



# MANUFACTURING FAMINE

ISRAEL IS COMMITTING THE WAR CRIME  
OF STARVATION IN THE GAZA STRIP

April 2024

Photo: Mohammed Zaanoun, Activestills

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In early April 2024, an Israeli airstrike on a World Central Kitchen (WCK) convoy that was on its way to deliver humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip [killed](#) seven of the organization's workers. WCK, a key agency in humanitarian relief efforts in the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the war, halted operations following the incident. Several other organizations also [announced](#) they would be suspending operations in the Gaza Strip due to fear for their workers' lives. The killing of the aid workers, six of whom were foreign nationals, drew sharp criticism of Israel from senior officials in the international community, chiefly, US President Joe Biden. In a [special statement](#) released by the White House, President Biden asserted that Israel was not doing enough to avoid harming civilians and aid workers trying to deliver "desperately needed" help to the hungry population in Gaza Strip, and that this was not a "stand-alone incident." All of this comes in the wake of [the provisional measures](#) issued by the International Court of Justice at the end of January, instructing Israel to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza.

Responding to international pressure, Israeli officials, including the IDF Spokesperson and the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) [pledged](#) to work towards improving humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip, [released figures on this subject](#) and even announced Erez Crossing would reopen and the numbers of trucks permitted to enter Gaza increase. The IDF Spokesperson went so far as announcing "[expansion of efforts to facilitate humanitarian aid into Gaza](#)" to the foreign press.

It is too soon to determine how the shift in Israel's policy will affect reality on the ground. Yet it is clearly too little, too late, and attests to Israel being chiefly responsible for the humanitarian crisis that has, since the war began about six months ago, spiraled into the catastrophe we are witnessing now. For months, Israel [refused](#) to let humanitarian aid in through the land crossings in its territory, thereby limiting the amount of aid that could enter. Even when, following international pressure, [Israel did agree](#) to allow aid in through its territory, the amounts were a far cry from the needs of the population, and Israel even stooped so low as to [try and present a false image](#) that there was no serious nutritional crisis in Gaza. The current change in policy cannot absolve Israel of its responsibility for the hunger crisis in the Gaza Strip, and it is doubtful whether the "new measures" it recently announced – whose effect on the ground, to the extent they actually exist, it is too early to analyze – can meet the current needs of the civilian population there.

In this document, we review the current scale of the hunger crisis in the Gaza Strip, its short and long term impacts, Israel's conduct with respect to this issue and the legal implications of this conduct. We rely on the most recent figures and data available.

Based on various reports from international bodies about the situation in Gaza and on testimonies gathered by B'Tselem's field researchers, we unfortunately conclude that for months, Israel has been committing the crime of starvation under international law in the Gaza Strip.

## THE STATE OF HUNGER IN THE GAZA STRIP IN RECENT MONTHS

The [IPC report](#), an initiative involving more than 15 international humanitarian aid organizations led by the UN and published in late March, determined the Gaza Strip was on the verge of famine. This constitutes Phase 5 of the IPC, or Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, with half of Gaza's residents suffering from catastrophic food insecurity. According to the accepted [international standard](#), an area is in a state of famine when at least 20% of households face extreme food gaps, and at least 30% of children suffer from severe malnutrition.

According to the report, in February and March 2024, the entire Gaza Strip was in Phase 4 of the hunger scale, with some households already at Phase 5 of acute food insecurity: 55% of households in the north, 25% in central Gaza, and 25% in the south. The report predicted that the situation would further deteriorate in the coming months, with a projected 70% of households in the north, 50% in central Gaza and 45% in the south reaching Phase 5.

Similar figures and cautions have been released in recent weeks by the [World Health Organization](#), [USAID](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [World Food Programme](#), [The Global Nutrition Cluster](#), and other international humanitarian officials. According to the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), in March 2024, 2.2 million people (nearly 100% of the population) in Gaza were experiencing Phase 3 level food insecurity or worse, 1.17 million were at Phase 4 and nearly half a million people were experiencing the highest level of food insecurity – Phase 5.

