

# **Famine as a Weapon**

## **Israel's Responsibility for Genocide in the Gaza Strip**



**Prepared by: : Sherif Abd Elhamid**

## Introduction

Since October 7, 2023, the Gaza Strip has been experiencing one of the deadliest and most complex humanitarian crises in modern history, resulting from Israel's extensive and ongoing aggression against the territory. This aggression has not been limited to traditional military operations that have left tens of thousands dead and injured—most of whom are women and children—but has taken a systematic approach aimed at targeting the essential components of life, including food, water, and medicine, indicating a premeditated intent to inflict widespread suffering on the civilian population.

Israeli authorities, as documented by human rights organizations and UN reports, have adopted a systematic policy of collective starvation through the imposition of a suffocating blockade on the Gaza Strip, preventing humanitarian aid from entering, and targeting food supply chains, including agricultural fields, bakeries, grain storage facilities, relief trucks, and water and energy facilities. UN organizations have warned that Israel is using "starvation as a weapon of war," in serious violation of international humanitarian law, particularly the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Statute of the International Criminal Court, which categorizes "starvation of civilians as a method of warfare" among war crimes.

The use of starvation not only reflects a humanitarian failure but is also a deliberate strategy to eliminate the ability of civil society to survive, threatening the collapse of the healthcare system, the spread of famine, and increased mortality rates due to malnutrition and disease. Despite international condemnations, the continued implementation of this policy without accountability raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of the international justice system and the extent to which the international community is committed to protecting civilians during armed conflicts.

## Methodology

This report relies on a multi-source methodology, based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of available data, including reports from the UN and its specialized agencies, data from humanitarian organizations operating in Gaza, and

documentation from international and regional human rights organizations, as well as governmental sources when necessary for comparison and verification.

The report covers the period from October 7, 2023, to mid-July 2025, focusing on violations related to the use of starvation as a systematic weapon against civilians, without addressing other types of crimes except to the extent that they serve the objective analysis of the issue of starvation. The report also pays special attention to analyzing the applicability of international legal frameworks to the behavior of the occupying authorities, evaluating shortcomings in the international response, and holding perpetrators of crimes accountable under international law.

## **Starvation as a Weapon of War in International Law**

Deliberate starvation of civilians is one of the gravest violations committed by conflict parties, and this behavior has been explicitly criminalized in numerous international legal norms, both under international humanitarian law and international criminal law, extending to being considered a crime of grave violations of the Geneva Conventions. This underscores the absolute nature of the prohibition of this behavior and the necessity of holding its perpetrators accountable.

### **1. In International Humanitarian Law**

International humanitarian law, under its fundamental protocols, prohibits the use of starvation as a method of warfare. Article 54 of the Additional Protocol I of 1977, annexed to the Geneva Conventions, states: "It is prohibited to use starvation of civilians as a method of combat. It is prohibited to attack, destroy, transfer, or render useless objects and materials essential for the survival of the civilian population, such as food, farms, and water stations, with the aim of starving the civilian population or forcing them to flee."<sup>1</sup>

The Additional Protocol II reiterates this prohibition concerning non-international conflicts, clearly stating in Article 14 that "it is prohibited to starve the civilian population as a method of combat" and emphasizes that it is impermissible to

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<sup>1</sup> The four Geneva Conventions (1949); The first additional protocol (1977), Article 54. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-54>



attack, destroy, or render useless the objects indispensable for the survival of the civilian population.<sup>2</sup> This repetition clearly indicates that this prohibition has become a binding customary rule in all armed conflicts, whether international or non-international.

## **2. In International Criminal Law**

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of 1998 encapsulated this prohibition by including starvation as a war crime in Article 8, which states that among the war crimes is "the deliberate starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of essential foodstuffs, including obstructing relief supplies as stipulated in the Geneva Conventions."<sup>3</sup>

This provision represents an important development in international criminal law, as it not only criminalizes the act but also expands the scope of responsibility to include anyone who disrupts the accessibility of humanitarian assistance or intentionally destroys the means by which civilians rely on for survival, such as food, water, and medical care.

