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PALESTINE ECONOMIC POLICY
RESEARCH INSTITUTE (MAS)

Background Paper

Round Table (4)



**The Governance of Aid to Palestine
After the War on Gaza**

July 2024



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The Governance of Aid to Palestine After the War on Gaza

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1. The Gaza Strip: From Disaster to Catastrophe

A sustainable and vibrant Palestinian national economy has always been hampered by Israel's economic interests, enshrined in the 1994 Paris Protocol. In the West Bank, the Palestinian economy has been stifled by movement restrictions, territorial fragmentation, and ever-expanding settlements and settler infrastructure. In the Gaza Strip, the blockade imposed by Israel in 2007, has resulted in disastrous levels of economic "de-development" and reliance on humanitarian assistance.¹

Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip has shaped the economic climate and conditions impacting over 2 million Palestinians living there. From 2005-2023, the blockade effectively isolated Gaza Strip from the rest of Palestine, leading to a significant loss of many of its domestic trade links as well as severe restrictions on its import and export capacities. Additionally, the blockade resulted in the loss of vast amounts of cultivable land, crippling the agricultural sector and other local industries and exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. Israel also prohibits the construction and operation of air or seaports and restricts the import of critical production inputs and technology.

The Gaza Strip has been routinely subjected to Israeli military attacks, the largest and most disastrous of which has been ongoing since October 2023. Previous offensives (in 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021) caused tremendous loss of life, injury, and internal displacement as well as recurrent destruction of all physical infrastructure—from residential and commercial units to educational facilities, healthcare centers, irrigation canals, water pumping systems, electricity networks, internet networks, and factories. These operations also damaged capital stock and productive assets, including agricultural lands, crops, livestock sheds, greenhouses, fruit trees, storage facilities, boats, fishing equipment, and agribusinesses.

Israel's blockade and continuous military incursions on Gaza Strip have had dire economic consequences. As of 2022, Gaza Strip's GDP was a mere 17.4% of the total Palestinian economy, its aid dependency had reached 80% and the unemployment rate hit a staggering 45%.² These grave indicators have worsened considerably since, as documented in MAS and international publications issued so far.³

2. Provision of Humanitarian Aid to Gaza Strip Pre-2023

Humanitarian aid to Palestine has historically been delivered and coordinated by a complex network of international humanitarian and non-governmental organizations, governments, and local authorities. The international donor community governs aid distribution primarily through coordination forums, ostensibly, to ensure that their contributions align with overall humanitarian goals. These efforts are guided by the collective Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) - coordinated strategies developed by humanitarian actors, including United Nations agencies,

1. Roy, Sara. "The Gaza Strip: A Case of Economic De-Development." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. Vol. 17, no. No. 1, 1987, pp. 56-88.

2. "Report on UNCTAD's Assistance to the Palestinian People | UNCTAD." *unctad.org*, 25 Oct. 2023, unctad.org/news/report-unctads-assistance-palestinian-people.

3. See <https://mas.ps/en/gaza-war>.

non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other international and local partners, to address urgent humanitarian needs in crisis-affected areas.

The 2022 HRP for the Occupied Palestinian Territories outlines strategic objectives that guide the overall humanitarian response across the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.⁴ These objectives are aimed at addressing the most critical humanitarian needs, protecting vulnerable populations, and promoting resilience and recovery. The HRP is divided into clusters, each focusing on a specific area of need: food security, health, education, shelter, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and protection. Each sector develops detailed plans for delivering aid and services, setting specific targets, and identifying required resources. The HRP includes a comprehensive financial plan that outlines the total funding required to implement the response. It details the budgetary needs of each sector and identifies funding gaps that need to be addressed to achieve the plan's objectives. The HRP also incorporates mechanisms for monitoring the progress of the response and evaluating its impact and advocacy efforts to raise awareness about the humanitarian situation and mobilize support from the international community, donors, and other stakeholders.

The 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan indicated an overall financial requirement across all aid sectors of \$509.9 million, with \$379.8 million allocated for the Gaza Strip alone. Implementation of the plan required 139 operational partners for 210 projects. The 2022 financial requirements for specific sectors (across all of Palestine) were as follows:

- Food security sector: \$271,144,107
- Protection cluster: \$47,143,024
- Health & nutrition sector: \$48,402,400
- Education cluster: \$37,266,934
- WASH sector: \$31,988,155
- Shelter & NFIs sector: \$60,617,187
- Coordination sector: \$13,310,395

The majority of the earmarked aid is delivered through a network of relief agencies. The most significant ones operating in Gaza Strip include:⁵

- The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which provides education, healthcare, relief, and social services to Palestinian refugees.
- The World Food Programme (WFP), which offers food assistance to vulnerable populations.
- The World Health Organization (WHO), which provides health and wellbeing services.