“There is no food or water here. In fact, there's nothing here. You can't get food in the market, either – no canned food, flour or rice. There isn't even barley left. Sometimes, we manage to find khubeiza growing by the roadside or in fields and we pick it. If we manage to find some cardboard or wood to make a fire, we cook it in water and then eat it for a day or two and at least manage to sleep better at night. We used to eat khubeiza maybe once a year, and now it's almost our only source of food. In the last four days, we didn't sleep at all because we're so hungry. We didn't eat a single thing. We couldn't get any food. All I do is look for food, all the time, and I can't stop thinking about at night, either. Everyone here in the camp is pale with hunger and can barely stand on their feet.”

Khamis al-A'araj, 52, al-Falujah IDP camp. Read the full testimony [here](#)

In early April, Samantha Power, who heads the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), [assessed](#) that famine was already occurring in northern Gaza. The assessment was given during a [hearing of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee](#). This was the first time a US official declared famine was already present in Gaza, after months of warnings that the hunger crisis was escalating.



Many officials report the impact on the ground. International medical teams that visited Kamal Adwan Hospital, the only medical facility in northern Gaza that centers on pediatrics, reported a full-blown humanitarian catastrophe. The Director-General of the World Health Organization [said](#) that 10 children have died in hospital as a result of hunger. OCHA [reported](#) that 32 people, 28 of them children, have died of malnutrition or dehydration since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip. It has also been reported that about 16% of children under the age of two in northern Gaza are suffering severe malnutrition, and 5% in Rafah. The [World Health Organization](#) has also said that all households in Gaza are "skipping" meals as a result of the dire food shortage, with adults holding back so their children can eat. The [humanitarian situation report](#) put out by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) notes that in the week between February 29 and March 6, the UNICEF hotline received more than 1,000 calls about food shortages or hunger, mainly in northern Gaza.

"Yazan was born with muscle disease, and was treated in hospitals in Gaza and Jerusalem. In the last four years, he got physiotherapy and we kept him on a special diet, which allowed him to have a normal life. [...] We couldn't get Yazan the food he needed – not eggs, and not any fruit or vegetables. There were hardly any available and what was available, we couldn't afford. Not a lot of aid made it there. They mostly gave out canned goods and grains. Other than that, we mostly had bread and tea. At lunchtime we'd make him semolina porridge, and because it was impossible to get fresh milk, we used powdered milk. Sometimes I went all the way to Rafah to look for semolina for him, and when I couldn't find any, I bought him halva. We couldn't get the medication he took before the war, either, and obviously he didn't get any physiotherapy. There was no water or electricity and it was dirty. All of our children had upset stomachs because of the poor nutrition. Yazan weighed 15 kilos before the war and was quickly losing weight. We decided to move to Rafah 35 days ago, hoping to find medication and healthier food for him here, and a cleaner environment. [...] But even in Rafah, we couldn't get Yazan medication or proper food and he kept getting worse. I took him to Abu Yusef a-Najar Hospital, and the doctors examined him and said he had to be hospitalized for malnutrition and severe weight loss. He also had phlegm buildup in his chest. They fed him intravenously and put him on inhalation and oxygen, but he kept getting worse. On 2 March 2024, I brought him clean clothes. When we were dressing him, I looked at him and my heart ached so much. He was all skin and bones. He was half his weight. On 3 March, at 4:00 A.M., my wife called and told me Yazan had passed away. I went to the hospital right away. I hugged him."

Sharif al-Kafarneh, 31, IDP camp in Rafah. Read the full testimony [here](#)

An emergency medical team of volunteers from several aid organizations around the world [has reported](#) patients dying of infections due to acute malnutrition. Aid workers arriving at hospitals in the Gaza Strip [encounter](#) exhausted and hungry medical teams in desperate need of food and water. Hospital patients – people with chronic conditions such as cancer or diabetes, people recovering from serious injuries, surgeries and loss of limbs due to the fighting, as well as women who have recently given birth and newborns – are all suffering hunger that impedes their recovery.

