments in Gaza by examining how Israel's actions, as condemned by Human Rights Watch, may breach international humanitarian law and be deemed a war crime. But a noteworthy fact is the resilience of Gaza's people, who, amidst the chaos, have turned to their local cuisine as a symbol of strength in the face of hardship.

Utilizing Food Deprivation as a Warfare Strategy

The allegation suggests that Israeli forces are significantly limiting the delivery of crucial humanitarian aid, food, and medical supplies to the millions of people in the besieged territory. Despite repeated international warnings calling on Israel to open up aid channels, famine in Gaza is becoming unavoidable due to the persistent disregard for these warnings and the continuation of the conflict.⁴



Source: Al Jazeera

³Jehan Alfarra, "Israel uses starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza", Middle East Monitor.

⁴"Israel's Use of Starvation as a Weapon of War Brings Gaza to the Brink of Famine", Democracy Now, February 5, 2024, https://www.democracynow.org/2024/2/5/alex_de_waal

Let us try to define accurately how this notorious tactic of Israel is working out in Gaza at present. Children in Gaza are losing their lives due to a scarcity of food and tragically, parents attempting to secure it are being fatally shot in the process. Israeli forces are alleged to open fire on families moving towards aid convoys seeking essential supplies. This dreadful situation raises serious concerns about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza as the very act of seeking sustenance is becoming full of danger. Innocent people are not only being deprived of their basic needs but also being brutally murdered in the process of fulfilling those needs. Most of them have already lost their homes, loved ones and now those who are alive have nothing to eat. The prevailing situation paints a heartbreaking picture of profound suffering and desperation of the civilians of Palestine.

Case Study: Flour Massacre in Gaza 2024

A very miserable and unexpected incident occurred around 4:30 in the morning on 29 February, 2024 in Gaza. People gathered on Harun al-Rashid Street, hoping for aid trucks carrying flour as a convoy of 31 trucks had entered Gaza. As folks waited for the much-needed aid, they were fired upon by various military equipment. But people somehow managed to take boxes of flour and canned goods off the trucks. Tragically, after the first round of shooting stopped, people went back to the trucks only to face more gunfire. Witnesses claimed that Israeli tanks advanced while running over many of the dead and injured bodies. At least 112 Palestinians lost their lives and over 750 others were heavily injured as a result of this devastating incident.⁵

⁵“Flour massacre: How Gaza food killings unfolded, and Israel’s story changed”, Al Jazeera, March 1, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/1/flour-massacre-how-gaza-food-killings-unfolded-and-israels-story-changed>



Source: Middle East Monitor

This harrowing incident occurred just one day after Carl Skau, Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), shared some concerning facts with the United Nations Security Council. Stating that over 500,000 people or one in four individuals were at risk of famine, Skau's warning portrayed a harsh picture.⁶ Adding to the heartache, he disclosed that one in every six children below the age of two is exceedingly malnourished.

Israeli Military's Changing Explanations:

Initially, the Israeli military claimed that private contractors managed the aid trucks as part of their oversight in an aid operation for the past four nights. However, the Israeli version of events changed as the day progressed.

According to several reports, the Israeli military first tried to blame the crowd by claiming that injuries resulted from people being crushed and mangled in a stampede during the arrival of aid trucks. Later, the narrative shifted with the Israelis stating that their troops felt threatened by hundreds of approaching people, justifying their decision to open fire.⁷ However, the explanation lacked details on how these individuals were perceived as a threat.

⁶"Flour massacre: How Gaza food killings unfolded, and Israel's story changed", Al Jazeera.

⁷ibid

Contrastingly, witnesses insisted that the stampede occurred only after Israeli troops started firing at people seeking food. The conflicting accounts raised uncertainties about the circumstances leading to this tragic incident.