Prominent non-governmental providers of humanitarian aid are the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), Oxfam, Save the Children,

4. <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-response-plan-2022>

5. <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/171/flows/2022>

UNICEF, Catholic Relief Services, Qatar Charity, and America Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA). These organizations, contribute a combination of medical care, emergency relief, food services, and other essential services. Local NGOs work closely with international partners to deliver aid on the ground, while the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) is supposed to coordinate the international humanitarian response.

Several key forums exist to effectively coordinate aid delivery and align it with Palestinian national priorities, at least in theory. The Local Aid Coordination Committee (LACC), which was initially established by donor countries and later involved the Government of Palestine (GoP), is intended to serve as a key forum for coordinating aid efforts at the local level. The LACC is designed to facilitate regular communication between donors, the GoP, and other stakeholders to align strategies and operational activities with the HRPs and aims to ensure that donor initiatives are harmonized with Palestinian national priorities.⁶

Sector Working Groups (SWGs) are sector-specific groups that bring together representatives from the GoP, international donors, NGOs, and other relevant actors. They focus on technical policy dialogue, information exchange, and the coordination of sectoral activities. Each SWG is chaired by the relevant ministry with support from international agencies. They report to the Donor Advisory Group-Heads of Cooperation (DAG-HoCs) and the Aid Coordination Platform (ACP), ensuring that the activities within each sector are aligned with the strategic objectives of the HRPs. Some of these groups are more active and regularly convene than others.

In practice, however, the Palestinian political division resulted in international aid to the Gaza Strip largely bypassing local government authorities and being channeled directly to local beneficiaries.⁷ This arrangement allowed humanitarian aid to reach Palestinians without being held hostage to political considerations. International agencies and NGOs liaised with local government officials for logistical purposes while maintaining formal political consultation with the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah. While this ultimately allowed agencies to pursue their missions with minimal political interference, it also meant that donor coordination mechanisms became marginalized, serving primarily as information exchange or advocacy platforms. Over time, Palestinian national ownership of aid weakened to the extent that the Local Aid Coordination Secretariat (LACS) lost its convening power, and by 2023, most SWGs were reduced to little more than information exchange platforms.

Additionally, international governance of aid to the Gaza Strip has been limited by bureaucratic, logistical, and political constraints that condition all aid with international political agendas and interests rather than centering the actual humanitarian, political, or development needs of the Palestinian population. While aid has been crucial for the basic needs of around 80% of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, it has failed to challenge Israeli and global policies that have perpetuated the conditions that make aid necessary. This inadvertently sustains and maintains the status quo.⁸

6. <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-209393/>

7. <https://www.ochaopt.org/country/opt>

8. See The New Humanitarian. "Aid to Palestinians has failed. Here's how to fix it." The New Humanitarian and Lowy Institute. "Aid and its limits in Palestine." Lowy Institute

As a result, support to Gaza Strip by most donors is subject to a highly scrutinized, limiting, and time-consuming vetting process, resulting in a series of preauthorized projects that may or may not accurately reflect current needs. More critically, this policy highlights broad international adherence to political agendas shaped by the government of Israel and its allies at the cost of providing responsive and relevant aid to the Gazan population.

In any case, all humanitarian aid to Gaza Strip is subject to Israeli control through the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and the Israeli army.⁹ COGAT regulates how much and what types of aid enter Gaza Strip and the movement of humanitarian workers in Gaza Strip. COGAT also requires a time-consuming, expensive, and arbitrary screening process that includes unpacking, inspecting, and repacking aid deliveries, which has resulted in food waste, delays in the transfer of critical medical supplies, and the outright refusal of aid based on often arbitrary reasons. COGAT maintains a ban list of items that cannot be imported into Gaza Strip, stipulating that no items be allowed that may pose dual military use, a policy that humanitarian actors have labeled arbitrary and often contradictory.¹⁰ All of this has led to the refusal of entire shipments of humanitarian aid for outright ludicrous reasons. Shipments have been turned away because they contain green-colored sleeping bags, which are considered a military color, or toys that are packaged in wooden cases instead of paper, or dates because they contained pits, or insulin pens for no particular reason.¹¹

3. Disruption and Realignment of Humanitarian Aid Under War

Following the Hamas attack of October 7th, 2023, the Israeli army launched the deadliest military incursion into Palestinian territory since 1948, whose stated military objectives have yet to be achieved after nine months of fighting throughout the Strip.¹² In the process, the Israeli war has entailed making Gaza unlivable,¹³ through indiscriminate targeting of civilians - including women and children, journalists, doctors and nurses, and providers of humanitarian aid, mass destruction of Gaza's vital physical, economic, education, health, and humanitarian infrastructure. All along Israel has rejected ceasefire proposals that would free Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails and has been unable to propose any clear strategy to end the war. In the process, the urgent priorities of protecting and aiding the population of the Gaza Strip have upended those that had prevailed over many years and created a whole new set of humanitarian missions that will be needed as long as the war continues and well after it ceases. Meanwhile, political pressures have forced a realignment of roles between different agencies (both within the UN system as well as between it and existing or new non-governmental actors).