The chair of the Israel's National Food Security Council, Prof. Roni Strier, [recently addressed](#) the state of food security in Gaza, saying:

“There are solid testimonies by international organizations that we have ongoing working relationships with such as the World Bank, the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme – and various institutions like international aid organizations and the global press – attesting to the exceptional humanitarian disaster, which includes extreme hunger of the local population.”

## **THE IMPACT OF HUNGER ON THE HEALTH OF THE POPULATION**

Malnutrition can increase susceptibility to diseases and infections, especially among children, as well as the chance that these will result in death.<sup>1</sup> It significantly extends recovery time from existing illnesses and injuries, and increases the chance of long-term health effects. There is already a high mortality rate among children in Gaza due to a combination of malnutrition and existing diseases.

“There are nine of us in the tent without water, electricity and medications, and with almost no food. Life here feels like a disaster. We're living in the desert, in conditions unfit for human habitation. It's hard to get potable water or even water for cleaning. There is no way to bathe, and we don't do laundry either. We're very cold because we have no warm clothes. There are insects everywhere here – mosquitoes and flies, and reptiles too. We've all lost a lot of weight and feel weak and exhausted all the time. We barely sleep at night.

Our children have health problems. Kinan has a calcium deficiency and is supposed to get an injection once a month. I've managed to get the injections only twice during the war, because they cost 30 shekels (-USD 8) a month and we can't even afford that. [...] Muhammad has hepatitis and there is no cure for it. He needs to stick to a healthy diet, but we can't provide him with that.”

Fatimah Baker, 37, IDP camp in Rafah. Read the full testimony [here](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Ramirez, Steven A. Haas. [Windows of Vulnerability: Consequences of Exposure Timing during the Dutch Hunger Winter](#), September 2022; World Health Organization. Famine in Gaza is imminent, with immediate and long-term health consequences, March 2024; UNICEF. [Children in Gaza need life-saving support](#)

In addition to the devastating short-term effects, hunger has fateful long-term implications. Malnutrition and its side effects have far-reaching consequences for children's neurological and cognitive development, especially in the first two years of life. Babies who are born underweight and children who suffer from malnutrition have a lower IQ, and their academic performance and achievements are lower. Hunger is also a significant contributing factor in increased behavioral and psychological problems among children.

Moreover, malnutrition in the first years of life interferes with the development of the musculoskeletal system, as well as the development of intestinal bacteria, a lack of which increases the risk of chronic disease in old age. Malnutrition during pregnancy impedes cognitive development and increases the risk of diabetes and obesity later in life. Hunger and malnutrition may even contribute to the development of health disorders in future generations, including, among others, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity and an increased tendency to transmit infectious diseases and infections, such as tuberculosis.<sup>2</sup>

## **DIFFICULTY TRANSPORTING AND DISTRIBUTING HUMANITARIAN AID**

After six months of fighting and incessant bombardment (following on years of blockade and frequent military operations), there is [little to no possibility](#) to grow food or produce food based on locally grown products. A large proportion of Gaza's [agricultural areas](#) have been destroyed in bombings, and those remaining are still a risk to Palestinian farmers as they are exposed to shelling. All branches of the food production sector have been [heavily damaged](#), and the [mass destruction](#) caused by the Israeli bombings have almost completely disabled food production factories, bakeries, food warehouses and markets. In addition, the hundreds of thousands of people displaced from their homes have little or no access to running water and to supplies and provisions required for cooking.

Testimonies given to B'Tselem indicate that [the price of food](#) and other items still available in the Gaza Strip has gone up by hundreds of percent or more, creating exorbitant costs that the vast majority of the population cannot afford. In this shocking state of affairs, repeated [posts](#) by the Israeli Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) showing photos of stands overflowing with food in Gaza are revolting. Given the prices at these stands, as described in testimonies, this is clearly an attempt by the Israeli military to create the impression that there is enough food in Gaza, while the reality is entirely different.

