# Data for Denial

## The Smokescreen Behind the Starvation of Gaza

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*Translator's note: This is an unofficial English translation of the complete Hebrew report. Quotations have been translated from the Hebrew as reproduced in the source unless an established English wording was readily identifiable.*

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## Introduction

In this paper I seek to reexamine the way Israel has used hunger and control over humanitarian aid as a weapon in the war in Gaza, and to show how much of the discussion of the issue in Israel often serves as a smokescreen concealing conscious political decisions. As I will show, since the beginning of the war—and with increasing intensity from March 2025—Israeli policy toward aid, meaning the entry of food, medical equipment, fuel, water, and other essentials of life, amounts to the use of starvation as a weapon of war. This policy is rooted primarily not in error but in planning, experimentation, and maneuvering

around the humanitarian “red line” and the international pressure placed on Israel at the war's various stages.

To a great extent, this paper discusses the obvious, because the data and evidence concerning the severe humanitarian crisis and widespread hunger in Gaza throughout the war are unequivocal, even if specific findings by UN agencies and aid organizations may be disputed or mistaken. This crisis was caused not only by the war itself but by the systematic restrictions Israel imposed on the entry of food, medical equipment, fuel, cooking gas, and various other essential goods. That fact was evident throughout the war and accepted by UN agencies, aid organizations, human-rights organizations, experts on the issue, the relevant agencies of the Biden administration, and other allies. According to the official Israeli narrative, by contrast—a narrative also accepted by Israeli journalists and scholars—Israel did not pursue a starvation policy in Gaza; there was no severe hunger in the Strip during the war apart from the mid-2025 hunger crisis; sufficient food was available; and Israel imposed no restrictions on aid entry except for security needs.

This gap between the narratives is astonishing, because Israel's use of starvation as a weapon was not merely declared by key decision-makers; it was also openly discussed and reported in the Israeli media. On the other hand, denial of overt crimes committed by the nation-state and political community to which a writer, journalist, or scholar belongs is extremely common. Although Israel's war in Gaza is no different in this respect from many other cases, it is worth examining the character of the arguments and mechanisms that make this denial possible and advance it.

The first of these mechanisms is ignoring the evidence and data on the issue throughout the war or treating them as unreliable. As in every war, particular data and testimony may be wrong, misleading, or false, but the overall picture emerging from the totality of the evidence concerning starvation in Gaza is quite clear. Ignoring it therefore becomes essential to the work of denial. The second mechanism is ignoring one of the most basic insights in famine studies: the fundamental challenge is not the availability of food and aid but the population's access to them, especially the access of its more vulnerable strata. What might satisfy a population's needs under other conditions becomes wholly inadequate under conditions of intensive warfare of the kind Israel waged in Gaza. Ignoring this basic point is a recurring motif in most Israeli attempts to deny the starvation policy.

Finally, those who deny Israel's starvation policy must isolate the particularly severe hunger crisis in Gaza in mid-2025. Because it cannot be denied, they argue that it was a discrete episode resulting from Israeli miscalculations and the massive looting by Hamas of aid that entered during the ceasefire of January-February 2025. Yet the starvation of mid-2025 can only be understood as the culmination of an ongoing process that began in October 2023. That process included severe Israeli restrictions on food, aid, and goods entering the Strip, alongside systematic damage to sources of food production and supply and to

Gaza's civilian infrastructure—damage curtailed mainly by international pressure. It brought most of Gaza's population into a chronic hunger crisis that claimed many victims even during the Biden administration. With Trump's entry into the White House, however, the few constraints the United States had placed on Israel were removed. The result of the free hand given to the Netanyahu government was, as Israel had been warned throughout the war, an unprecedented humanitarian disaster in the Strip.

The scale of death and harm inflicted on Gaza's civilian population by starvation—especially on particularly vulnerable groups (children, girls, women, and elderly men and women)—is still not known with certainty. But it can safely be said that nearly all of it was preventable. The UN, human-rights organizations, and aid organizations often stressed during the war that the hunger, and more broadly the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, was "man-made." There is something misleading about such statements. As famine scholars repeatedly emphasize, mass starvation, especially in the modern era, is generally not the result of a shortage of food in itself (even when such a shortage exists), but of disruption of a population's access to existing food. It is therefore the product of political decisions and, in that sense, is always "man-made." This is true of every mass famine witnessed in recent decades, from Sudan and Ethiopia to Yemen. Israel's starvation of Gaza is distinctive, however, because Israel's degree of control over what enters the Strip is exceptional in comparison with most, if not all, of those cases.

The degree of responsibility corresponds to the degree of control. Although Hamas also bears heavy responsibility for Gaza's humanitarian disaster, it was Israel's choice to use starvation as a weapon, just as it chose measures that predictably caused widespread harm to the civilian population in other aspects of the war. The victims of that choice are our victims—not merely those of the Israeli government and security establishment, but of all of us as a political community, especially in view of the broad legitimacy that the Israeli public granted Israel's policy in Gaza.

The paper before you details Israel's choice and the dynamics surrounding it throughout the war.

## Withholding Aid and Food from Gaza as a Weapon of War

Since the ceasefire declared in October 2025, Israel has continued consistently to restrict aid entering Gaza—from medical equipment and infant formula to tents and caravans—to prevent Gazan patients from being evacuated to hospitals in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and to restrict dozens of aid organizations from assisting the population. In doing so, Israel continues to weaken the aid system of the UN and its humanitarian partners, preserve the humanitarian crisis in the Strip, and bring about the deaths of Gazans, including children, from cold and flooding, from the lack of medical equipment in hospitals, and while awaiting evacuation for treatment outside Gaza. Because the crime of using starvation as a weapon of war encompasses not only the denial of food but also deprivation of "objects indispensable" to a population's survival, Israel continues to commit this crime in the Gaza Strip even after the ceasefire.

There is a strange gap between Israel's repeated use of aid and food as weapons from the beginning of its war in Gaza and the sweeping denial of that use by the state and by Israeli scholars and writers. The peak of the starvation, as is well known, occurred between March and September 2025. It aggravated Gaza's hunger crisis to such an extent that it directly caused hundreds of deaths from malnutrition, an unknown number of deaths indirectly caused by malnutrition, physical, cognitive, and mental developmental problems expected to affect a much larger number of children, and further trauma to most of the Strip's residents. This severe phase in Israel's use of starvation generated considerable international outrage at Israel and was an important factor leading prominent experts—including some who had previously resisted doing so—to conclude that the evidence against Israel concerning the gravest crimes had grown substantially stronger. But the policy Israel adopted in those months cannot be understood without grasping its continuity with policy from the beginning of the war.

The reports of Gaza's 2025 hunger crisis and Israel's response to it are particularly revealing about the decision-making process. For example, journalist Nadav Eyal reported in early August 2025:

The story Eyal tells is one of a chain of errors. The root of the matter, as he explains it, was this:

> "None of the decision-makers knew, and cabinet meetings did not address, a dramatic question: precisely how much food does Gaza need? There is a fierce dispute here. COGAT says Gaza needs to receive approximately 80 food trucks a day. Each truck carries approximately 20 tons, which comes to about 50,000 tons of aid per month. International organizations reject 'Israel's truck calculations,' saying that some trucks do not carry 20 or 22 tons. The World Food Programme, which the IDF designated a 'clean' UN body (unlike UNRWA), argues that the figure is 62,000 tons per month."