9. Refugees International, "Siege and Starvation" 7 Mar. 2024

10. CNN. "Gaza Aid: Investigation Finds Israel's Restrictions Are Stopping Essential Items Getting In." CNN, 1 Mar. 2024, www.cnn.com/2024/03/01/middleeast/gaza-aid-israel-restrictions-investigation-intl-cmd/index.html. By Tamara Qiblawi, Allegra Goodwin, Nima Elbagir, Caroline Faraj, and Kareem Khadder. Video by Barbara Arvanitidis, Mark Baron, Alessia Tinti, Mary Rogers, Alex Platt, and Abeer Salman. Visuals by Henrik Pettersson and Alberto Mier.

11. CNN. "Gaza Aid: Investigation Finds Israel's Restrictions Are Stopping Essential Items Getting In."

12. <https://internationalpolicy.org/publications/the-israeli-war-on-gaza-post-war-scenarios/>

13. MAS. (2023, October 18). The economic dimensions of the war on the Gaza Strip according to international humanitarian law: Making Gaza Unlivable. Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute - MAS. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from https://mas.ps/cached_uploads/download/2023/10/18/pr1-en-gaza-attack-1697654590.pdf

3.1 The new humanitarian challenges of Gaza Strip

On October 9th, 2023, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant stated “I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed.”¹⁴. In the months following, the number of aid trucks to Gaza Strip dropped by at least 50%, and reports indicate that new requirements mean aid trucks can only be filled at partial capacity, are subject to additional stringent inspection measures, and are often delayed or turned away.¹⁵ For example, the UN reports that “between 6-12 April, 41 percent of humanitarian requests to the north [of Gaza] were denied.”¹⁶. This severe limitation of food supplies and lifesaving aid can only be understood as the deliberate creation of a human-made famine for over 2 million Gazans, in dire need, facing mass displacement and unprecedented violence and destruction.¹⁷.

The ongoing airstrikes and ground incursions have resulted in indescribable damage. By April 2024, 60% of Gaza’s housing had been damaged or destroyed, and over 1.7 million people (75 percent of Gazans) had been displaced – numbers that increase daily as the war progresses.¹⁸. Only 10 of Gaza Strip’s 36 hospitals remained functional,¹⁹ and over 90% of schools have been damaged or destroyed. Electricity is a precious commodity and fuel for vehicles and cooking is almost non-existent. Gaza Strip is critically low on clean drinking water, food, and medicine. Famine is widespread in Northern Gaza Strip, with fear that it will soon strike the remainder of the Gaza Strip.²⁰.

Hence, this war has created a humanitarian crisis the dimensions of which Palestine has never known, and which existing humanitarian coordination frameworks are under severe pressure to address coherently, harmoniously, or in line with established principles of aid effectiveness. Prolonged crisis modes of operation have generated a range of coordination, policy, legal, and ethical challenges for international agencies and NGO aid providers trying to respond to the humanitarian imperative while avoiding political manipulation or collusion with actions that defy international law (such as forced mass displacement). From the earliest stages of the war, humanitarian agencies recognized red lines in their operations as this forms part of emergency planning in humanitarian response. Some NGOs have also raised concern over the risk that their role in providing aid under these conditions could be perceived as complicity in war crimes²¹. However, these agencies have continuously emphasized the need to uphold principled humanitarian action to navigate these complex challenges.²². Indeed their track

14. Refugees International, “Siege and Starvation” 7 Mar. 2024

15. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-more-aid-is-entering-gaza-figures-disputed-2024-04-09/>

16. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148656>

17. Refugees International, “Siege and Starvation” 7 Mar. 2024

18. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). “OCHA oPt - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.” OCHA, n.d., <https://www.ochaopt.org/>. Accessed 16 April 2024; UN Women. (2024). Gender alert: The gendered impact of the crisis in Gaza [PDF file].

19. International Rescue Committee. “The Collapse of Gaza’s Health System.” International Rescue Committee, IRC, 1 March 2024, www.rescue.org/article/collapse-gazas-health-system.

20. Bryant, Elizabeth. “Hunger in Gaza: Famine Findings a ‘Dark Mark on the World,’ says WFP Palestine Country Director.” World Food Programme, WFP, 18 March 2024, www.wfp.org/stories/hunger-gaza-famine; Accessed 17 April 2024.

21. <https://www.change.org/p/>

22. <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/pauses-corridors-and-safe-zones-gaza-rhetoric-vs-reality>

record in terms of adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and coordination of positions and advocacy messages has helped to keep international agencies focused on similar priorities.

