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Starvation is no accident

Anyone talking about Gaza cannot ignore Israel's intentions. Human suffering is part of their war strategy

It is a typical war of words on social media. One user challenges the claim that there is a hunger crisis in Gaza. He posts about the number of meals that the so-called Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) has distributed, along with images of full market stalls in Gaza, and expresses fundamental doubts about Israel's intentions. Another user responds with references to renowned famine experts, statements from human rights organisations, and analyses published in *Haaretz* and the *New York Times*.

This Bluesky thread illustrates the structure of public discourse on the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Its uncompromising nature also stems from the fact that terms such as 'genocide' and 'starvation', which are used as weapons of war, are clear moral markers. Those who deny them are accused of trivialising the situation. Those who accept them are accused of demonising Israel. Many seek to escape this dilemma by presenting ever new arguments — for why red lines have been crossed and how this could have been avoided. The example quoted above shows the limits of such attempts at objectification. After all, the question is no longer *whether* the people of Gaza are starving, but to what extent this is systematic, predictable and above all *deliberate*. Anyone who seeks a meaningful discussion about Gaza, must talk about intentionality. Everything else is mere distraction.

Clearing up falsehoods

The starting point here is in fact clearer than many claim. When it comes to starvation, international humanitarian law leaves no room for ambiguity: starvation as a method of warfare is prohibited. Not only because it is cruel, but because it concerns the very essence of the mandate to protect civilians. The research findings on famine are also clear: war always results in the death of innocent people. However, full-blown famines are rare and always the result of strategic decisions about access to water, food, energy and medical care. Gaza is no exception.
The reply to this is familiar. There are aid deliveries, organisations such as

the GHF have distributed millions of meals, markets continue to operate, and it was Gaza that started the war anyway. The intended conclusions from this are equally familiar: the humanitarian situation was not intentional, but an unfortunate and unavoidable consequence of a just war. And if anyone is to blame, it is the Palestinians.

The logic of this war is one of control.

As familiar as this argument is. It remains cynical. It is – deliberately? – based on false premises. First, it blurs the distinction between availability and access. When it comes to famine, the most important thing is not whether bread can still be bought somewhere or whether there is a full market stall somewhere. Of far more significance is whether someone is preventing large parts of the population from accessing these goods. Anyone looking to have a serious debate on this must therefore free themselves from the reflex of treating individual photographs or anecdotes as solid evidence. Images of crates full of fruit understandably dominate public attention in the context of a Gaza Strip that is almost completely cut off from the media. But these images tell us virtually nothing unless we know where these goods are and who can afford them, or how many people no longer have access to food and clean drinking water. The logic of this war is one of control. The ability to meet the basic needs of civilians is determined by checkpoints, permits, abrupt border closures and destroyed infrastructure. Anyone who can create bottlenecks has control not only over the amount of aid but also its plannability, security and distribution. In this sense, starvation is caused not only by bombs and tanks but also by tables, lists, barriers and rejections.

Further, the rhetorical formula that Gaza started the war serves as a moral alibi and a semantic short-cut. Gaza is a territory, not an armed group. The civilian population is not the same as the Hamas fighters operating on its territory. The status of an actor in the conflict does not change the fact that the other side remains bound by law. Indeed, it is *precisely* because it is based on non-reciprocity that international humanitarian law is so crucial. The duty to protect vulnerable populations applies regardless of who started the war. Anyone who casts

collective suspicion over a civilian population removes part of this protection and normalises the violation of international law.

Who controls access, controls food security

The argument that Israel would not allow aid deliveries if it wanted to starve Palestinian civilians is also a (false) inference from the opposite. Those using this argument do not actually present any evidence, instead basing their reasoning on the absence of supposedly expected behaviour. But this expectation does not correspond to what we know about famine. Renowned authority on famine Alex De Waal puts it in a nutshell in an article in the *New York Times*: starvation takes time. People do not starve because they are deprived of calories for a day, but because their livelihoods are gradually eroded. Their wages are falling, prices skyrocketing, roads becoming unsafe, water contaminated, and medical supplies more and more scarce. If a military actor can anticipate these shortages and yet continues to exacerbate them by closing supply roads, attacking warehouses, cutting off power or making it practically impossible for aid convoys to be authorised, we have arrived at the very method that is prohibited by international law. It is right and important to condemn the war crimes of non-state actors and to demand the immediate and unconditional release of hostages. This does not, however, affect the obligation not to weaponise the civilian population.

Especially in the context of targeted propaganda by the warring parties, it is worth drawing on expertise acquired from examining patterns of human-made starvation over decades. De Waal's assessment did not come out of nowhere. It condenses the findings of decades of conflict research on theatres of war: whoever controls access, controls food security. Security along humanitarian corridors can be established and destroyed. Looting is a result of scarcity – not its cause. This accumulated empirical knowledge cannot be refuted by individual photographs. The consequences of this insight are inconvenient, especially for Germany. We have got into the habit of talking about Gaza using a grammar of suspicion. The responsibility of non-state actors quickly finds its way into editorials. Anything that is reminiscent of Israeli responsibility, on the other hand, is subject to reservation. This bias leads us astray. After all, anyone who turns a blind eye to Israel's weaponisation of hunger can inevitably see no way of alleviating the famine in Gaza.

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First and foremost, this requires (immediate) reliable and safe humanitarian corridors from the humanitarian aid stockpile warehouse to the

architecture of scarcity.

distribution centre — not just for a few days but for several months. Gaza needs electricity, water, and fuel again — not just sporadically, but through the reestablishment of requisite infrastructure. Without energy, every cold chain, every hospital, every well system simply collapses. We also need to put an end to the resource-draining micro-controls at the borders of the Gaza Strip, through which the Israeli authorities control not only trucks but de facto also the nutritional state of the population of Gaza. For international politics this means a different set of priorities. Aid money does not end hunger as long as it keeps running up against an architecture of scarcity. Exerting pressure on Israeli decision-makers is therefore more important than quoting new aid pledges in press releases. It is not the number of trucks at the border crossing that counts, but the calories per capita that enter Gaza.

It is also vital to clearly designate responsibility. Using images of market stalls in Gaza to exonerate Israel is not only convenient but also an expression of skewed morals. In truth, these pictures prove the exact opposite. They show a market where the last remaining food items are becoming luxury goods that the majority can only dream of. Whoever controls the border with Gaza also controls this market. Starvation is no accident. Perhaps this is the most matter-of-fact statement we can make right now.



Jannis Grimm
Berlin

Dr. Jannis Julien Grimm heads the research group *Radical Spaces* at the Center for Interdisciplinary Peace and Conflict Research at Freie Universität Berlin.