International Responses:

- The Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas, termed it an "ugly massacre"⁸ conducted by the Israeli occupation army.
- UN Chief Antonio Guterres also faulted the incident, emphasizing the urgent need for aid in Gaza.
- The US government expressed concern but did not directly condemn the killings. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller stated that uncountable innocent Palestinians have lost their lives and the US is seeking answers from Israel.
- Jordan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced the brutal targeting of Palestinians waiting for aid.
- Saudi Arabia called on the international community to ensure Israel's adherence to humanitarian law.
- Colombia's President Gustavo Petro went a step further by suspending weapon purchases from Israel and likening the situation to genocide.
- In France, President Emmanuel Macron joined the chorus of condemnation and expressed his strong disapproval of the tragic event in Gaza.

Critical Assessment

This grieving incident in Gaza presents a saddening picture of a vulnerable population seeking aid in the face of a devastating crisis. The use of military force against civilians seeking basic necessities raises censorious questions about human rights and the ethical conduct of military operations. The witness accounts of Israeli tanks advancing and causing harm to the already vulnerable population further deepened concerns about the proportionality and necessity of the military response. The overall situation would demand a thorough investigation into the incident, the reassessment of military strategies in civilian areas and urgent international intercession to address the mounting humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

⁸ibid

Besides, the military's initial attempt to blame the crowd by alleging injuries from a stampede during aid truck arrival raises questions about accountability. The subsequent shift in narrative, claiming their troops felt threatened, introduces a new dimension to the story. Notably, the lack of specifics regarding the perceived threat raises concerns about transparency. The contrast with witness accounts, asserting that the stampede ensued after Israeli troops opened fire created more complexity. Lastly, the series of global reactions reflects widespread condemnation of the tragic incident in Gaza.

Impacts of Israeli Ground Operations on Gaza's Food Security

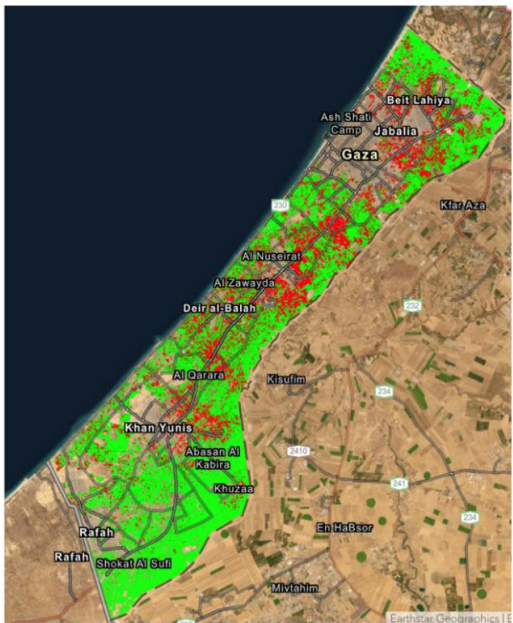
At the time of ground operations in northern Gaza, Israeli forces have destroyed agricultural products, worsening food shortages with lasting effects. This destruction includes damaging orchards, fields, and greenhouses. The military claimed that those operations were aimed to clear tunnels and other military objectives. Satellite imagery comparison between October 15, 2023 and January 6-7, 2024, shows the devastating impacts on agricultural lands as a result of bulldozers carving new roads and military vehicles entering the area.

Damaged agricultural land in the Gaza Strip, October 2023 – January 2024

a. October 15, 2023



b. January 6-7, 2024



Legend. Green: non-affected agricultural land; red: damaged agricultural land

Source: IFPRI

Farmers in this region grew various crops like citrus fruit, potatoes, and strawberries etc. which are very crucial for Palestinian livelihoods.⁹ The destruction not only impacts current harvests but also years of investment in trees and cacti. The imagery reveals bulldozer marks and mounds of earth, indicating deliberate destruction. Furthermore, farmland across northern Gaza has significantly decreased due to hostilities and irrigation issues. Southern Gaza farmers have also suffered, with many reporting damage to their assets and crops, lack of water for irrigation, and inability to harvest crops.

