

Israel uses starvation as a weapon of war

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Between ourselves it must be clear that there is no room for both peoples together in this country. We shall not achieve our goal if the Arabs are in this small country. There is no other way than to transfer the Arabs from here to neighboring countries—all of them. Not one village, not one tribe should be left.—Joseph Weitz, head of the Jewish Agency's Colonization Department, 1940

The situation of hunger, starvation and famine is a result of Israel's extensive restrictions on the entry and distribution of humanitarian aid and commercial goods, displacement of most of the population, as well as the destruction of crucial civilian infrastructure. ... The extent of Israel's continued restrictions on the entry of aid into Gaza, together with the manner in which it continues to conduct hostilities, may amount to the use of starvation as a method of war, which is a war crime.—UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, March 19, 2024

The use of starvation by Israel as a weapon of genocide in Gaza is an objective fact, for which Nazi Germany is the main modern precedent, as Holocaust survivors who remain alive attest. It is in this tradition of the Nazi regime and the genocidal policies toward the Jews and Soviet population that the Israeli government has borrowed a page out of history.

Five-plus months into the military onslaught on the Gaza Strip, a great majority of Gazans are facing emergency or catastrophic levels of food insecurity as a result of Israel's genocidal policies that have blockaded the entry of food and water trucks into the enclave. The next few months will only exacerbate this grave situation that could see thousands die of starvation every week.

Last week's report by Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, affirmed in the strongest terms, "[There are] reasonable grounds to believe that the threshold indicating the commission of ... acts of genocide against Palestinians in Gaza has been met. The overwhelming nature and scale of Israel's assault on Gaza and the destructive conditions of life it has inflicted reveal an intent to physically destroy Palestinians as a group."

Currently, according to conservative official estimates, casualties in Gaza are at nearly 32,500 deaths, of which over 70 percent have been women and children. The over 8,000 missing are presumed dead, their bodies buried under the rubble of the daily onslaught by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), who have been armed to the teeth with weapons supplied by the US.

At least 75,000 have been injured in the more than five months since Israel initiated its genocidal campaign, many with "life-changing mutilations" for which medical attention is severely lacking, risking a high incidence of fatal consequences when left untreated. Over 70 percent of residential areas have been destroyed, and 80 percent of the 2.23 million people have been internally displaced, with 1.5 million now crammed into Rafah, awaiting the impending military assault that is being planned with Washington's direct involvement.

The entire enclave is now reliant on aid trucks to bring in food, water and emergency provisions, which are trickling in at a fraction of what is required to sustain life. Many families are having to make do with one meal a day if they are lucky. Limited to a piece of flat bread and some canned cream cheese or a tin of fava beans, the diet provides barely 300 to

400 calories per day, starvation rations that lack the essential nutrition to sustain life for very long. Already, more than 10 children are dying daily by starvation.

The impact of food deprivation

Infants and toddlers, who require at least 1,000 calories a day to sustain their high metabolic demands, are especially vulnerable due to their limited reserves. If their caloric intake is restricted for even the briefest amounts of time, they quickly begin to lose weight as their body breaks down the small amount of carbohydrate and fat stored in their liver and tissues.

Once these are depleted, to preserve the most important functioning organs like the brain, the body then resorts to cannibalizing proteins from muscles, including the intestines and the heart. The immune systems of the very young are weakened, making them much more susceptible to deadly consequences of infection. Indeed, they are the most vulnerable and the first casualties in Israel's employment of starvation as a weapon of war. They often are the first to die, and they die at double the rate of adults. If they survive, they face the prospect of ill health for the rest of their lives. Their growth may be stunted, their organs affected, and they may have long-lasting cognitive developmental trauma.

Children around 10 years of age require around 1,600 calories. Adult women and men need somewhere around 1,800 to over 2,200. However, mothers who are breastfeeding must supplement their diet to continue feeding their newborns. There are approximately 60,000 pregnant women in Gaza facing severe malnutrition and dehydration and the prospect of giving birth without any medical resources. Around 5,000 women are giving birth each month under hazardous conditions.