According to Eyal, although the Israeli government had waged a war for a year and a half in which hunger in Gaza was a critical issue, when it decided in early March 2025 to stop all food and aid from entering Gaza, decision-makers had no clear idea exactly how much food Gaza's population required. At the time, Eyal argues, the cabinet had COGAT's estimate that Gaza required about 80 food trucks per day, or roughly 50,000 tons per month. This was lower than the World Food Programme's estimate of approximately 60,000 tons of food per month. A similar figure appears in a September 2025 response submitted by COGAT and the Foreign Ministry to the UN's famine-assessment experts (the IPC and its Famine Review Committee, FRC). The document also states that the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) itself estimated in March 2025 that 50,000 tons of food would feed Gaza's population for a month. COGAT and the Foreign Ministry also mention the World Food Programme's higher figure, but contend that it includes a safety margin for aid diversion and looting.

The OCHA document, however, states that Gaza needs more than 50,000 tons of food to provide residents with a basic food ration per person, in addition to 9,700 tons of flour per month for subsidized bakeries and further supplies needed to produce hot meals. It is thus consistent with the World Food Programme's

estimate even without assuming significant food loss and waste. The same document explains that, despite improvement during the ceasefire, what entered the Strip remained far from sufficient to meet residents' nutritional needs because it did not provide the required dietary diversity, especially for children under two, pregnant women, and breastfeeding women, who are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition. OCHA therefore determined that food, humanitarian aid, and other essential goods had to enter in large quantities.

Despite these and subsequent warnings, Israel continued blocking aid entry until May 19. It then admitted small quantities of aid while repeatedly declaring that there was no hunger in Gaza. Only when reality became unmistakable was Israel forced to acknowledge hunger and gradually increase the volume of incoming aid. As the COGAT and Foreign Ministry response indicates, only in July 2025—after months of starvation—did the minimum of nearly 50,000 tons of food enter. Indeed, Eyal tells us that even when Israel resumed aid, it did so minimally and with a rather shocking degree of gradualism:

> "On May 19 Israel resumes food and aid to the Strip and makes a U-turn—slowly and haltingly—from the policy begun roughly 80 days earlier. The Prime Minister's Office announcement that night fully acknowledges the possibility of a hunger crisis in the Strip: 'On the IDF's recommendation, and because of the operational need to permit the expansion of intensive fighting to defeat Hamas, Israel will introduce a basic quantity of food for the population to ensure that a hunger crisis does not develop in the Gaza Strip. [...] Such a crisis would endanger the continuation of Operation Gideon's Chariots to defeat Hamas.' Note the words 'a basic quantity.' At no stage, despite the warnings, was the defense establishment ordered to flood the Strip with food and aid; the government was still trying to control the quantity of food available to millions of people."

According to Eyal, something serious went wrong in the calculations of the Israeli government and COGAT. But what was it?

## Failed Calculations

The figure of approximately 80 food trucks per day allegedly required by Gaza also appears in a report by Prof. Danny Orbach and his colleagues, published by the Begin-Sadat Center at Bar-Ilan University. Among other things, the authors argue that Israel brought enough food into the Strip throughout the war except during the mid-2025 hunger crisis. Combining the average number of food trucks entering Gaza each day in 2022 (73 trucks) with compensation for the loss of Gaza's domestic food production, they concluded that approximately 81 food trucks per day were required to maintain Gazans' nutrition at a level comparable to the prewar period, while Israel admitted a significantly larger number throughout the war. The figure on which they relied—approximately 12 percent domestic production in Gaza before the war—was based on research by Prof. Francesco Checchi and others that in turn relied on a 2013 Oxfam study,

although that figure did not appear in the latter study. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization, by contrast, estimated that Gaza's domestic production before the war supplied 20-30 percent of residents' caloric consumption and that more than half a million residents depended on it fully or partially in various ways.

In any event, COGAT's estimate and that of Orbach and his colleagues can be compared with the Biden administration's estimate as early as December 2023. According to two senior administration officials directly involved in the issue, the administration had concluded by then that if fewer than 250 trucks carrying food and other aid entered Gaza each day, the aid system would collapse under the pressure of desperate Gazans. They estimated that 350-400 such trucks per day were needed to meet the Gazan population's needs. Their estimate was lower than those of the UN, the World Food Programme, and other aid organizations (including USAID), which generally maintained that about 300 trucks of food and other aid per day, and a total of 500-600 trucks carrying essential supplies, were required to meet Gaza's needs.

The gap between these (rough) estimates arises not merely from the additional aid Gaza requires beyond food, but from a simple fact: in conditions of intensive warfare—especially warfare of the kind Israel waged in Gaza—the chief problem is not food entering, but the population's access to it. After all, even before the war more than 60 percent of Gaza's population lived in poverty, more than 40 percent were unemployed, and approximately 80 percent received humanitarian assistance. From an early stage of the war most Gazans became internally displaced persons living in tents under harsh conditions. Local food sources, food warehouses, and food-distribution sites were frequently bombed. Gaza's roads used to transport aid were rapidly destroyed; the prices of food and other goods in the markets rose substantially while many Gazans' capacity to purchase them diminished. Throughout the war there were also frequent acute shortages of cash, and cash itself became a commodity.

Gazans' nutritional and aid needs increased throughout the war as a consequence of hunger and the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and clinics. While starving civilians, armed gangs, and Hamas itself seized aid, Israel refused requests by the UN and aid organizations to operate safe routes for transporting assistance, and killed aid workers in large numbers. As one aid worker observed early in the war: “It is easier to coordinate deconfliction with a militia in South Sudan [...] that has one satellite phone than with [the IDF] at this point.” Aid workers experienced in other war zones testified that they had never encountered comparable obstacles to delivering assistance.

Moreover, food cannot be separated from the rest of the aid entering the Strip. Israel placed severe restrictions on fuel, cooking gas, and water. Fuel is needed to refrigerate and preserve incoming food and operate bakeries; gas is needed to cook much of the food; and water is needed for cooking and, of course, drinking—not least to prevent outbreaks of diseases whose combination with malnutrition may be fatal.

Because other essentials such as tents, hygiene products, wood (as an alternative fuel), and the like entered only in small quantities, their prices were high. Other necessary services, such as transportation to evacuate areas designated by the IDF, were also expensive. Gazans—especially the vulnerable among them—therefore had still fewer resources with which to purchase food brought into Gaza by a small number of private merchants, whose prices, as noted, also rose greatly throughout the war, sometimes to extreme levels.

Despite the considerable uncertainty inherent in estimates of this kind, it is clear which estimate was closer to reality. From November 24, 2023, against the background of the first hostage deal and mounting international pressure, Israel allowed more aid trucks—and food in particular—to enter. Between December 2023 and the end of February 2024, an average of nearly 80 food trucks entered per day (fewer in December and February and more in January). The result, as we shall see, was widespread malnutrition and hunger in the Strip, even though Gazans could supposedly still rely on some domestically produced food and prewar stocks. Even between March and September 2024, when Israel allowed substantially more food into Gaza, hunger and malnutrition remained extensive.