Furthermore, this provision marks the culmination of a long trajectory of legal accumulations that began with the Hague Conventions (1907) and the four Geneva Conventions (1949) and their Additional Protocols (1977), where the prohibition has transitioned from a mere humanitarian commitment to a binding legal rule with a punitive and retributive character.

In the judicial context, the International Criminal Court has opened the door for the prosecution of those involved in such acts, whether they are military or political leaders or individuals holding authority to command or execute. It is noteworthy that the concept of starvation in this context is not limited to the direct act of depriving people of food but encompasses all actions intended to or resulting in systematically

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<sup>2</sup> The second additional protocol (1977), Article 14. <https://www.ohchr.org/ar/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-additional-geneva-conventions-12-august-1949-and-0>

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph B (25) of Article 8 of the Rome Basic System of the Criminal Court. <https://www.ohchr.org/ar/instruments-mechanisms/instruments>

or deliberately depriving populations of life necessities, whether through blockade, preventing the entry of aid, or targeting vital infrastructure.

In light of this framework, the systematic deprivation faced by civilians in the Gaza Strip of food, water, electricity, and medicine due to the blockade and targeting of vital facilities may rise to the level of a war crime under international criminal law, warranting international investigation and accountability.

### **3. In International Human Rights Law**

Although international humanitarian law provides the clearest framework in the context of armed conflicts, international human rights law complements this protection by safeguarding the right to food. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states in Article 11: "The right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their family, including enough food..."<sup>4</sup>

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in its General Comment No. 12 (1999), stated that "violations of the right to food include any act or omission intended to deprive individuals of access to enough food."<sup>5</sup>

The UN General Assembly reinforced this rights framework in its Resolution 73/164,<sup>6</sup> adopted on December 17, 2018, regarding "the right to food," emphasizing that hunger constitutes a blatant violation of human dignity and hinders the full enjoyment of other rights. It called on states to refrain from taking any measures that would deprive peoples of their livelihoods, including in situations of conflict or occupation. This resolution gains particular importance in light of the catastrophic conditions in the Gaza Strip, where Israeli policies and practices have undermined the population's ability to access food, representing a direct violation of this international legal framework.

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<sup>4</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 11. <https://www.ohchr.org/ar/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

<sup>5</sup> The Committee on Economic and Social Rights in General comment No. 12 (1999). <https://hrlibrary.umn.edu/arab/gc12.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The text of the decision can be found at the following link: <https://n9.cl/uum2b0>

A report on the **analysis of genocide** issued by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese,<sup>7</sup> regarding the war on Gaza, stated that Israel's use of systematic starvation through intensified blockade and deprivation of civilians of food, water, and medicine constitutes a serious violation of international humanitarian law. It may even be classified among actions that fall under the scope of genocide when coupled with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a particular human group, as is the case with the targeting of the Palestinian population in Gaza.

#### **4. On State and Individual Responsibility**

These legal texts establish dual responsibilities:

**Individual Criminal Responsibility:** For any person—whether a military or political leader—who participates in planning, executing, or supervising a systematic starvation policy.

**International Responsibility of the State:** If it adopts or permits such a policy without taking effective measures to halt it.

Starvation crimes are considered non-time-barred, meaning that perpetrators can be held accountable at any time, as evidenced by past experiences in the trials of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

The entirety of international legal texts demonstrates that using starvation as a weapon of war is not only a blatant violation of international humanitarian law but rises to the level of a war crime that necessitates individual criminal accountability according to the provisions of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Article 8 of the Rome Statute explicitly prohibits "the deliberate starvation of civilians as a method of warfare," which particularly includes depriving them of essential materials for their survival, including food, water, and medicine.

In light of this, what has been occurring in Gaza since October 7, 2023—an all-encompassing blockade preventing the entry of food, water, and fuel, along with

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<sup>7</sup> The report can be found at the following link: <https://docs.un.org/ar/a/hrc/55/73>

systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure as a pressure tool in armed conflicts—has led to a serious deterioration of humanitarian conditions. This represents a real application of this pattern of crimes and places responsible parties—politically and militarily—before inevitable legal accountability. Additionally, the silence and sluggishness of the international community in taking decisive actions against these practices may rise to the level of complicity or failure to fulfill the collective obligation to protect civilians and prevent serious crimes. Thus, the situation in Gaza serves as a critical test of the credibility of the international justice system and of the compliance of state parties with their duty to pursue and punish perpetrators of international crimes without exception or selectivity.