“A bag of flour that cost 30 shekels (~USD 8) before the war has gone up to 600 shekels (~USD 168). We had to make do with one meal a day and there were days when we didn't eat at all. Sometimes, the neighbors gave us some water and food. It was also very dangerous to go out to stock up on food because of the gunfire and bombings. [...] Once every 10-15 days, water is supplied, and sometimes, it's possible to get flour and make pita bread, but

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<sup>2</sup> [Historic famine leaves multiple generations vulnerable to infectious disease](#), University of California, Berkeley, October 2020.

most of the time, we really have nothing to eat. In the past month, we've had less than one meal per day. Because of the hunger, my wife can barely nurse our nine-month-old son, Yamen, and baby formula is nowhere to be found either. A little while ago, we managed to buy a kilo of dates for NIS 40 (~ USD X), which has been helping us survive. We live off what we manage to get - a little rice, a little corn we ground, and also barley, which is meant for feeding farm animals. The price of barley has also gone crazy. Now even the barley ran out and people have started grinding bird and rabbit food. But there is not much of that either. There is no food for humans or for animals”.

Ibrahim a-Ghandur, 38, Gaza City. Read the full testimony [here](#)

To obtain food, residents of the Gaza Strip now rely almost entirely on aid from states and international organizations. However, the aid trucks go through a [lengthy, arduous process](#) until they reach their destination inside Gaza, Most of the aid supplies are stored in al-Arish, Egypt. From there, they are transported to Gaza in trucks via one of only two crossings, both located in the southern Gaza Strip. Access to these crossings is difficult and time-consuming, with many stops along the way. The trucks' cargo is checked multiple times, usually both at Rafah Crossing and at Nitzana or at Kerem Shalom, causing major delays. The cargo is unloaded at the crossings, and then loaded onto other trucks and taken to storage facilities inside the Strip. From there, the aid is distributed in different parts of Gaza, in coordination with Israel. Due to the restrictions Israel imposes and to the severe damage to infrastructure caused by the Israeli bombings, only a fraction of the aid reaches the northern Gaza Strip, where, as the figures show, the humanitarian situation in general, and hunger in particular, are particularly severe.

Because of the many obstacles to humanitarian relief efforts on the ground, initiatives and plans to bring aid through the [air](#) and the [sea](#) have gained momentum. In addition to the marine aid corridor established off the shores of Gaza, by early April, nine countries (Jordan, Egypt, the USA, the UAE, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Singapore) received [permission](#) to airdrop aid from cargo planes flying over the Gaza Strip. These workarounds help get around Israel's cumbersome bureaucracy, but experts say they are [slow, expensive, and very limited in quantity](#) compared to the aid brought in by truck. Airdropped aid has also proven to cause damage and injury, [killing](#) five people since early March, according to Palestinian media.

As if the myriad obstacles Israel is putting in the way of the humanitarian response to the crisis it created are not enough, Israel is also making it difficult to effectively distribute the aid to the population, which is struggling to survive. For example, despite the critical role played by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), collecting and distributing the aid, since the beginning of the hostilities [Israel has taken steps to restrict the UNRWA's operations](#) and even [oust it from the Gaza Strip](#), over claims some of its employees took part in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel. These

steps are taken despite the fact that no other body can assume the many civilian and humanitarian roles the agency plays.

UNRWA and a host of leading humanitarian aid organizations [claim](#) that for many months now, Israel has not met its legal and moral obligations, and in practice provides only limited and reduced nutritional aid that is nowhere near meeting the current scope of hunger. Figures on growing hunger in the Gaza Strip corroborate these claims. In March, EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell [said](#) Israel was causing hunger and using starvation as a method of warfare. Israel is also [denying visas](#) to aid workers seeking access to Gaza and even [boasts](#) of denying the applications.

The State of Israel, for its part, shirks its responsibility for the situation, [claiming](#) among other things, that Hamas is to blame for disrupting aid convoys and for [stealing](#) the aid. Whether these claims are substantiated or not, Israel remains responsible for taking every necessary measure to meet the occupied population's humanitarian needs.

“Our situation is very difficult. We now rely entirely on charity, but there isn't enough food. The only things you can buy here are canned food and grains that cost a lot. There's nothing healthy to eat. We haven't had vegetables and fruit in months. They're very rare and expensive. Meat is out of the question. I can barely remember what it looks like. When meat arrives at the stores, it costs 120 shekels (~USD 32) a kilo. Eggs are also rare and cost 100 shekels a package”.