Had Israel genuinely wished to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, it would have allowed food and aid to enter at levels close to those considered minimal by the Biden administration, the UN, and aid organizations. For most of the war, however, it allowed quantities far below them. Claims such as Orbach and his colleagues' assertion that “the aid organizations' supply target of 300 trucks was never based on professional wartime food-consumption calculations” reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of how such a humanitarian crisis must be addressed amid intensive warfare and in light of experience gained from similar crises. The UN and aid organizations sought to “flood” Gaza with food and other aid to ensure that it reached weaker and more vulnerable populations, lowered prices, and reduced the incentive for looting. That is precisely what happened during the principal ceasefires.

Alex de Waal, one of the world's leading experts on these issues, criticized Prof. Orbach and his colleagues' calculations in the same spirit. “Every student of famine,” he wrote, “should know by heart the famous opening lines of economist Amartya Sen's 1981 book *Poverty and Famines*: ‘Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat.’” De Waal argued, in effect, that Orbach and his colleagues had come nowhere close to grasping Gaza's food-access problems—problems present in every case of intensive warfare and certainly in a war of the kind Israel conducted in Gaza. This criticism also applies to COGAT's similar estimate: if Israel actually sought to avert a hunger crisis in Gaza, it relied on failed assumptions and calculations.

Orbach and his colleagues, like COGAT, claim that OCHA's March 2025 document shows that 50,000 tons per month is enough to feed Gaza's population. Like COGAT, they omit the additional need for large quantities of flour and supplies for hot meals. They also write that their calculation accords with the World

Food Programme's estimate that “116,000 tons of food would feed one million Gazans for four months even allowing for waste and supply losses.” But the WFP statement plainly does not include waste and supply losses. It was repeatedly made clear that this and similar estimates concerned the humanitarian assistance required to supply Gaza's population's minimum needs, and that addressing the hunger crisis also required renewed commercial food imports, because only those could provide the necessary dietary variety and richness.

More important, the WFP estimate concerned a situation in which food reaches the entire population equally and no significant quantities are looted, stockpiled, spoiled, and so forth. That assumption is unrealistic even during a ceasefire, let alone during months of war that included IDF attacks on aid warehouses, community kitchens, and aid-distribution centers, as well as seizures by Hamas, gangs (some of which, as is well known, cooperated with Israel), and starving Gazans. Reliance on this estimate—much less on lower ones—during intensive warfare effectively guarantees a humanitarian crisis in the Strip.

The IDF has extensive experience responding to humanitarian crises in which it has assisted outside Israel, while COGAT had long experience managing Gaza's “red lines” well before October 7 and possessed tools for monitoring conditions in real time. In other words, COGAT knew what it was doing and what it meant for Gaza's residents. I will return to this point. For now, it is worth recalling that in 2008, with reference to a Gaza population of approximately 1.5 million, COGAT estimated that a much larger quantity of food was required to prevent a humanitarian crisis—even without a war of the kind waged since October 7.

A detailed attempt to calculate Gaza's food requirement on a caloric basis was conducted by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and published in mid-2025. Assuming approximately 2.1 million people living in Gaza, it concluded that the required minimum was about 2,300 tons of food per day, or 69,000 tons per month, equivalent to 120 food trucks a day (its estimate of the average load per truck was lower than COGAT's). Any quantity below this was expected to produce a hunger crisis in Gaza of varying severity, from crisis to catastrophe. Again, the 69,000-ton estimate assumes that the entire population receives food equally and that every resident can consume it daily—conditions that plainly did not exist in Gaza during the war. The FAO concluded that the food Israel permitted to enter from the beginning of the war through December 2024, together with local food production, provided an average of approximately 1,510 calories per person, or 72 percent of the required caloric minimum.

The validity of this analysis can be disputed, and in an updated analysis its authors suggested that 60,000 tons of food per month might have met the population's nutritional needs—again, assuming equal distribution and universal ability to consume it. Still, it is noteworthy that on the basis of their analysis they predicted Gaza would enter a severe hunger crisis between April 26 and July 5, 2025. This projection depended on differing estimates of how much food entered during the ceasefire and did not assume the massive Hamas looting of a large share of ceasefire aid on which COGAT and Orbach and his colleagues

relied as the sole explanation for how rapidly that food ran out. Hamas did seize aid—apparently chiefly aid brought in by organizations and merchants outside the UN system and affiliated organizations—but probably not on a scale capable of explaining Gaza's rapid descent into starvation. To date, Israel has not supplied evidence of Hamas looting on such a scale. The FAO estimate proved accurate, whether because its analysis was close to reality or because of the population's difficulty accessing food.

## The Threshold and Beyond

Nadav Eyal argues that the serious error in the calculations of COGAT and the Israeli government led to Gaza's mid-2025 hunger crisis. Let us examine this "error."

Eyal explained that according to COGAT estimates, Gaza was supposed to reach the "red line" near the end of June or beginning of July. The nature of this "red line" was not specified, but it evidently marked the threshold of an especially severe hunger crisis that could cause widespread mortality and expose Israel to excessively serious international condemnation. The Israeli government did not want to cross this line, but it was willing to approach or risk it. Its calculations were evidently quite meticulous: how much food entered during the ceasefire; how long it should last; when it would fall to a level at which Hamas could no longer rely on it; and when the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) would enter Gaza, supply an alternative, and serve Israel's war aims. As de Waal observed, there has been no case since the Second World War of starvation being planned and controlled so meticulously.

Eyal's report shows that the Israeli government ignored not only warnings from the UN, aid organizations, and experts, but also warnings from the security establishment, which began seeing indications of hunger in early April and warned in early May that Gaza was "approaching the red line":

> "From the beginning of April, the security establishment's own indicators began demonstrating growing distress in Gaza, adding to the aid organizations' warnings. The calculation concerning the 'surplus food' in the Strip resulting from the quantity admitted during the ceasefire did not take basic elements of supply, demand, and food insecurity into account. If, for example, people are told that all food supplies are stopping, they will stockpile as much as possible, which raises its price even before a shortage develops. Given that Gaza no longer has an economy, the meaning is clear.
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> "The general attitude toward Maj. Gen. Ghassan Alian, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, was that 'he simply raises red flags while simultaneously saying that there is not yet hunger,' as one minister told me. Another minister commented that IDF assessments concerning the Strip were treated dismissively. The far right and the Prime Minister's Office waged a smear campaign against COGAT; in mid-May, Channel 14 reported 'anger' in the prime

> minister's circle toward Alian, claiming the government had been 'deceived' into allowing fuel to operate the Emirati hospital (the IDF replied that the political echelon had approved the fuel). By early May, countries and aid organizations were already reporting an extremely acute crisis in the Strip. Discussions about resuming aid began. The IDF was already warning that 'we are approaching the red line.' In retrospect, that was a mistake; we were far beyond it."