The international community's response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza Strip so far exemplifies how humanitarian needs may be sacrificed in favor of international political interests and alliances. The global political establishment is unable and unwilling to secure a political solution or to compel Israel to abide by international humanitarian law and has, in fact, continued to promote Israel's actions through direct military support and the continuation of existing trade and cooperation agreements. Simultaneously, the international donor community must maintain its portfolio of humanitarian activities and spend the aid funds earmarked for Gaza Strip, which it can only accomplish in coordination with Israel.

Delivering humanitarian aid under these contradictory conditions can only be accomplished by actors willing to submit to Israel's conditions and act as "politically neutral" relief workers. The World Central Kitchen (WCK), a food aid provider registered as a 501(c)(3) in the United States, for example, partnered with Israeli restaurants to serve meals "to [Israelis] ... displaced from their homes as a result of the October attack and ensuing shelling along the border."²³ The WCK was then permitted to operate in Gaza Strip while established aid providers such as UNRWA were being shut out of processes by Israeli order. International WCK staff were permitted to enter Gaza Strip while international journalists were denied entry. When the Israeli army killed seven WCK employees, the Army quickly investigated and concluded that "those who approved the strike were convinced that they were targeting armed Hamas operatives and not WCK employees."²⁴

An even more troubling example occurred during Ramadan 2024, when nine countries including the US, UK, and Germany, air-dropped aid into Gaza Strip from Jordan.²⁵ The airdrops were conducted in coordination with Israel and were funded despite being exponentially less cost-effective than delivering aid through the existing land routes. Airdropping aid also resulted in civilians being killed by the packages falling from the sky and in attempts to collect aid packages dropped into the sea.²⁶

Finally, since March, the US military collaborated with the Israeli army to construct a pier inside an IDF-securitized exclusion zone.²⁷ The pier and an offshore loading platform operates under the security protection of the IDF at an initial cost of \$320 million.²⁸ While US authorities have emphasized that the port is meant to supplement existing land-based aid delivery routes rather than replace them, it remains difficult to understand why the US government could not have insisted that existing land borders remain open to accommodate the pre-war 500-600 trucks of aid. The pier project has faced recurrent logistical problems, the apparently overwhelming sea state off Gaza, and most recently following the Israeli hostage rescue mission, accusations that its integration into an Israeli security facility compromises its humanitarian purpose.

23. <https://wck.org/relief/middle-east-2023>

24. <https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/hamas-israel-war-24/all-articles/conclusion-of-the-investigation-into-the-incident-in-which-7-wck-employees>

25. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68774923>

26. Sabbah, AbdelQadder, Kareem Khadder, Jomana Karadsheh, Abeer Salman, and Sana Noor Haq. "At Least 12 Palestinians Drown Trying to Retrieve Aid Parcels Dropped into the Sea." CNN, Cable News Network, 26 March 2024, www.cnn.com/2024/03/26/middleeast/palestinians

27. Palestine Economic Update, May 2024, MAS

28. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-militarys-pier-gaza-cost-320-million-2024-04-29/>

While such are the problems facing management of the aid effort under fire, the humanitarian needs the day after a ceasefire will be no less tremendous. In addition to the reconstruction and rehabilitation of vital infrastructure, the removal of rubble, and the clearance of explosive ordnances, Gaza Strip will require extensive support in all relief sectors. Food aid will be required by the entire population, particularly to address the high levels of child malnutrition. Gazans will also need immediate access to clean water basic sanitation and sewage systems while the infrastructure is rehabilitated. Some 1.7 million (and counting) displaced Gazans who have lost their homes will need temporary shelter options that can protect against hot summers and cold winters.²⁹ Tens of thousands of wounded men, women, and children will require makeshift medical facilities and specialized care providers. Lifelong support will likely be required for those who have been left seriously wounded and have been disabled for life. Mass trauma will require specialist programs to enable people to begin to recover. Reconstruction can only begin properly when these essential humanitarian baselines have been met, tasks that will take many months after the war has ended.

Temporary educational options will be required for Gaza's 625,000 school-aged children who have lost nearly all of their school facilities, and at least another year out of school is expected, in addition to the 2023-2024 school year.³⁰ Somehow, Gaza Strip universities will need innovative solutions so that over 90,000 students can reintegrate into higher education streams and not completely lose their investments already made in their futures.³¹ Finally, cash-for-work programs, universal basic income, and other financial support will be needed to protect against abject poverty and enable households and communities to absorb the shocks and set the scene for recovery.³² This all precedes the economic recovery and reconstruction that can only come in the wake of relief.