### Conditions Constituting "Deliberate Starvation"

International humanitarian law clearly distinguishes between the unintended collateral effects of military operations and policies or practices that amount to "deliberate starvation" as a method of warfare. While some humanitarian harm may arise indirectly from military operations, the commission of targeted, repeated, and systematic acts that lead to the deprivation of populations of essential means of survival constitutes a serious breach that rises to the level of a war crime. Among the behaviors that fall within this framework are:<sup>8</sup>

- **Obstructing Access to Humanitarian Relief:** This includes denying permits or attacking aid convoys.
- **Deliberate Destruction of Food and Water Supply Chains:** This involves targeting farms, mills, food storage facilities, or water distribution installations.
- **Targeting Essential Infrastructure:** This includes health, transport, and energy facilities, exacerbating shortages of food and water and crippling storage or distribution capabilities.

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<sup>8</sup> Global Harm Directory, Global Rights Compliance Organization (GRC), pp. 26-27. [https://globalrightscompliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Reparations-Guide\\_AR-April2025FINAL.pdf](https://globalrightscompliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Reparations-Guide_AR-April2025FINAL.pdf)

- **Imposing a Long-term, Suffocating Blockade:** This prevents the entry of essential materials and restricts the movement of populations.

In all these instances, the state or non-state armed groups are directly responsible for these practices if they are proven to be systematic or the result of deliberate policies. They cannot evade responsibility on the grounds of security or military necessity, as long as their actions lead to the starvation of populations or are used as tools for political or military pressure.

Since the onset of Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023, the region has witnessed practices that directly represent indicators of "deliberate starvation," including:

- **Complete Closure of Borders:** Preventing the entry of food, water, medicine, and fuel for days and weeks, even in the face of international humanitarian convoys.
- **Repeated Targeting of Relief Trucks and Logistics Infrastructure:** Including key roads and bridges, leading to delays or halts in distribution operations.
- **Destruction of Water and Sanitation Networks:** Damaging water wells and desalination plants, depriving millions of civilians of their right to safe water.
- **Targeting Food Production and Storage Facilities:** Such as grain mills and farms, or burning central markets in various areas.
- **Imposing a Wide Security Zone:** Preventing fishermen and farmers from accessing their livelihoods.

Numerous UN reports have indicated that over 90% of the population in the Gaza Strip suffers from food insecurity, living under a real threat of famine. The entire population is classified within critical stages of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, with areas facing a "food catastrophe" at the highest level of the famine scale.

The UN has warned that the comprehensive blockade imposed by Israel since October 7, 2023, coupled with direct targeting of food infrastructure and obstructing



humanitarian aid shipments, indicates the use of "starvation as a weapon of war." The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have deemed these practices—including the destruction of food stores, bombing of bakeries, and repeated closures of borders—a blatant violation of Article 54 of Additional Protocol I of the 1977 Geneva Conventions, which prohibits the use of starvation as a weapon against civilians.

Customary and legal rules indicate that a state that implements policies leading directly or indirectly to the deprivation of civilians of essential means of life bears full legal responsibility, whether through international criminal courts or under the principle of state responsibility for unlawful acts. The same applies to non-state actors if they exercise effective control in the field and implement similar policies.

### **Starvation Policy as a Systematic Tool of War in Gaza**

The blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip represents one of the most systematic and organized violations of international law principles, particularly international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Since 2007, Israel, as the occupying power, has enforced a suffocating blockade on the territory, which includes restrictions on freedom of movement, preventing the entry of essential goods, and controlling food, medicine, and fuel supplies, as well as reducing electricity and water availability. The effects of this blockade have reached catastrophic levels during the recent aggression that began on October 7, 2023, characterized by unprecedented levels of destruction and systematic starvation. Israel has systematically relied on a total blockade of the Gaza Strip, leading to the deprivation of the population of basic means of life, alongside deliberate policies to prevent the entry of food, water, medicine, and fuel, in addition to targeting vital civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, food distribution centers, and water tanks. These actions have been accompanied by repeated orders for mass displacement, affecting over 85% of the area of the Gaza Strip, converting most populated areas into battlefields, and narrowing the geographical space where civilians can remain to less than 15% of the land, which is highly congested and lacks basic services.