Publicly, it should be noted, COGAT claimed in early April that Gaza had food for a long time "if Hamas allows the population to consume it." The UN responded that the claim was "ridiculous [...] we are at the very end of our supplies." COGAT continued publicly denying the hunger for a considerable period despite all the evidence. In this context, Eyal seems largely to serve as the security establishment's voice against the government. His account is that grave calculation errors occurred, but that COGAT at least warned the government—even if too late—and the government ignored those warnings. Yet in earlier episodes of hunger during the Gaza war, senior IDF officials were often the very people angered by the aid Israel allowed into Gaza under international pressure. To recall this dynamic, and how Israel's policy throughout the war formed the basis for the policy that produced the hunger crisis beginning in March 2025, let us go back in time.

## October 2023-March 2024: Gaza Collapses into Hunger

Israel's control over what entered Gaza enabled it to impose a harsh siege after October 7. According to the World Bank, the siege drove Gaza into one of the greatest economic collapses in recent history, as well as widespread hunger and malnutrition that developed with unprecedented speed in recent decades. From October 7 through November 23, 2023, only a few dozen trucks entered daily, chiefly because of American pressure. Already in October, the Biden administration conditioned the president's visit on the admission of more aid, after Netanyahu claimed that cabinet ministers were unwilling to let "even an aspirin" enter after October 7.

Even after the Rafah crossing opened for goods and aid from Egypt, Israel restricted traffic through it to roughly 75 trucks per day, using an arbitrary and opaque inspection process based on a frequently changing list that COGAT did not provide to aid organizations and that included many innocuous items summarily rejected. This method of bureaucratically blocking most aid trucks while officially denying the restrictions would serve Israel through most of the war and perhaps also facilitated rationalization of starving Gaza's population, as Sari Bashi has suggested. At the same time, Israel destroyed Gaza's independent food sources. In mid-November it bombed Gaza's principal flour mill. Of roughly 130 bakeries operating before the war, only 15 remained by January 2024, whether because of mass displacement or direct damage. Israel similarly destroyed agricultural areas and other sources of food production and consumption, including livestock and the fishing sector. By October 2024, according to Forensic Architecture's analysis, Israel had attacked sources of food, water, and aid more than 320 times.

Importantly, all this occurred against the background of reports during the first months of the war that the strategic objective of Netanyahu, Smotrich, Ben-Gvir, and quite a few other ministers was to “reduce Gaza's population to the minimum possible.” Netanyahu's envoy Ron Dermer was reported to have formulated a plan intended to achieve this objective even though the security establishment considered it impracticable—an assessment proven correct by Egypt's opposition. Such gaps between the Netanyahu government and at least some senior security officials persisted, as we shall see. Yet both the vision of comprehensive ethnic cleansing and the desire to move the population from northern Gaza to the south shared a common denominator. In August 2025, Brig. Gen. Erez Wiener, head of operational planning in Southern Command—who lamented the scant attention given to emigration from Gaza and made clear his professional view that Trump's forced-migration plan should be implemented—explained that Gaza City residents should be persuaded to evacuate by ensuring “that humanitarian aid does not enter Gaza City, but only the evacuation zones.” As we shall see, similar logic—starvation to compel evacuation—applied at other stages and in other contexts of the war.

Aid organizations were warning of Gaza's collapse into widespread hunger by November 2023. Oxfam reported, on the basis of accounts from the aid organization Juzoor, which operates in northern Gaza, that premature births resulting from living conditions had risen by 25-30 percent, and at least one infant in each of the 13 shelters where the organization worked had died from those conditions. The first ceasefire began on November 24, allowing significantly more aid to enter for about a week. When it ended, the volume fell again and conditions continued deteriorating rapidly. In December 2023, the World Food Programme reported that the proportion of displaced households in southern Gaza suffering severe hunger had risen from 38 to 56 percent. Nearly half of displaced people reported others being forced by hunger to consume uncooked or inedible food. Human Rights Watch interviewed displaced Palestinians in late November and early December. One displaced person from northern Gaza testified, “We had no food, no electricity, no internet, nothing [...] We don't know how we survived,” while others described similar conditions in the north and in Gaza City. Starving Gazans soon began rushing aid trucks.

During December 2023 the Biden administration began pressuring Israel to admit more food. On December 22, the Security Council adopted a resolution requiring Israel to allow the aid necessary to meet the population's needs. A report by the UN's famine-assessment experts published in January 2024 found that Gaza's entire population was experiencing hunger at varying levels, from crisis to catastrophe, and that nowhere else monitored since the IPC's creation in 2004 had such a high percentage of the population experienced hunger on this scale. Near the end of the month, the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel must enable the necessary food and aid to enter Gaza.

In response, Israel admitted larger quantities of food and other aid, but simultaneously began attacking Gaza's police forces, leading to increased aid looting. Israel also began its efforts at this time to obstruct

UNRWA, the “backbone” of Gaza's relief operation and the organization in which Gazans tend to express the greatest trust regarding aid distribution and beyond.

In February 2024, Israel again reduced the aid it allowed in. This may have been because the IDF leadership was angered by the admission of even minimal aid. According to reports, IDF officials argued that admitting aid while hostages were held under horrific conditions was immoral; that aid should have been used as leverage against Hamas to secure a better hostage deal; and that Hamas's seizure of aid helped it survive and preserve its power. The security establishment maintained that there were “no famine conditions” in Gaza, yet in the same breath assessed that a humanitarian crisis might generate civil unrest against Hamas.

Meanwhile, in the real world, an analysis by the UN Nutrition Cluster—based on partial data collected in December and January and therefore probably an underestimate—found that the great majority of children under two and of pregnant and breastfeeding women suffered nutritional deprivation. In northern Gaza, acute malnutrition among children under two exceeded 15 percent, and approximately 3 percent suffered its most severe form. In Rafah, malnutrition among children of that age was relatively lower—about 5 percent—but still represented a pronounced deterioration from pre-October 7 malnutrition among children under five, which had been below 1 percent. Widespread damage to civilian infrastructure continued, and disease spread with it.

Data from February-March 2024 showed rapid deterioration. A March 2024 analysis by UN experts reflected this in malnutrition data for children in northern Gaza, food-consumption data, and the scale of household hunger. “The speed at which this catastrophic child malnutrition crisis has unfolded is shocking,” UNICEF stated, “especially when critically needed assistance is only a few miles away.”

Gazans repeatedly testified to the hunger they experienced. Jonathan Whittall, a former head of OCHA who joined a UN team visiting northern Gaza in late January 2024, said mass hunger had already spread by the time of their visit: “Everyone we spoke to asked us for food. People in the streets gestured with their hands that they wanted something to eat. The Israeli authorities continued to deny supplies entry despite our warnings about the deadly conditions.” James Elder of UNICEF testified after a March visit to northern Gaza: “Driving through the north you see, time and time again, the universal gesture of hungry people, hands brought to mouths. Crowds of children, women with very gaunt faces.” At Kamal Adwan Hospital he saw a dozen children resembling skeletons: “We are seeing severe cases of malnutrition. Children on the brink of death, skin and bone. And these are the children who managed to reach the hospital. The real fear is for those who did not.” *The Guardian*, which reported his testimony, said Elder's description “was corroborated in numerous interviews with aid workers and other residents in the area.” World Health Organization representatives visited northern Gaza and testified to the scale of malnutrition

and the harsh conditions they saw. Western media carried video of children wasting away in northern Gaza and reported Palestinians being forced to eat animal feed and grass to survive.