The sheer scale, depth, and scope of the new, emerging humanitarian realities in the Gaza Strip have overwhelmed not only the people there but has also prompted a range of novel aid interventions by a range of countries in the region and globally and flows coming through Rafah until May 2024, and sporadically through Israeli crossings into the Strip. These have been poorly coordinated and often stumped by logistical dynamics (e.g. the pier and airdropped aid) and Israeli military measures (e.g. the offensive in Rafah and settler attacks on aid convoys). The UN has already raised and spent close to \$2.5 billion in aid to Gaza Strip since the war began and is calling for an additional similar sum to keep flows at the bare minimum. This funding is allocated to cover critical needs, including approximately \$930 million for food and nutrition, \$400 million for health and medicine, and \$700 million for shelter and sanitation through the end of the year³³. While significant amounts of aid have been held up and spoiled since the Rafah border was closed (with up to 2000 trucks at one point in May 2024 loaded with goods on the Egyptian side of the crossing),³⁴ the composition of aid reflects a disjointed and haphazard management of aid actually reaching Gaza Strip, not necessarily addressing immediate basic needs or food security requirements. Protein bars cannot be a substitute for balanced human nutrition.

29. <https://www.rescue.org/article/crisis-palestine-what-you-need-know>

30. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gazans-strive-study-war-shatters-education-system-2024-05-13/>

31. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/explainer-gaza-israel-palestine-war-university-destroy>

32. See Omar Shaban analyses on Pal-Think for Strategic Studies: <https://palthink.org/en/2024/05/12409/>

33. <https://www.unocha.org/news/gaza-aid-conference-un-relief-chief-calls-boost-humanitarian-assistance#>

34. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/24/world/middleeast/rafah-gaza-aid-hunger.html>

3.2 Realignment of Stakeholders and Global Public Opinion

The intensity and brutality of the war have brought into play a range of new actors, reshaped alliances, intensified existing divides, and brought the weight of global public opinion to bear in pressuring for stepped-up humanitarian aid. While some of this realignment has been positive, overall change has been slow, and to date, has not altered the status quo. However, several major new factors are complicating the challenges:

- The proliferation of smaller NGOs many of which have no prior track record in Palestine and could be more liable to political manipulation than established humanitarian NGOs.
- Rivalries and turf battles between UN agencies more or less favored by Israel, as well as a confusing UN top management arrangement that does not always appear clear to the public (who leads on what?).
- The direct involvement of regional and international actors, and private security corporations as part of the humanitarian effort, for example in funding or operating the controversial maritime corridor
- The sudden reappearance on the scene of some donors who had over recent years deserted the Palestine arena in frustration with the adverse status quo prior to 2023.

A major factor affecting funding of the relief effort is the political impasse arising from the US administration all-out support for Israel's war against the Gaza Strip, even while calling for increases in humanitarian aid to Gaza Strip and a ceasefire that would end the violence and return the Israeli hostages. While media reports hint at some divisions between the US and Israeli governments, resulting from the high number of civilian deaths and the attack on Rafah, on the ground the humanitarian catastrophe has only widened and become more entrenched.³⁵ And though divisions within the United States Congress have intensified, with some lawmakers criticizing ongoing, unconditional U.S. support for Israel and calling for a reassessment of military aid, the administration has not acted in line with expectations of the international community to put an end to Israeli aggression.³⁶

The politicization of aid flows and modalities was most evident in the unwarranted cut-off of funding for UNRWA by the US and major donors, only some of whom have since resumed funding, a process held hostage to Israeli misinformation about UNRWA and its neutrality in the conflict. The European Union has generally called for a ceasefire and humanitarian access to Gaza Strip, though member states vary in their levels of support for Palestine.³⁷ The German government's position has retained its historical pro-Israeli stance; Germany has consistently emphasized that Israel's security is a cornerstone of German policy, which has translated into the continued provision of military aid and maintaining all cooperation agreements with Israel.³⁸ While political conditionalities on aid not being diverted from humanitarian purposes are understandable and natural, this has extended into a broader realm of post-October 7 inspired unsubstantiated conditionalities, which risk creating new complexities and deficiencies in the governance of aid.

35. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/08/politics/joe-biden-interview-cnntv/index.html> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68735879>

36. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/jan/10/> and <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/08/politics/>

37. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/23/>

38. <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-support-israel-military-campaign-gaza-wavering/>

The Arab states' positions have also seen notable shifts. The Abraham Accords, which saw several Arab states begin to normalize relations with Israel under the Trump administration, have been strained. Public opinion in the Arab countries, if muted, often opposes the Accords, and the current war has intensified scrutiny and criticism of these agreements.³⁹ In November 2023, Bahrain's Parliament announced the cessation of economic ties with Israel and the withdrawal of its ambassadors.⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia has slowed engagement with the Abraham Accords process and has conditioned future agreement on a concrete commitment to Palestinian statehood.⁴¹ Jordan has come under popular pressure to do more to speed aid into Gaza Strip, while Egypt equally faces heightened public scrutiny over its role in managing the huge aid stockpiles waiting to enter through Rafah, as well as the passage of Palestinians able to depart Gaza.⁴² Meanwhile, the role of other Arab states such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates has gone beyond their mediation and growing political involvement in Gaza's fate, and have become major providers of humanitarian aid, including through the maritime corridor.

