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On Aid and War – How Israel has Used Starvation to Subdue the Palestinians



Image by Planet Volumes.

Humanitarian aid should never be politicized though, quite often, the very survival of nations is used as political bargaining chips.

Sadly, Gaza remains a prime example. Even before the current war, the Gaza Strip suffered under a 17-year hermetic blockade, which has rendered the impoverished area virtually ‘unlivable’.

That very term, ‘unlivable’ was used by the then-UN Special Rapporteur for the Situation of Palestine, Michael Lynk, in 2018.

As of mid-December, “nearly 70% of Gaza’s 439,000 homes and about half of its buildings have been damaged or destroyed”, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing experts who conducted a thorough analysis of satellite data.

As tragic as the situation was in December, now it is far worse.

67 percent of Gaza's water, sanitation facilities and infrastructure have been destroyed or damaged, according to a statement by the United Nations Agency for Palestinian Refugees, UNRWA, on June 19, leading to the spreading of infectious diseases, which has ravaged the beleaguered population for months.

The spread of disease is also linked to the accumulation of garbage everywhere in Gaza. Earlier, the refugees agency reported that “as of June 9, over 330,000 tons of waste have accumulated in or near populated areas across Gaza, posing catastrophic environmental (and) health risks”.

The situation was already disastrous. Indeed, three years before the war, the Global Institute for Water, Environment and Health (GIWEH) said, in a joint statement with the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, that 97 percent of Gaza water was undrinkable and unfit for human consumption.

Yet, so far, any conversation on allowing aid to Gaza, or the rebuilding of Gaza after the war, has been placed largely within political contexts.

By shutting down all border crossings, including the Egypt-Gaza Rafah Crossing – which, on June 17, was set ablaze – Israel has politicized food, fuel and medicine as tools in its war in the Strip.

This is not a mere inference, but the actual statement made by Israeli Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant, who on October 9, declared that he had ordered a “complete siege” and that “there will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, no water” entering Gaza.

The timing of the statement, which has indeed been put into action from the first day of the war, suggests that Israel did not apply the strategy as a last resort. It was one of the most important pieces in the war stratagem, which remains in effect to this day.

Instead of pressuring Israel, Washington tried to obtain its own political leverage, also by politicizing aid. On March 3, the US Air Force started airdropping aid into northern Gaza. A far more conducive and less humiliating option for Palestinians, however, would have been direct US pressure on Israel to allow access to aid trucks arriving through Rafah, Karem Abu Salem Crossing or any other.

Scenes and images of thousands of starving Palestinians chasing after boxes of aid parachuted in Gaza will remain etched in the collective memory of humanity as an example of our failed morality.

News reports spoke of whole families who were killed under the weight of the dropped ‘aid’, much of which had fallen in the Mediterranean, never to be retrieved.

Even the Gaza pier, constructed by the US military on the Gaza shore last month, did little to alleviate the situation. It merely transported 137 aid trucks, according to the US' own estimation, enough to cover Gaza's need for food for a few hours only.

During the years of siege, an average of 500 trucks arriving daily in Gaza has kept the 2.3 million population of the Strip alive, though malnourished.

To deal with the outcome of the war, and to stave off current starvation, especially in the north, the number of aid trucks would have to be much higher. Yet, whole days would pass without a single truck making its way to the suffering population. This is unacceptable.

Not only did the international community fail at ending the war, it has also failed in delinking humanitarian aid from political and military objectives.

The problem with politicizing aid is that innocent civilians become a bargaining chip for politicians and military men. This goes against the very foundation of international humanitarian law.

According to the International Red Cross, citing the Hague Conventions, "international humanitarian law is the branch of international law that seeks to impose limits on the destruction and suffering caused by armed conflict." In Gaza, no such 'limits' have been 'imposed' by anyone.

Providing aid to Gaza and ensuring the reconstruction of the Strip must not be a political item for negotiations. It is a basic human right that must be honored under any circumstance.

Meaningful pressure must be placed on Israel to end the Gaza siege, and urgent plans must be drafted, starting today, by representatives of UN humanitarian institutions, the Arab League and Palestinian and Gaza authorities to be the entities responsible for delivering aid to Gaza.

Humanitarian aid to Gaza must not be used as political leverage, or a tool in a cruel war, whose primary victims are millions of Palestinian civilians.

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