Starvation—the prolonged undernourishment of the body that leads to suffering or death from hunger—over several weeks or months can result in specific diseases like anemia from low iron stores or beriberi (vitamin B1, or thiamine, deficiency) that leads to difficulty walking, loss of sensation in hands and feet, paralysis of lower legs, mental confusion, pain, speech difficulties, tingling and eye twitching.

The weight loss is substantial, as evidenced by the gaunt faces of children who are half their normal weights. The main disabling symptoms are feeling faint or dizzy. Profound weakness means the starving become bed-bound.

As the body tries to compensate, metabolism slows, and temperature regulation begins to fail, with the feeling of gnawing chill permeating the body. Kidneys cannot function, and the immune system is unable to fight off diseases. The thyroid function becomes substantially reduced. Abdominal cramping and diarrhea are common symptoms which exacerbate dehydration. Without intravenous fluids, blood pressure drops, and heart rates become slow or erratic. Mentally, clinical depression sets in. When nothing is left for the body but to scavenge muscle tissue, death is not far off. Even the muscles of the heart are not spared to provide

sustenance.

One danger in attempting to rescue people after prolonged starvation are potential cardiac problems requiring close monitoring of these patients in a medical care unit. If refeeding is suddenly initiated, there is a risk of sudden cardiac failure and ensuing death. There can be a precipitous drop in potassium levels. Increase in fluid volumes can precipitate cardiac failure. With the end of starvation, cardiac compensation mechanisms may overshoot and lead to arrhythmia or cardiac arrest. Although the etiology of these uncertain compensatory mechanisms is unclear, these may be related to the loss of cardiac muscle in parallel to skeletal muscle wastage.

Currently, on average, only 126 food trucks are making their way into Gaza. Before October 7, the figure was around 500 to 700 trucks each day. And at that time, Gazans were able to supplement 20 percent of their dietary needs internally through farming and other food industries.

However, the entire food source that had existed within Gaza has now been destroyed, and the population is solely reliant on the aid that Israel allows to come in. The whole of the Gaza Strip is being systematically starved to death as lines of aid trucks linger for days outside just a few miles beyond the enclave. As UN Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick told reporters recently, “[w]e are lucky getting 10 to 15 trucks in at any point in time over a two-day period.”

At the current rate, UN representatives on the scene estimate that the daily death toll from starvation can rise to 200 per day if the blockade continues. In short, this catastrophic development amounts to an inhumanly cruel form of mass torture, which is a clear violation of international laws. The US and imperialist powers who have given Israel their wholehearted blessings are complicit in the act of genocide.

Targeting the young generation

The cruelest element in the use of starvation as a weapon by Israel is the complete annihilation of the new generation of Palestinian children. As Albanese's report noted, “The savagery of Israel's latest assault is best illustrated by the torment inflicted upon children of all ages, killed, or rescued from under the rubble, maimed, orphaned, many without surviving family. Considering the significance of children to the future development of society, inflicting serious bodily harm to them [by bullets or through starvation] can be reasonably interpreted ‘as a means to destroy the group in whole or in part’.”

A recent Integrated Food Security Phase classification (IPC) report published by Oxfam International found that 2.13 million Gazans (95.5 percent) are facing high acute food insecurity (considered IPC phase three or above). Of these, 677,000 (32 percent) are in IPC phase five food insecurity defined as being in famine or having a complete lack of access to food and other basic needs. As the World Food Programme notes, “Starvation, death, destitution and extremely acute levels of acute malnutrition are evident.”

With the continuation of hostilities, the number in this category is expected to almost double to more than 1.1 million (50 percent of the population) by mid-July. Another 854,000 will be in Emergency phase four, or a situation where families face large food consumption gaps alongside very high acute malnutrition rates and excess deaths. In basic mathematical figures, 88 percent of Gaza's population will be on the brink of death. (See Figure from IPC.)

Sally Abi Khalil, Oxfam's Middle East and North Africa Regional Director, said, “This new report shows that the catastrophic levels of hunger and starvation in Gaza are the highest ever recorded on the IPC scale, both in terms of number of people and percentage of the population. Never before have we seen such a rapid deterioration into widespread

starvation.”