Turkey and Iran have solidified their support for Palestinian military factions, providing political and, in some cases, financial or material support. Turkey has suspended all trade with Israel pending a ceasefire and an increase in humanitarian aid to Gaza.⁴³ In Yemen, Houthi Ansar Allah forces have launched missiles and drones towards Israel and upended global shipping routes by targeting ships linked to Israel in the Red Sea.⁴⁴

Amidst this rapidly transforming humanitarian aid landscape, political pressures have built against Israel since the war began, most recently at the United Nations Security Council which in June 2024 voted to support the latest US ceasefire accord initiative.⁴⁵ Additionally, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is considering allegations of genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza, a case brought by South Africa against Israel that the Court has only begun to deliberate.⁴⁶ Finally, in May 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor announced his applications for arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as Hamas leaders Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Deif, and Ismail Haniyeh, based on allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed on and following October 7.⁴⁷

Simultaneously, large-scale public demonstrations and global protest movements have surged, showing solidarity with Palestinian rights and influencing public opinion and political discourse worldwide. University student movements have taken hold across many campuses, including in the United States, and are often cited as reminiscent of the student protests against the Vietnam War.⁴⁸

39. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy> and <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/>

40. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/01/the-october-7-massacre-and-the-war-in-gaza-impact-on-bahrain-and-the-united-arab-emirates/>

41. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/04/27/blinken-to-address-normalization-with-israel-during-visit-to-saudi-arabia/>

42. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-ibrahim-organi-sinai-tribal-leader-gaza>

43. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68945380>

44. <https://www.newsweek.com/houthis-role-iran-israel-war-nasreddin-amer-1895640>

45. S/RES/2735(2024)

46. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/> and <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203454>

47. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/February>

48. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/> and <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/03/>

These realignments and new political realities, against the backdrop of a humanitarian crisis the likes of which the international community has rarely dealt with in such an adversarial and fraught situation, do not bode well for a humanitarian relief effort at the level of the challenge nor for the needed coherence with established principles of aid effectiveness.

4. The Governance of Postwar Relief Aid

Since the early days of the war, international officials and pundits have flooded the media with possible scenarios for the future of Gaza, in the so-called “Day After”, offering gratuitous suggestions for potential Palestinian leadership structures and the governance of humanitarian aid.

“Historically, postwar planning—dayafterism—preoccupied not only governments and businesses but also universities, as was the case throughout World War II. Scientists, too, talk routinely of “the day after.” This may, of course, just be a normal human reaction to the dread and grief of war. Or it may be an attempt to counteract war’s inherent shortsightedness and the blinders that made it happen in the first place.”⁴⁹

The most likely scenarios for the moment entail a continued Israeli military presence around or within the Gaza Strip for the immediate future, even though Hamas ceasefire demands and the international community expects a full withdrawal in the event of a ceasefire deal. The specifics remain uncertain as to how unified Palestinian governance in the West Bank and Gaza Strip will be achieved in the short and medium terms to meet the challenges of claiming national ownership and credible leadership of this monumental aid effort. But the onus in the first instance is not on Palestine, the victim, but rather the aggressor, whereby it is evident that Israeli government conditions as currently stated will not accept a unified Palestinian national administration in any form that might facilitate the reunification of governance in Gaza and the West Bank.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Israel continues to promote delusional ideas of a local tribal, civil society, or private sector Gaza leadership under the tutelage of a consortium of Arab states and other international actors.

While such positions from Israel reflect the same sense of impunity that it has enjoyed so far in this war and has become the norm from such an extremist leadership, the greater risk lies in international acquiescence and underwriting of such outlaw behavior. It would indeed be problematic if the international community showed a willingness to go along with leadership transition and humanitarian aid plans that ignore Palestinian autonomy and agency. Several clearly established and supposedly inalienable international principles of responsible aid delivery emphasize the importance of local ownership and agency, which the donor community seems to have forgotten. In the context of the current global political consensus that has enabled Israel’s aggression to continue unabated, the absence of coherent and inclusive consultation and coordination mechanisms effectively sidelines Palestinian expertise, knowledge, leadership, and rights.

49. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/hunger-time/>

50. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-israeli-war-on-gaza-post-war-scenarios/>

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) offers a comprehensive framework for enhancing the impact and efficiency of development aid. These principles were endorsed in the Paris Declaration of 2005 and further refined in the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008. The framework emphasizes five main principles: ownership, alignment, harmonization, results, and mutual accountability. For the sake of the record as the global gold standard and as principles indeed worthy of attempting to adhere to in governance of aid in the coming years, let us recall these.

