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How nonviolent action might save Gaza

Gaza has become the harshest test of international humanitarian law since Rwanda — yet the world's most vital protection framework remains unused

'In Gaza we are witnessing an absolute hell', UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared in August 2025. With over 60 000 people killed – the vast majority civilians, including thousands of children – Gaza has become the most severe test of international humanitarian law since the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Yet, as diplomatic paralysis grips the Security Council, the world's most important protection doctrine remains unused.

The UN's Responsibility to Protect (R2P) could offer a pathway forward, but only if applied through comprehensive nonviolent action rather than failed military paradigms.

A nonviolent framework for protection

R2P emerged from the international community's failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda and in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995. This doctrine rests on three pillars: states must protect their populations; the international community must assist them; and when states manifestly fail, collective action becomes necessary. Crucially, R2P doesn't authorise military intervention at will — it demands proportionate, multilateral responses that prioritise prevention and respect international law.

Gaza presents a textbook R2P case. The International Court of Justice found a plausible case that Israel may be committing genocidal acts. Hamas's October 7 attack in Israel clearly violated international humanitarian law. But with entire neighbourhoods in ruins, infrastructure decimated, and over a million people facing displacement and famine, Gazan civilians are systematically deprived of life's necessities. When one party to a conflict possesses overwhelming military superiority and civilians suffer mass atrocities, R2P becomes urgent — regardless of nationality or political affiliation.

Traditional military interventions have failed repeatedly in this region. Libya's 2011 experience showed how R2P's military application can worsen conflicts rather than resolve them. Gaza thus demands a different approach: sustained nonviolent intervention that protects civilians immediately while addressing the root causes of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

The international community must treat humanitarian access as non-negotiable, employing coordinated diplomatic pressure to ensure that sufficient aid reaches civilians. This means establishing internationally-monitored humanitarian corridors to and within Gaza and demanding unrestricted medical supply access. The UN Security Council should authorise civilian protection missions composed of unarmed international observers whose presence may deter violence and who document abuses. While air drops of supplies serve as interim measures, ground access remains essential for sustained civilian protection.

Sustainable civilian protection comes from empowered communities, not external force.

Military intervention by outside powers in Gaza remains politically untenable and ethically fraught. However, deploying unarmed international observers – human rights monitors, legal experts and civilian protection teams – has proven effective from South Sudan to the West Bank. An International Civilian Protection Corps, trained in nonviolent intervention and conflict de-escalation, should be established immediately. Their presence along humanitarian corridors could reduce attacks on aid convoys while providing transparent documentation of human rights violations by all parties.

Moreover, mass atrocity crimes demand serious consequences. The International Criminal Court must investigate all violations of international humanitarian law, regardless of perpetrators. Targeted sanctions on leaders and entities responsible for war crimes should follow from the UN Security Council, General Assembly or individual states. However, punitive approaches must be complemented by truth and reconciliation processes that address collective trauma. Impunity breeds repetition: accountability deters, but reconciliation heals.

Countries with close ties to Israel bear special responsibility. The United States provides approximately $3.8 billion annually in military aid to Israel. Making this assistance conditional on humanitarian access and civilian protection compliance could put immediate pressure on Israel.

Clear red lines – targeting civilians, denying humanitarian access, expanding illegal settlements – should trigger major diplomatic and economic consequences for Israel. States influencing Hamas or other militant groups in Gaza must face similar pressure to uphold international human rights norms.

Lastly, civilian protection also requires addressing root causes. Gaza's economic strangulation fuels desperation and conflict. Targeted development aid, support for Palestinian economic and political sovereignty and pressure to lift Israeli restrictions on aid that serves no legitimate security purpose are essential. Simultaneously, Palestinian and Israeli civil society organisations working for peace need adequate funding, international accompaniment and amplified voices. Sustainable civilian protection comes from empowered communities, not external force.

The uniting for peace alternative

When the UN Security Council remains deadlocked by veto-wielding powers prioritising strategic interests over humanitarian principles, the General Assembly can act. UN Resolution 377 (V) 'Uniting for Peace', adopted in 1950, allows the Assembly to consider matters immediately when the Security Council fails due to permanent members' vetoes. The resolution enables recommendations for collective measures, including armed force, when necessary, to maintain international peace and security.