According to UNICEF, at least 23 children in northern Gaza had by then died as a result of malnutrition

and dehydration. Iman's infant (a pseudonym) may have been one of them: the mother told *+972 Magazine* that he died in January 2024 because infant formula was unavailable. Sharif al-Kafarna of Beit Hanoun told B'Tselem in early March that his son had died of malnutrition. Others testified to malnutrition spreading especially in northern Gaza. Human Rights Watch also interviewed fathers from the north whose children died after being born to severely malnourished mothers, and others whose children suffered extreme hunger; it corroborated accounts of children dying at Kamal Adwan Hospital from causes related to malnutrition. Similar testimony concerning the scale of malnutrition and the toll it took during these months appears in many additional sources, some based on interviews with Gaza refugees outside the Strip.

Yet even these data and testimonies capture only part of the humanitarian crisis Israel created in Gaza. Many who suffered hunger do not appear in the data at all: a large share of children under five (screening began in January and mostly covered children under two), most pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants under six months, older children, and adults—especially elderly people and women. Adults skipped meals so their children could eat; women were often the last to eat and ate the least. In a March 2024 Gaza survey by Khalil Shikaki, 55 percent reported that they lacked enough food for a day or two. Most said they knew where food or water could be obtained, but reaching it involved great difficulty and danger.

These data and testimonies are the most basic sources for evaluating the consequences of Israeli policy during the Gaza war, yet Israeli journalists and scholars alleging a “false starvation campaign” ignore them. In the original version of their report, Orbach and his colleagues claimed that UN experts relied exclusively on “Palestinians' self-reports to determine food distress,” whose reliability they questioned. But the IPC also relies on independent malnutrition screenings throughout the war and accessible evidence such as starving Gazans rushing food trucks and aid distributions or airdrops.

Similarly, Orbach and his colleagues alleged that UN experts and aid organizations relied on the UN secretary-general's invented figure of 500 trucks entering Gaza daily before the war (about 150 carrying food), and based their doubts concerning hunger on the apparent gap between that figure and wartime entries. Like COGAT, they failed to understand that the 500-truck figure was calculated by working days and included fuel and gas, although this was explicitly stated in the January 2024 IPC report and OCHA reports from the war's outset.

Although the English version of Orbach and his colleagues' report corrected these issues after criticism by the present author and others, they continued assigning critical importance to the 500-truck figure in international assessments while ignoring the actual data and indications of hunger and malnutrition on which those assessments rested. This may explain their conclusion that, between October 2023 and March 2024, “it can cautiously be said that although nutrition probably fell below recommended levels for several weeks, it was not life-threatening or damaging to long-term health except in extreme cases.” As we have seen, this is far removed from reality.

Pressure on Israel gradually increased. In early February 2024, the Biden administration decided to examine whether Israel was violating conditions U.S. law places on military assistance. International criticism, together with data and testimony concerning conditions in Gaza—especially the north—led the Israeli government to decide to admit more humanitarian aid. When Smotrich leaked this, he provoked resentment within the security establishment, which, as noted, regarded humanitarian aid as leverage to be used strategically in hostage negotiations with Hamas. This was especially true, security officials explained, when Hamas was “very worried” about the humanitarian situation in the north because the fighting had caused it to lose “governance” over the estimated 250,000 Gazans there.

At the end of February 2024 came the “Flour Massacre,” provoking severe international criticism. In early March the Biden administration explicitly demanded more aid. “The Israeli government must do more to significantly increase the flow of aid,” Vice President Harris declared. “No excuses. They must open new border crossings. They must not impose any unnecessary restrictions on the delivery of aid. They must ensure humanitarian personnel, sites and convoys are not targeted.” On March 18, the IPC's second report warned that conditions could rapidly develop into famine. At month's end, the International Court of Justice issued an additional, sharper and more unequivocal order that Israel allow unrestricted aid entry. After Israel killed World Central Kitchen workers in early April—an event that reverberated worldwide—the Biden administration threatened to condition continued U.S. military assistance on a substantially greater flow of aid. In response, Israel began in March, and especially April, admitting substantially more food and assistance.

Miraculously, even in those months the security establishment maintained that Gaza had no hunger or humanitarian crisis and that none was expected. Israel was forced by international pressure to admit much more aid, journalist Yoav Zitun explained, but security officials were frustrated that it was given to Hamas “for free” rather than in exchange for a better hostage deal, and that Hamas seized some of it or otherwise profited from it to survive and preserve control over the population.

Gaza is a small territory, and aid organizations—foremost among them UNRWA—had the experience, knowledge, and personnel to distribute food rapidly and efficiently. The improvement following increased aid clarified still further the close relationship between Israeli aid policy and the severity of Gaza's

conditions, and demonstrated that admitting assistance was not a technical problem created by battlefield circumstances but a political consideration: a deliberate Israeli decision. Israel consistently called forecasts of severe hunger baseless, yet ironically they failed to materialize chiefly because Israel yielded to international pressure and increased aid. There is a double irony: had Israel taken the warnings of famine experts and aid organizations more seriously, it might have avoided the same "political avalanche," as Eyal described it, generated by Gaza's starvation in 2025.

Another irony is that even when the relevant Biden-administration agencies reported northern Gaza becoming an "apocalyptic wasteland," or concluded that Israel was intentionally blocking and delaying aid, senior officials chose to suppress their criticism because of their commitment to supporting Israel. Under U.S. law, the use of starvation for purposes of war required the administration to stop weapons shipments. As with other aspects of this war and many earlier events, a tougher approach by the U.S. government—and by other allies that publicly recognized Israel's use of starvation as a weapon—might have saved Israel from itself.

"Israel's approach to aid distribution, especially in the north," International Crisis Group analysts summarized in early April 2024,

> "has thus far been an abject failure. It has not coordinated military with humanitarian action; it has endangered aid workers and recipients and frequently stopped aid convoys. It targeted civilian police, alleging Hamas links, and forced them to withdraw, leaving supplies vulnerable to looting either by profiteers or desperate, hungry Gazans. It tried to bypass the international aid system and its protocols for preventing and responding to deadly hunger, distributing aid piecemeal in an attempt to build a network to administer Gaza on its behalf after the war. It directed aid to large families that agreed to adopt its agenda and harmed those that refused, while risking damage to Gaza's social fabric in a manner that U.S. officials said resembled Mogadishu in the early 1990s."

It is no coincidence that this observation echoes the escalation in Israeli policy one year later, in March 2025, which plunged Gaza into exceptionally severe hunger. It was the same government and security establishment, with two variables: Biden had been replaced by Trump, leaving no administration to place even weak limits on Israel; and Netanyahu had removed Chief of Staff Halevi and replaced him with his former military secretary, Zamir, who failed—and perhaps did not try—to gain control of the grotesque Gaza Humanitarian Foundation scheme.

The increased humanitarian aid entering in April 2024 raised hopes among aid organizations and many others that it marked a turning point in Israeli policy. It survived only until the Rafah invasion in early May.

## The Invasion of Rafah and Northern Gaza as a Laboratory

In light of repeated warnings, including from the Biden administration, about a Rafah invasion's humanitarian consequences, from May 2024 Israel doubled, and more than doubled, the number of trucks admitted by private merchants. At the same time, however, it violated its promise not to prioritize commercial trucks over humanitarian assistance: permitted humanitarian aid fell by almost half in May and declined further in subsequent months.