“Ownership” maintains that developing countries establish their own strategies for achieving development goals and exercise greater agency over the development process. This involves deep participation in policy formulation, aid coordination, and ensuring that aid delivery increasingly relies on national systems rather than international actors. “Alignment” requires donor countries and organizations to support these local development strategies and utilize local systems whenever possible. The principle of “inclusive partnerships” underscores the necessity for donors, civil society, and developing countries to collaborate fully, as partners, to achieve development objectives.

In addition, the recognized interconnectedness between humanitarian, development, and peace programming is widely regarded as a central component of the resilience aid paradigm. Since the early 1990s, international actors have sought to strengthen the links and connections between humanitarian action and development aid. They have recognized that while the aid sector is formally divided into development and humanitarian arms—with humanitarian aid seeking to mitigate the effects of immediate crises by providing necessary relief items, and development aid aiming to understand and respond to the systemic and long-term root causes of chronic vulnerabilities, particularly economic instability, and poverty—they are deeply connected and mutually reinforcing.⁵¹ This recognition has been formalized in the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, or Triple Nexus approach, which prioritizes “prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding, investing in development whenever possible, while ensuring immediate humanitarian needs continue to be met.”⁵²

Despite this recognition, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts in the Gazan context have been systematically undermined by the Israeli government with tacit approval from the international community, preventing coordinated efforts for both immediate and long-term needs.⁵³ Additionally, power imbalances between international and local actors have been persistent and continue to undermine the localization of aid. International actors still dominate decision-making and resource allocation, limiting the meaningful engagement of local communities and organizations.⁵⁴ Finally, traditional funding mechanisms and donor priorities often favor short-term, project-based interventions that maintain and support the political status quo over longer-term, holistic approaches

51. For detailed descriptions and evaluation of this approach see: FAO. (2017). The FAO’s Role in the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. Food and Agriculture Organization; ICRC. (2016). The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Humanitarian-Development Nexus. International Committee of the Red Cross, and United Nations. (2020); The United Nations and the Triple Nexus Approach. United Nations.

52. OECD. (2008). The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

53. See <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature> and <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/05/03/>

54. See <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5019>, and <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C58/>

that challenge a failing political system.⁵⁵ EU diplomats have for a decade bemoaned the impression that their funding was helping to sustain an unacceptable status quo of prolonged occupation. Only today is it possible to reimagine aid as a force for liberation, not subjugation.

5. Reclaiming Ownership: Palestine's Path to Sovereignty in Aid Distribution and Governance

The disaster that has unfolded since October 7 demonstrates that the Palestinian people pay a heavy price for the international community's inability to protect their basic human rights and the systemic biases that undermine the international community's legitimacy as the protector of these rights. It is also clear that existing Palestinian governing structures cannot provide in their current form the mass national mobilizing capacity to fulfill the promise of a sovereign Palestinian state free of Israeli occupation and the international restrictions that constrain economic development. The international community cannot be blamed for Palestinian disunity and understandably awaits a single Palestinian interlocutor. While the PA was designed and operated as an interim vehicle towards independence, and the PLO-Hamas political reconciliation appears impossible, few would disagree that the necessary condition of reclaiming Palestinian ownership of aid requires a unified Palestinian governance in all of the occupied Palestinian territory.

As war rages on and Israeli military occupation of the Gaza Strip seems the only default scenario for now, it is time to reassess the foundational aspects of the Oslo Accords and the sources of legitimacy that international donors have in governing aid, particularly for Gaza. For example, what is still ad-hoc in the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), which was not established to support Palestinian state formation but rather to underwrite a peace process, as donors should today be oriented.

Similarly, Palestinian national rebuilding strategies cannot take the same premises as the past 25 years of national planning which ultimately became more of a wish list than an investment and funding agenda. New strategies must create realistic opportunities for sustainable development and real economic viability even in the face of a hostile occupation but can only succeed if anchored in concrete steps towards a diplomatic solution that protects and memorializes Palestinian rights. While international donor support will clearly be required to make progress in this direction, it would be yet another large-scale failure to believe that this support can be designed, coordinated, and delivered without Palestinian participation, indeed leadership.

For decades, the Palestinian people have been subjects of a narrative written by others. Humanitarian aid, intended to alleviate their suffering, has too often been wielded as a tool of external influence rather than a genuine instrument of support. Palestinians are faced not only with occupation and war but also with the subtle undermining of their autonomy through externally controlled aid systems. The very aid meant to support their survival has frequently disregarded their voices, sidelined their expertise, and overshadowed their knowledge of their own needs and potential solutions. The moment is opportune for Palestine to reclaim its ownership over the

55. <https://s42831.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/triple-nexus-in-practice-nwow-full-december-2019-web.pdf>

distribution and governance of aid and to transform dependence into self-determination. The Paris Aid Effectiveness principles should frame and guide future donor and national aid management processes, alongside lessons from the rich experience of international development cooperation with Palestine, including its successes and failures.