According to field reports from UN agencies, over 90% of the population in the Gaza Strip suffers from severe food insecurity, while more than 1.1 million people live in conditions equivalent to "food catastrophe" (phase five according to the UN classification), the highest level of food insecurity globally. A joint statement from UN organizations—including the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the World Health Organization (WHO)—noted that the acute shortage of fuel has led to the shutdown of bakeries, hospitals, and water distribution facilities, exacerbating the humanitarian disaster.<sup>9</sup>

In its latest data, the WHO confirmed that the healthcare system is collapsing entirely due to the lack of food, water, and electricity, and that the population faces "inhumane" living conditions amid continuous bombardment and the prevention of supply entry.<sup>10</sup> OCHA documented that food storage facilities and distribution centers have suffered severe damage from Israeli attacks, while relief operations are hindered due to insecurity and movement restrictions.<sup>11</sup>

More than two million people live under conditions equivalent to a "food catastrophe" according to international classifications, with alarming increases in malnutrition rates, especially among women and children. Estimates indicate that 39% of patients receiving medical consultations in shelters suffer from acute watery diarrhea, due to the lack of potable water and deteriorating sanitation services.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the severe fuel shortage, many hospitals have stopped providing vital services, such as dialysis and intensive care, and have been forced to treat patients on the floors due to overcrowding. For more than 17 consecutive weeks, no fuel shipments have been allowed entry, leading to the shutdown of water, electricity, and communication networks. The "Satar" tank in Khan Younis, a major water distribution

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<sup>9</sup> A joint statement from the United Nations organizations on the fuel crisis in Gaza ", United Nations, July 17, 2025. <https://2h.ae/lnqp>

<sup>10</sup> Gaza: The collapse of the health system amid hundreds of dead while searching for food. " United Nations news, June 27, 2025. <https://2h.ae/IPGR>

<sup>11</sup> The latest developments in the humanitarian status No. 304 | Gaza Strip, July 2025. <https://2h.ae/wbry>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

center, has been closed due to military orders, threatening the complete collapse of the water distribution system in the city.<sup>13</sup>

As mass displacement continues to escalate daily, since the collapse of the ceasefire in March 2024, at least 714,000 people have been forcibly displaced, some multiple times, without access to safe shelter or minimal infrastructure. Field surveys indicate that 97% of displacement sites consist of individuals sleeping in the open, with families forced to flee from locations that were considered relatively safe, including medical facilities and aid distribution points.<sup>14</sup>

These restrictions on humanitarian operations exacerbate the tragedy. In June alone, over 44% of requests to coordinate vital humanitarian activities were denied, while 12% of missions were canceled for security or logistical reasons. With these ongoing restrictions, operations for distributing food, clearing rubble, delivering fuel, and repairing water networks have been suspended or postponed. In recent days, more than one-fifth of attempts to bring fuel into the northern Gaza Strip have been rejected, putting vital humanitarian networks at risk of complete collapse.<sup>15</sup>

In light of this reality, international agencies have warned that the opportunity to save the population from famine is rapidly diminishing. Women and girls, in particular, are suffering harsh consequences, facing a lack of privacy, shortages of sanitary pads, and difficulties in accessing water and soap, while indicators of gender-based violence are sharply rising.

This humanitarian scene represents not only a failure to protect civilians but also a stark example of using starvation as a tool of war, clearly violating Article 54 of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions. Such actions may amount to war crimes requiring urgent international investigation and accountability.