Hanan Abu Rabi', 30, IDP camp in Rafah. Read the full testimony [here](#)

The aid shipments that manage to overcome the many obstacles, including those imposed by Israel, sometimes come up against Israel's war machine, which continues to operate in Gaza. In mid-March, the Palestinian Ministry of Health [reportedly](#) said at least 21 people were killed and 150 wounded by IDF fire when they crowded Kuwait Square in Gaza City to receive aid. A [similar incident](#) occurred earlier, in late February, when more than 100 people were killed and more than 700 were injured as thousands stormed aid trucks arriving at a-Rashid Street in Gaza City. Israel claimed most of the deaths were caused by the trucks themselves and the crowding, and that the troops followed open-fire regulations. The Palestinian Ministry of Health, however, said the gunfire was to blame for many of the injuries. Testimonies received by B'Tselem indicated the same.

“But what happened at a-Nabulsi Square on 29 February 2024 is something I will never forget. I went there along with thousands of others to get sacks of flour, and when we got near the trucks, we came under massive fire. A lot of people were injured from the shooting, and some were killed. It was a shocking sight. Horrifying. The blood seeped into the flour, and the phrase “bread dipped in blood” became a reality.





food or source it for production. Given these circumstances, the population's diet relies almost entirely on outside aid, which is controlled by Israel. As described above, Israel is failing to meet its obligations in this regard by not allowing sufficient aid to enter the Gaza Strip and by failing to guarantee the safe arrival of the aid to its destination, even in areas it [says](#) are under its control.

2. The second element is intentional use of starvation as a method of warfare, i.e., to gain a military advantage or enfeeble the enemy. The prohibition applies to conduct that is known to cause starvation and is meant to serve the war effort. Consequently, there is no requirement for an outcome (such as civilian deaths or a mass malnutrition) to result directly from the conduct that falls under the definition of starvation.

Israel's intent to use starvation in order to gain a military advantage is reflected in statements made by senior politicians and military commanders, that denying residents food and water is part of Israel's methods of warfare in the Gaza Strip. For example, Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant, a member of the war cabinet, which is the highest forum directing Israel's policy in its war in Gaza, explicitly stated that denying food and water is part of the fighting: "We are imposing a full siege on Gaza City. There is no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Everything is closed. We are fighting beasts and we are acting accordingly. Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir tied efforts to release the Israeli hostages to preventing humanitarian aid from entering Gaza: "As long as Hamas refuses to release the hostages it is holding, the only thing that should enter Gaza is hundreds of tons of Air Force explosives, and not a gram of humanitarian relief." Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz [said](#):

"For years, we've given Gaza electricity, water and fuel. Instead of thanking us, they sent thousands of beasts to butcher, rape and kidnap babies, women and elderly people. That is why we decided to stop the supply of water, electricity and fuel, and now their local power plant has collapsed and there's no electricity in Gaza. We will continue to tighten the siege until the threat that Hamas poses to Israel and to the world is removed. The past will not be the future."

As for Israel's awareness that its actions are causing starvation – there is no doubt that Israeli officials are aware of the developing hunger in the Gaza Strip and particularly in the north, which Prime Minister Netanyahu [says](#) has been "conquered" by Israel. This awareness is the result of the large number of reports and figures published by international bodies, alongside an [appeal](#) to the Israeli Supreme Court filed by several Israeli human rights organizations headed by Gisha. In addition, Israel has been imposing a blockade on Gaza for years, and as part of this policy has addressed Gaza's 'economy needs' – [calculating](#) the minimal requirements for the subsistence of the population.

3. The context for the commission of the crime has to be an international armed conflict. There is no dispute that the fighting in the Gaza Strip is an international armed conflict.
4. The perpetrator must be aware of the context and the circumstances that constitute such a conflict. In this regard, too, there is no dispute that Israeli officials are aware of the existence of an armed conflict, given a war has been declared.