Khalil added, “Northern Gaza is days away from famine, and the rest of Gaza faces a similar fate. Children are already dying of malnutrition and starvation under the gaze of the international community. Since December, the number of people in Gaza who have plunged into catastrophic levels of hunger has nearly doubled. Oxfam's report today shows how Israel is causing these horrifying figures, by deliberately blocking food and aid from going into Gaza. It has been using starvation as a weapon of war for over five months now. ... Israel's deliberate manufacturing of suffering is systematic and of such a scale and intensity that it creates a real risk of a genocide in Gaza.”

What the Zionists learned from the Nazis

The use of starvation as a weapon of war was made clear early in Israel's assault on Gaza. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on October 9, 2023, “I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly.”

In mid-November, his current adviser, retired Major General Giora Eiland, in an editorial in *Yedioth Ahroneh*, doubled down: “The international community is warning us against a severe humanitarian disaster and severe epidemics. We must not shy away from this. After all, severe epidemics in the south of Gaza will bring victory closer and reduce casualties among IDF soldiers.”

One would have to look as far back to role of starvation in the Holocaust to find clear parallels.

Almost 100,000 people in the Warsaw Ghetto—a fourth of its total victims—were killed by hunger and disease prior to the beginning of the great deportations to Treblinka and Auschwitz in the summer of 1942.

The Nazis also developed the infamous “Hunger Plan” for the Soviet Union, a key component of their genocidal war of annihilation against the Soviet population. As part of the Generalplan Ost, it envisaged the targeted starvation of some 30 million people in western and northwestern Russia. The policy was intended to ensure food supplies for Germany's war effort, while creating living space (*Lebensraum*) for the expansion of the Nazi empire.

It has been estimated that at least 27 million Soviet citizens were killed as a result of the Nazi invasion. Among these were up to 3.5 million Soviet prisoners of war, the vast majority of whom were murdered through a systematic policy of starvation. Many of them were given on average no more than 420 calories per day. It is inconceivable that the planners of the Gaza genocide are unaware of these historical precedents.

As Christian Gerlach, in his book on the extermination of the European Jews, explained in his chapter on hunger policies and mass murder: “This starvation policy, one of the biggest mass murder plans in human history, was designed earlier than any specific plans to kill European Jews and was intended to kill far more people. Although deeply rooted in pragmatic considerations, it was broadly compatible with important elements of Nazi thinking: racist contempt and enslavement of Slavs, the destruction of communism and long-term intentions to win land for German settlers in the east. Thus, the hunger policy was based on military necessity, but none free of ideology.” (*Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*)

The current scale of genocidal intent through starvation in Gaza assumes similar pragmatic and ideological conceptions. Similarly, the starvation policy was not conceived spontaneously as a response to the October 7, 2023 uprising by Hamas against the brutal suppression of Palestinians' right of self-determination in an open-air prison system called the Gaza

Strip.

Diplomatic cables published in 2008 by WikiLeaks between Israel and Washington informed the White House that it intended to keep Gaza's economy "on the brink of collapse." Reuters wrote in 2011, "Israel wanted the coastal territory's economy 'functioning at the lowest level possible consistent with avoiding a humanitarian crisis,' according to the November 3, 2008, cable."

It has been well documented that Israel had conducted precise calculations on the minimum number of calories to avoid malnutrition in Gaza Strip to allocate how many trucks would be allowed. This speaks volumes to the premeditated use of starvation as a potential weapon in their policy to rid the strip of all Gazans.

As Fawzi Barhoun, a Hamas spokesman, had said when the cables were published by WikiLeaks that they constituted "evidence that the Gaza blockade was planned and the target was not Hamas or the government, as the occupation always claimed, [but that] this blockade targeted all human beings ... this document should be used to trial the occupation for their crimes against the humanity in Gaza."

Precisely what had been imagined but not yet dared, was finally undertaken, a reality which informs the comments made by Gallant and Eiland. Specifically, the evolution of imperialism and Zionism has reached the stage where the annihilation of the Palestinians through mass starvation has become an open policy. The working class must organize under the banner of socialist internationalism and prevent this historic catastrophe.



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