Historical applications reveal both potential and limitations. The Suez Crisis in 1956 marked the mechanism's greatest success — Britain and France complied with General Assembly withdrawal demands following international isolation, leading to the first UN peacekeeping force. Conversely, the Soviet Union completely ignored Assembly calls for Afghanistan withdrawal in 1980, demonstrating this Resolution's potential impotence against determined major powers.

Most relevant to Gaza is the ongoing Tenth Emergency Special Session on Palestine, convened in 1997 and now the longest-running emergency session in UN history. Despite numerous UN resolutions condemning Israeli settlement activities by overwhelming margins (131-3-14 in 1997), Israel has refused compliance and expressed contempt for Assembly decisions. While achieving symbolic victories like Palestine's upgraded UN observer status in 2024, fundamental objectives remain unfulfilled after nearly three decades.

Yet, even 'failed' applications of Assembly resolutions create legal

foundations for future accountability measures and diplomatic isolation. The overwhelming support for Ukraine UN Assembly resolutions (141 countries) demonstrates the potential for broad international consensus when states and NGOs are properly mobilised.

Overcoming Israeli opposition

Israel's strategic relationship with major powers creates for many of its actions significant protective barriers against meaningful international pressure. However, systematic nonviolent strategies might help overcome this resistance.

Economic leverage provides immediate tools. Beyond conditional or suspended US military aid to Israel, targeted sanctions on Israeli officials blocking humanitarian aid or targeting civilians, modelled on Magnitsky-style legislation, could create personal consequences for perpetrators of human rights violations.

Corporate accountability through divestment campaigns and supply chain disruptions might initiate transparency requirements that pressure companies profiting from the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Gaza's people deserve more than temporary ceasefires between devastating violence and famine.

As recently announced by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the EU has suspended bilateral support to Israel and proposed sanctions on 'extremist ministers' and violent settlers, thereby demonstrating how multinational entities can apply coordinated economic pressure even when individual member states remain divided. As Israel's primary trading partner, representing 32 per cent of its overall trade, EU actions carry significant economic weight.

Legal strategies multiply these pressure points. The General Assembly can request International Court of Justice advisory opinions on the legal consequences of Israeli policies. Universal jurisdiction prosecutions in domestic courts for war crimes could create global accountability risks for perpetrators of war crimes and other violations of human rights. Enhanced International Criminal Court cooperation with major powers could facilitate the investigation of all such violations.

Multilateral diplomatic isolation by regional bodies – the African Union, the Arab League and others – of suspected Israeli human rights violators may put pressure on Israeli decision makers to change course. Israel could

also be suspended from specific UN bodies or international organisations until its compliance with UN resolutions and international law, as was done with apartheid South Africa. Third-party mediation through neutral countries like Norway or Ireland offers alternatives to failed US-dominated initiatives.

The time for action is now

Gaza's people deserve more than temporary ceasefires between devastating violence and famine. They deserve an international community committed to their protection through patient, principled nonviolent action.

The tools exist. The legal framework is clear. R2P provides normative authority, Uniting for Peace offers procedural pathways, and successful nonviolent campaigns – from the Palestinian First Intifada in 1987 to anti-apartheid movements – demonstrate the potential efficacy of multilateral action. What's missing is the political will by global superpowers to move beyond failed military paradigms toward sustained nonviolent initiatives.

Success demands unprecedented coordination among international organisations, civil society and individual activists — moving beyond state-centric protection toward comprehensive strategies addressing Palestinians' immediate humanitarian needs while building lasting mechanisms for resolving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Gaza can become either another failure of international protection or a testimony to nonviolent intervention's transformative power.



Charles Webel

Dr Charles Webel is currently professor and guarantor of the School of International Relations and Communications at the University of New York in Prague. He is also at present Fulbright Specialist in Peace and Conflict Resolution and a member of the Academic Council on the United Nations System. Dr Webel has studied, taught or lectured at Harvard,

Oxford, Heidelberg, Stanford and U.C. Berkeley. He has published 10 books on peace and conflict transformation, as well as the two-volume *The Fate of This World and the Future of Humanity,* and several philosophical books.