Examining the elements that render starvation a war crime under international criminal law – in light of the information available to B'Tselem from reports by various international bodies and testimonies collected by our field researchers – yields that Israel has been committing this war crime for months.

We recall that under international law, grave crimes considered war crimes, such as starvation, may carry individual liability for those who commit them. Article 27 of the Rome Statute stipulates that personal liability applies regardless of official capacity, such as head of state or any immunity a person might be entitled to by virtue of a ministerial or any other position.

In Article 28, the Rome Statute stipulates the personal responsibility of military commanders and effective civilian superiors.

“A military commander or person effectively acting as a military commander shall be criminally responsible for crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court committed by forces under his or her effective command and control, or effective authority and control as the case may be, as a result of his or her failure to exercise control properly over such forces.”

This responsibility applies to commanders in one of the following three cases: (1) The commander as the direct perpetrator of the offense, (2) The commander who ordered the commission of the offense, (3) The commander as an accomplice to the offense.

The number of senior officials in the IDF and in state institutions who have taken part in denying adequate humanitarian relief to Gaza's residents in recent months is large, and many of them were presumably aware of their actions and the ramifications. Evidence that forces on the ground are aware of the widespread destruction of objects necessary for survival can be found in remarks made by Colonel Yogev Bar-Sheshet, Deputy Head of the Civil Administration, in a [television interview](#) from inside the Gaza Strip: "It doesn't pay to hurt our people. That's the message. There's nothing left there. Those who come back here, if they come back here after, will find scorched earth. No houses. No agriculture. They have no future."

## Conclusion

"The current war against the Hamas murderers is another chapter in the story of our national resilience through the generations. Remember what Amalek did to you." That is what Binyamin Netanyahu wrote in a message to Israeli soldiers on 3 November 2023, in a dog whistle that anyone who has gone through Israel's education system will recognize as meaning a response to an attack in a way that would obliterate any memory of that nation, women and children included. When the fight against Hamas is compared to the war against Amalek, the conclusion is clear: The order is to wipe out Gaza.

Israel has been operating for seven months in this spirit, and is succeeding: towns reduced to rubble, an unfathomable death count, a dysfunctional healthcare system and a murky future. Driven by a thirst for revenge over the crimes committed by Hamas on October 7, Israel's conduct ignores any fundamental moral standard and grossly violates its obligations under international law.

Of the multitude of unacceptable measures Israel is using, starving the population of Gaza is particularly horrifying. For months, Israel has pursued a policy of total blockade, complete destruction of the possibility of local food production through farming or fishing, and restrictions on the delivery of aid. The result of this policy is millions of starving people.

The severe hunger that has developed over recent months in the Gaza Strip is not a result of fate, but the product of a deliberate and conscious Israeli policy. It has been openly declared by decision makers, including a member of the Israeli war cabinet, from the very beginning of the war. During Israel's years of blockade on Gaza, it has studied how much food Gaza's residents need to survive. Israel has drafted [mathematical formulae and put together caloric tables](#) for this purpose. This means Israel entered the war with a vast amount of knowledge about the needs of Gaza's population, and made a conscious choice to deny them.

Pushing hundreds of thousands of people into hunger and using starvation as a method of warfare requires full dehumanization. Sadly, the dehumanization of Palestinians in Israeli eyes has accelerated in recent months.

We hope that highlighting the destructive implications of this policy, as well as the personal responsibility of politicians involved in making the decisions and the military commanders responsible for implementing them, will lead Israel to understand what should be obvious: starvation can never be used as a method of warfare. Starving a population is a crime. The moral stain, as well as the criminal responsibility created by the Israeli conduct in the last months, cannot be erased.

For the full testimonies appearing in this document and other testimonies from the Gaza Strip, see the [Voices from Gaza](#) blog on B'Tselem's website.

In compliance with the Israeli law that seeks to equate the receipt of international funding with disloyalty, please note that last year, more than 50% of B'Tselem's funding came from foreign state entities. These are listed on the website of the Israeli Registrar of Associations (and elsewhere). Be that as it may, we remain loyal to dismantling the apartheid and occupation regime and to protecting human rights.