Here another error by Orbach and his colleagues should be noted. They ignored the basic distinction between humanitarian aid and commercial trucks and claimed that aid did not fall at all after the Rafah invasion. Aid organizations did not warn against prioritizing commercial trucks for nothing. Privately imported food is itself essential for dietary diversity and richness, but it is subject to market fluctuations and profit considerations and includes foods not required by a population in a hunger crisis. Humanitarian assistance is needed to ensure that necessary food reaches the weakest and neediest.

The marked increase in commercial trucks prevented the disaster many had feared before the invasion, but the collapse in humanitarian-aid quantities—and, more broadly, the fighting in Rafah and displacement of more than one million people—reversed the earlier positive trend. The invasion also closed malnutrition-treatment centers and cut thousands of children off from essential care. At the end of May the UN reported a nutrition survey finding that 85 percent of the children surveyed had gone a full day without eating on at least one of the preceding three days. By July, humanitarian aid reached roughly 700,000 fewer people than before the Rafah invasion. Much aid intended to enter through Rafah was stuck for weeks, and the food reaching the southern population fell substantially.

In June 2024 the WHO reported that more than 8,000 children under five had been diagnosed with acute malnutrition since October 2023, including 1,600 with severe acute malnutrition. The rise partly resulted from more comprehensive screening, which also demonstrated that earlier malnutrition had been underestimated. Women remained the less-discussed victims. More than 30 percent of respondents in Shikaki's June and September surveys said they lacked enough food for a day or two. Reports continued of children dying from malnutrition-related causes and lack of medical care.

In October 2024, medical workers published testimony about what they had seen while volunteering in Gaza during the preceding year. “These people were starving,” nurse Meryl Tydings testified. “I learned very quickly not to drink my water or eat the food I brought in front of health workers, because they had gone so many days with nothing.” Another nurse, Abira Mohammed, said, “Everyone we met showed us pictures of themselves before October. Everyone had lost about 10 to 30 kilograms. Most patients and staff looked emaciated and dehydrated.” Dr. Nahreen Ahmed testified, “Every patient I treated had evidence of malnutrition—for example, poor wound healing and rapidly developing infections.”

Doctors, nurses, and paramedics testified to healthy newborns returning to hospitals and dying from dehydration, hunger, or infections because their starving mothers could not nurse them and formula and clean water were unavailable. Dr. Arham Ali said: “Starving mothers would come to intensive care begging for formula to feed their newborns. Infants only hours or days old arrived severely dehydrated, infected, and hypothermic. Many died from conditions that were without exception preventable.” Dr. Aman Ouda, who worked in neonatal intensive care, said, “Several infants died every day because of shortages of medical equipment and proper nutrition. We had to make difficult decisions about which critically ill infant would receive a ventilator.” Dr. Adam Hamawy, Dr. Mark Perlmutter, Monica Johnston, and Wilhelm Massey were among those testifying that many children they treated were malnourished. Combined with infections and hospital shortages, this caused children whose deaths were preventable to die from their wounds. Gazans' testimony told a similar story.

Even the increased entry of commercial trucks lasted only a few months. In October 2024, as part of clearing northern Gaza of Hamas forces and residents, Israel sharply reduced the food trucks—and trucks generally—it admitted. That month COGAT also ordered UN aid workers handling assistance arriving from Jordan to complete a special form identifying themselves and certifying the cargo declaration for Gaza. Workers feared that signing could expose them to prosecution for aiding a terrorist organization, significantly reducing aid from Jordan, a major lifeline. Israeli restrictions also greatly reduced the entry of medical personnel. Meanwhile, Israel allowed Gaza gangs to loot large numbers of aid trucks entering from the south. The IDF justified this by citing danger to aid workers if it intervened, but it later emerged as part of Israeli support for gangs—foremost that of Yasser Abu Shabab, whom the UN identified as a leading figure in truck looting.

The Biden administration's weakness before the approaching U.S. election appears to have influenced the Israeli government's return to a more intensive starvation policy. Although the administration demanded in October 2024 that at least 350 aid trucks and 50-100 commercial trucks be admitted daily, consistent with Israel's March commitments, Israel waited until northern Gaza had been cleared of most residents before permitting larger quantities in December. Still more important, the January 2025 ceasefire prevented further deterioration at this stage. Northern Gaza in particular nevertheless remained the “laboratory” for what Israel attempted on a larger scale from March 2025, against the background of a chronic hunger crisis already gravely affecting many Gazans.

By the end of 2024, approximately 40,000 Gazan children aged six months to five years had been treated for malnutrition; about 8,000 suffered severe acute malnutrition. These were not all children assessed as malnourished in that age group. Children over five and adults are absent from these data, while diagnosis and treatment of pregnant and breastfeeding women were also limited. Moreover, the mid-upper-arm-circumference screening commonly used in Gaza identifies only part of malnutrition cases, generally no more than 40-50 percent. Identifying all cases required combining it with weight-for-height

measurements, which are complicated and usually impossible in Gaza because of the difficulty training examiners, lack of suitable equipment, and intensity of the war.

Various studies, although limited in scale and in what can be learned from them, pointed to thousands of indirect deaths by the end of 2024. This was substantial, even if lower than many expected. Gaza's surviving health system, childhood vaccinations, the absence of deadly epidemics, Israel's admission of more aid at critical points, community and family support, and the aid system that treated and fed children and pregnant and breastfeeding women all helped avert a greater disaster. At the same time, extensive testimony suggests that malnutrition's effect on mortality—through its interaction with disease, difficulty recovering from injury, and lack of medical access—was probably broader than the studies showed. A survey of 78 medical professionals who volunteered in Gaza between August 2024 and February 2025 found that malnutrition was the most common medical problem they encountered among the war's indirect effects; it aggravated injuries and illnesses and caused otherwise preventable deaths.

None of this changed the Israeli government's considerations when it imposed a total siege in March 2025. The security establishment again assessed that what would move Hamas was “internal pressure and the humanitarian issue.”

## The Netanyahu Government's Strategic Considerations

“We always knew it was on the edge,” Nadav Eyal quotes a senior official saying, “and they laughed at Ghassan Alian. We knew the situation was acute.” Eyal continues:

> “The government did not want mass starvation in Gaza, if only because it knew that would turn against Israel. But it knew Gaza was close to starvation and continued walking a tightrope that placed an entire population at risk of humanitarian catastrophe. This was not done for strategic reasons, but chiefly from political fear of Ben-Gvir, Smotrich, and public opinion.”

Without discounting fear of the right-wing base, the Netanyahu government appears also to have had strategic considerations. In addition to seeking to damage Hamas's capacity to govern and to weaken the UN and aid organizations in favor of a system better serving Israeli aims, the government sought to “move” the population south to advance Trump's “voluntary migration” plan—that is, ethnic cleansing—as was clear from its earliest stages and from military activity in late 2024. Three of the GHF's four aid centers were in the south, and two of the foundation's initiators were also behind Trump's plan for a Gaza “Riviera” after moving a large share of Gazans to other countries. The original planning included areas in southern Gaza where Gazans would be housed and given aid in the spirit of the “humanitarian city” announced by Defense Minister Israel Katz, intended for construction on Rafah's ruins and to advance “voluntary migration.”