Palestinians must now emerge as the architects of their own recovery and development. This shift is not merely a demand for inclusion; it is a call for justice and an insistence on adherence to internationally recognized principles of effective and responsible aid delivery. It is about recognizing that those who endure hardships are best positioned to understand and address them. It is about ensuring that aid is not a means of imposing external priorities but a mechanism that genuinely empowers Palestinians to pursue their own aspirations for peace, stability, and prosperity.

Palestinian ownership of aid governance means leading the conversation on effective aid governance. It means that aid initiatives should be designed and implemented by those who understand the local landscape, who can see beyond immediate relief to long-term resilience, and who are committed to empowering their communities. It means that the design and coordination of aid do not happen in distant office suits and boardrooms but are lived and led by those on the ground.

In practical terms, reclaiming ownership involves developing robust local institutions capable of managing and distributing aid effectively. It requires transparent, accountable governance structures that inspire trust among the Palestinian people and confidence among international partners. The global community must support this shift out of a recognition of the Palestinians' right to self-determination. International donors must move from a mindset of control to one of partnership, from directing aid efforts to facilitating them. This transition demands humility and a commitment to upholding the dignity and agency of the Palestinian people.

In order to transition to an aid governance system owned and managed by Palestinians, the donor community must be willing to center Palestinians and their needs throughout the aid delivery process. There is no shortage of highly educated, capable, and politically aware Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, and they have a clear vision for their future. Donors that cling to outdated ideas and continue delivering aid in a "business as usual" manner limit the ability of aid to meet the current and future needs of Palestinians.

In addition, the international community must be willing to acknowledge and address the structural challenges facing Palestinian aid and development. Accountability measures must be taken to leverage international humanitarian law and norms when Israel prevents aid delivery or destroys civilian infrastructure. A separate commission should be established to document the cost of occupation, laying the groundwork for plausible future demands for reparations.

The international community must also be willing to support and work with existing forums and organizations in more than a tokenistic manner. The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) can and should take decisive steps to ensure greater involvement of Palestinian civil society and local authorities in its meetings, aligning aid strategies with local needs and priorities. The AHLC should focus on providing targeted support to strengthen Palestinian institutions so they can manage and implement aid projects independently.

The Local Aid Coordination Secretariat (LACS) should enhance its effectiveness by promoting integrated planning approaches that combine humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts. The Secretariat should work on ways to decentralize decision-making processes so that aid distribution reflects on-the-ground realities and is more responsive to immediate needs. Sector SWGs can maximize their impact and support Palestinian ownership by fostering cross-sector collaboration to address interconnected challenges and leverage synergies between different areas of intervention.

Clearer UN interagency coordination and leadership can be achieved by strengthening the role of OCHA and the Resident Coordinator Offices (RCOs). OCHA should provide comprehensive data and analysis to inform decision-making and ensure interventions are based on accurate assessments of needs and impact, while the RCO should work to develop stronger partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and community organizations to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of aid programs.

Since the onset of the war, global movements in support of Palestinian rights have surged, demonstrating a profound solidarity that transcends borders. These movements, fueled by the passion and conviction of millions around the world, have brought renewed attention to the Palestinian struggle for justice and equality. They have highlighted the urgent need for a paradigm shift in how the international community approaches aid and governance in Palestine. The voices of these global advocates echo the call for Palestinian sovereignty, urging that aid should not be a tool for perpetuating dependency but a means of empowering people to rebuild their nation on their terms. For Palestine, reclaiming ownership over aid is a step towards sovereignty. It is a declaration that their future will not be dictated by others but crafted by their own legitimate aspirations. It is an affirmation that despite the long years of struggle, the spirit of the Palestinian people remains unbroken and their resolve unwavering.

Discussion Questions

- How can international donors better support Palestinian ownership and governance of aid in the Gaza Strip?
- In what ways can the international community leverage international humanitarian law to address obstacles imposed by Israel on the delivery of aid to the Gaza Strip?
- What specific measures can be taken to enhance the capacity of Palestinian institutions to govern aid more effectively in the Gaza Strip?
- What are the key challenges in coordinating humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip given the Palestinian political division and how can these challenges be mitigated?
- How can the involvement of local Palestinian communities be increased in the planning and implementation of aid programs to ensure that their needs and priorities are central to these efforts?
- What strategies can be employed to improve the coordination between various UN agencies, international NGOs, and local organizations to enhance the efficiency and impact of aid in the Gaza Strip?