War Rules: No Starvation Tactic is Allowed

According to international humanitarian law, which governs the conduct of warfare, it is totally illegal to use starvation as a tactic against civilians. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court specifically outlines that purposely depriving civilians of essential resources vital for their survival and obstructing relief supplies constitutes a war crime.¹⁰ Intent to commit such acts can be deduced from the overall context of a military campaign even without direct acceptance of the perpetrator.

On top of that, Israel's ongoing blockade in Gaza, which has lasted for more than 16 years, is considered a form of collective punishment against the civilian population, which is also a war crime. As the occupying power in Gaza under the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel is responsible for making sure that civilians have access to necessities like food and medical supplies.¹¹

Starving civilians during war is against the rules under article 54(1) of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions (Protocol I) and article 14 of the Second Additional Protocol (Protocol II).¹² Even though Israel has not agreed to these specific agreements, this rule is still considered standard in international law during both international and non-international conflicts. These rules say that parties fighting in a conflict cannot purposely make people starve or suffer

⁹Fatima Tanis & Jaclyn Diaz, “With aid headed to Gaza, risks remain to getting food to its starving population”, NPR, March 14, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/13/1237616100/israel-hamas-war-gaza-aid-un-food-ships>

¹⁰“Israel: Starvation Used as Weapon of War in Gaza”, Human Rights Watch, December 18, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-used-weapon-war-gaza>

¹¹“Israel: Starvation Used as Weapon of War in Gaza”, Human Rights Watch.

¹² *ibid*

from hunger by taking away their food or supplies. Attacking important things that civilians need to survive, like food, medical supplies, farming areas, and water sources, is also not allowed.

Parties involved in a conflict have to make sure that all civilians who need help get it quickly and without any problems. They also cannot stop humanitarian aid from reaching people or prohibit the free movements of the relief workers.

Challenges in Aid Distribution

In mid-March, the World Food Programme (WFP) managed a significant breakthrough by delivering its first aid convoy to northern Gaza in three weeks. Utilizing an Israeli military road along the Gaza border fence, the convoy reached the area, providing much-needed relief. The WFP emphasized the urgency, stating that people in northern Gaza were on the brink of famine and requiring daily deliveries and direct access to the north.¹³ However, the agency faced challenges in its previous attempt on March 5, when Israeli soldiers turned away a 14-truck convoy at the Wadi Gaza checkpoint. Afterwards, the convoy was rerouted but faced looting by desperate individuals, resulting in the loss of around 200 tons of food.¹⁴

Despite efforts to provide aid again, challenges persist. Airdrops, while conducted, are inefficient and risky and lead to security concerns. The desperation for food has created security issues with examples of violence erupting over aid distribution. The United Nations emphasizes the need for consistent and accessible aid delivery to mitigate insecurity and desperation. This necessitates Israel's cooperation in opening more border crossings and ensuring unhindered access for humanitarian groups.¹⁵

However, aid efforts have faced obstacles from various quarters. Israeli protesters, demanding the release of hostages taken during the conflict, have disrupted aid flow at border crossings. Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles and visa restrictions imposed by Israeli authorities have hampered the work of humanitarian organizations, hindering their ability to respond effectively to the crisis.

¹³Fatima Tanis & Jaclyn Diaz, "With aid headed to Gaza, risks remain to getting food to its starving population", NPR, March 14, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/13/1237616100/israel-hamas-war-gaza-aid-un-food-ships>

¹⁴Fatima Tanis & Jaclyn Diaz, "With aid headed to Gaza, risks remain to getting food to its starving population.

¹⁵ibid

Conclusion:

The traumatic accounts from Gaza stresses the urgent need for international action to address the humanitarian crisis. The deliberate deprivation of essential resources, such as food and medical supplies, constitutes a grave violation of international law and human rights. The disturbing incidents, including the tragic loss of lives during aid distribution efforts, highlight the horrible consequences of conflict and siege on innocent civilians. It is imperative for the global community to condemn such atrocities, advocate for a ceasefire and work towards ending the blockade on Gaza to ensure unhindered access to humanitarian aid. Only through concerted diplomatic efforts we can strive towards a just and lasting resolution that upholds the dignity and rights of all individuals affected by the conflict in the region.