The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation was both tragedy and farce. No humanitarian worker, as many noted, would design a system requiring a population to walk kilometers through a war zone to reach a very small number of distribution points, instead of delivering aid through hundreds of sites as the UN and aid organizations did. Anyone with common sense could understand that chiefly the stronger members of the population would reach aid and many would be harmed along the way. The speed with which distribution sites became death traps for many hundreds of Gazans shot by the IDF while it tried to "manage by fire" a hunger-maddened crowd was perhaps less foreseeable. Yet given the dehumanization of Gazans after the October 7 atrocities and the extent of hunger, even this scenario could have been foreseen.

The GHF was not intended to be humanitarian or for Gaza. It was intended to replace the UN aid-distribution system, give Israel maximum control over aid and thereby over Gazans themselves, and pave the way for the government's farther-reaching objectives. Gabi Siboni and Erez Wiener expressed its logic neatly in April 2025:

> "The key to meeting the war's objectives lies in destroying Hamas militarily and as a government—that is, completely destroying Hamas as the entity exercising civil control in the Strip. This is essential to the organization's total defeat. It is necessary but insufficient. Hamas is a symptom of a graver and broader problem in Gaza. The psychological foundation and Palestinian public consciousness are committed to an eternal struggle to destroy the State of Israel. It may be assumed that even if a governing alternative is eventually found after Hamas's total defeat, the deep currents will continue; under such conditions it will only be a matter of time before a renewed threat develops from Gaza. [...]
>
> "For this purpose, the IDF and State of Israel must create conditions for Gaza's population to emigrate. The IDF is now operating in the Rafah area, from which the population was evacuated, to conquer and clear it as far as the Morag Corridor. The principal lever against Hamas is separating it from the population. Today the humanitarian zone in al-Mawasi is entirely under Hamas control. Evacuating the population from al-Mawasi will deprive Hamas of its principal lever. It is therefore proposed to establish a new humanitarian zone near Rafah and transfer Gaza's population into it through screening points preventing hostile elements from entering. A partial temporary military government would be established there, enabling IDF-controlled distribution of humanitarian aid through relief bodies managed and supervised by foreign security companies, following a model already used in Gaza. The IDF could then focus offensive operations on the rest of the Strip after its population was evacuated to the new compound. The compound would also be a transit camp enabling emigration to countries willing to receive Gaza's residents."

As in other aspects of Israel's Gaza war, the commitment to destroy Hamas and ensure that October 7 never recurred justified widespread harm to civilians. Because the population was perceived as saturated

with Hamas ideology, a more fundamental solution to the “Gaza problem” was required. This was presumably one reason Israel rejected the UN's May 2025 proposal for an even more rigorous monitoring mechanism for aid entering Gaza—instead of replacing the aid system—to allay Israeli concerns about Hamas seizures.

Netanyahu, Smotrich, and Katz left no doubt about the government's intentions. According to Netanyahu, aid at distribution centers was conditioned on Gazans not returning home: “We are destroying more and more houses; they have nowhere to return. The only natural result will be a desire among Gazans to migrate outside Gaza. Our principal problem is receiving countries.” Defense Ministry statements explicitly defined the war plan as transferring residents southward as a step toward “voluntary migration.” Asked what victory would look like, Smotrich replied: “When Gaza is completely destroyed, its civilians are concentrated south of the Morag Corridor and begin leaving in large numbers for third countries.” In his vision, “The IDF continues clearing, turning over every stone, and destroying infrastructure. Gazan civilians are concentrated in the south, utterly despairing, understanding that there is no future there and nothing to seek in Gaza. They look for relocation and to begin new lives elsewhere. That puts Israel in a different position and radiates across the entire region—including this place where we are sitting—for the next fifty years.”

Here, however, significant disagreements may indeed have existed between the government and some senior IDF officials. Like others consulted, they were concerned even while the GHF was being planned that it was intended to facilitate a continuing Israeli occupation of Gaza, with all that entailed for Palestinians. There was also difficulty finding third countries willing to receive them. In any event, one simple fact should be remembered: without severe hunger elsewhere in Gaza, Gazans would not have been expected to make the long and dangerous journey to the distribution centers. Even if Israel did not foresee the collapse into deadly hunger on the scale that occurred, acute hunger that forced Gazans to reach those centers was not an “error” in the plan; it was part of the plan.

The full consequences of starving Gaza throughout the war will become clear only in the future, but the close connection between Israeli policy on aid entry at each stage discussed above and the scale of hunger should be noted. This correlation was well illustrated by an article published in *The Lancet* in October 2025 examining malnutrition trends among children under five on the basis of more than a quarter-million measurements at UNRWA sites between January 2024 and August 2025. Each percentage point represents thousands of malnourished children, with all the consequences for their physical, mental, and cognitive health.




**Figure 2: Monthly prevalence of moderate-to-severe and severe wasting malnutrition among children aged 6–59 months in Gaza (Jan 1, 2024–Aug 15, 2025)**
265 974 screening measurements were recorded during this time period. Moderate-to-severe wasting was defined as MUAC Z scores of less than −2. Severe wasting was defined as MUAC Z scores of less than −3. MUAC=mid-upper arm circumference.

*Figure: Trend in malnutrition among children under five at UNRWA sites, January 2024-August 2025. Source figure reproduced from the Hebrew report.*

Similar evidence appears in data from another Gaza aid organization, Médecins du Monde. In that figure, the green line represents malnutrition among children under five and the blue line among pregnant and breastfeeding women. The organization began measurements only in July 2024; its database is much smaller and limited to Deir al-Balah and Khan Younis. Naturally, the data are not identical, but the trend is similar. Also notable is the organization's finding that in less than a year and a half, Gaza's malnutrition reached levels comparable to countries with long-term malnutrition crises, such as Yemen and Nigeria.

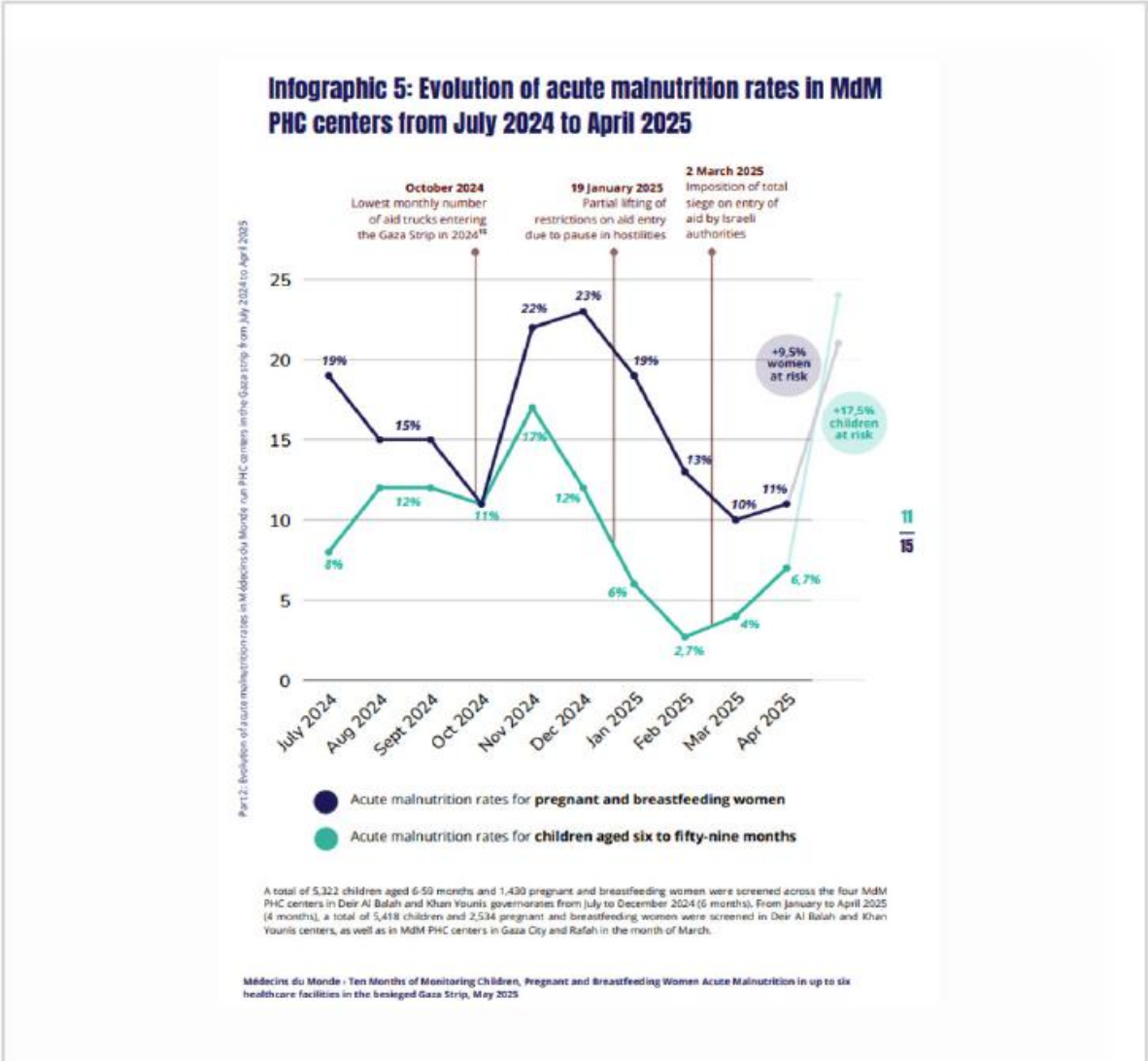



*Figure: Malnutrition among children under five and pregnant and breastfeeding women measured by Médecins du Monde. Source figure reproduced from the Hebrew report.*

Another Gaza aid organization, MedGlobal, likewise reported in August 2025 an extreme wartime increase in malnutrition among children under five and disclosed especially grave data from the period of mass starvation concerning children under five and women of reproductive age:

> "Gaza has become the epicenter of one of the most severe preventable malnutrition crises of the twenty-first century. This unfolding disaster is not the result of drought or natural disaster—it is a deliberate, man-made crisis stemming from Israel's intentional siege on food and other aid, together with the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure essential to survival. Before this war, acute malnutrition in Gaza was almost nonexistent, affecting only 0.8 percent of children under five. New data from MedGlobal's assessment in four of the Strip's five governorates in late July point to an alarming increase. Our assessment reveals that

> approximately 16.8 percent of children under five now suffer acute malnutrition—an alarming 2,000-percent increase over pre-conflict levels. This means an estimated one in six children under five now suffers acute malnutrition, compared with one in 125 before the war. [...] Among women of reproductive age, more than one in five (22.2 percent) suffers acute malnutrition. Adolescent girls and young women aged 15-19 have been hit especially hard, with 39 percent suffering acute malnutrition."

In October 2025, more than 150 American medical professionals who had volunteered in Gaza published an open letter to President Trump. They testified to deaths during surgery, miscarriages, an "epidemic" of infants born malnourished, mothers' inability to breastfeed, and deaths from disease caused by the combination of malnutrition and Gaza's medical conditions. They estimated that recorded deaths directly attributed to malnutrition were only a small fraction of total mortality caused by Israel's starvation policy and its Gaza policy generally. An Arab Center Washington DC survey published in February 2026 found that 90 percent of Gaza respondents said they or family members had needed medicine or medical supplies during the war and could not obtain them. Eighty-five percent said they or relatives had repeatedly experienced hunger, and 81 percent said they or relatives had on several occasions been unable to find drinking water. Between 46 and 57 percent said they had witnessed many cases of people begging for food or water.

Time will tell what we discover about mortality and the harm inflicted on civilians—especially children, girls, women, and elderly men and women—by Gaza's starvation. Israeli society will one day have to recognize a basic fact: our hands shed this blood.

## Afterword

As the preceding discussion shows, during the past two and a half years Gaza has served to a great extent as a laboratory not only for methods of warfare but also for an architecture of starvation and population management through deprivation. The questions discussed above concerning the limits of international law, the criminal and moral responsibility of decision-makers, and the cooperation of international actors who knew and remained silent or lent support will therefore occupy courts, commissions of inquiry, civil-society organizations, and academics for many years. Presumably, in Israel itself, when public discussion is somewhat less bound to the burning present, the numbers, documents, and quotations presented here will return to center stage, and the question will be asked: who knew, what did they know, and when?

The day is not far off when we will no longer be able to speak of security doctrines, "conflict management," and "deterrence" without confronting the deliberate use of hunger as an instrument of statecraft and war. Those who try to reshape Israeli-Palestinian relations or the regional and international agenda will no longer be able to content themselves with the language of errors and failures. They will have to make

an explicit moral choice: is starvation—even when wrapped in technical calculations and security justifications—a line we are no longer prepared to cross, or is it simply another instrument in Israel's policy toolbox for the use of force?

This question has implications beyond Israel. The strict prohibition on starvation as a weapon of war is relatively new, but the norm has become increasingly established in recent decades, as reflected, for example, in the 2018 Security Council resolution strongly condemning such starvation. In recent years this norm has not prevented various states from using starvation as a weapon, often with the support of powers that declared it a crime in the Security Council. Yet it is doubtful that any other case has undermined this norm as much as Israel's systematic, meticulous, and openly visible starvation of Gaza—because of the substantial support for the policy from Western powers, above all the United States, the very states that claim to lead a liberal international order governed by the rule of law.

As with the other aspects of Israel's war in Gaza, our actions have consequences for human lives around the world. It is unsurprising that some of the most prominent figures in Israeli denial and in legitimizing Israel's Gaza policy seek to undermine the foundations of modern international law as well as the international relief system. This is, as is well known, a global effort shared by governments—most conspicuously the Trump administration—and right-wing movements around the world, and it is likely to claim many victims. In this sense too, Gaza is a laboratory for what is already occurring and may continue to occur in many other places, absent a countervailing global struggle to restore basic moral and legal norms concerning what is permitted and forbidden in wartime and beyond.

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