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<sup>13</sup> Gaza - 1,500 families from the northern Gaza Strip, and dwindling opportunities to address hunger, United Nations news, July 1, 2025. <https://2h.ae/zxnr>

<sup>14</sup> Gaza - A new displacement in Khan Yunis, and the fuel crisis threatens vital facilities and communications, United Nations news, July 2, 2025. <https://2h.ae/emzn>

<sup>15</sup> The United Nations strongly condemns the loss of civilians in Gaza, United Nations news, July 3, 2025. <https://2h.ae/cdqg>

## Voices Under Siege: Testimonies from Gaza Residents

Amid the suffocating blockade and ongoing military operations in Gaza since October 7, 2023, statistics alone cannot capture the magnitude of the humanitarian disaster; the tragedy is reflected in the voices of the victims themselves. Live testimonies from several civilians in Gaza present the world with its ethical and legal responsibilities, revealing the daily suffering caused by the systematic starvation policies enforced by occupying forces. In Deir al-Balah, a group of women and children was bombed while waiting in line for nutritional supplements for their children, resulting in the deaths of 16 women and 13 children. The women were standing, some holding their children, and others breastfeeding newborns, carrying nothing but motherhood and a fragile hope for survival. The crime began with a loaf of bread and ended in a massacre.

In another testimony, a resident recounts the scene of children begging their parents, "Give me a loaf until the flour arrives," as bread has become a deferred currency, and hunger an unbearable reality. A head of a household speaks of his repeated tears when he has nothing to offer his neighbor but a handful of lentils or sweet potatoes barely enough for one meal for a whole family, forced to ignore daily cries for help due to a lack of resources.

**"We stand in long lines in front of the bakeries from dawn, and often we return empty-handed. Water is cut off, and aid rarely arrives; even when it does, it gets bombed on its way to us."**

**– A citizen from Khan Younis, July 10, 2025**

Mothers express their complete helplessness, feeling as though their motherhood is a betrayal in the face of hunger when they cannot provide a morsel for their children. "Do you feel the weight of hunger in my heart? My helplessness as a mother? Do you hear my children's empty stomachs?" asks one mother, tears preceding her words.

**"We no longer search for food but for crumbs of bread or leftovers from trash meals. My children cry from hunger, and all I can do is hold them and cry with them."**

– A resident of Jabalia Camp, July 4, 2025.

This reality not only falls under the category of a humanitarian crisis but serves as compelling evidence of violations of Article 54 of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, which prohibits the use of starvation as a method of warfare. These testimonies are not mere individual accounts; they represent a living documentation of systematic crimes targeting civilians directly, highlighting the urgent need for international investigation and immediate accountability.

**"My infant daughter has lost weight alarmingly, and the doctor said she suffers from severe malnutrition. There's no milk, no special food for children, and no electricity to operate medical devices."**

– A displaced person in a UNRWA school, July 13, 2025.

This testimony painfully documents the complete collapse of basic life essentials in Gaza, particularly for infants, who are supposed to receive special protection under international humanitarian law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 24), which explicitly states the "right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health," including enough food, medical care, and medicine. The absence of milk and child-specific foods, along with power outages affecting medical devices, constitutes a clear violation of the obligations of conflict parties and a breach of fundamental principles of international law, particularly the principles of proportionality and distinction in attacks, as well as the special protection of vulnerable groups. This testimony embodies how shelters, which should be humanitarian refuges, have transformed into slow torture points for life, amid increasing international inaction to ensure safe passages and sustainable humanitarian aid delivery.



**"What we are living is a slow death. We hear about supplies in the media, but we never see them. People are feeding on animal fodder, and sometimes on grass, just to survive."**

– A farmer from Deir al-Balah, July 16, 2025.

This testimony reflects a tragic image of the collapse of food security in Gaza, in blatant violation of the right to food enshrined in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which guarantees every person "the right to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their family, including sufficient food, clothing, and housing."

The necessity for civilians to consume animal fodder and grass is not merely an indicator of hunger; it is evidence of systematic starvation that could amount to a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which criminalizes the use of "starvation as a method of warfare to deliberately starve civilians by depriving them of essential supplies for their survival."

Discussions about humanitarian aid entering through media outlets without actual delivery to the population indicate systematic and deliberate restrictions on relief access, in violation of Articles 55 and 59 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which obligate occupying authorities to ensure the delivery of supplies and humanitarian relief to civilian populations in conflict zones.

This "slow death" described in the testimony does not represent an isolated case; it reflects a collective punitive policy prohibited under international law and necessitates urgent action from the international community to halt this humanitarian collapse and prevent further serious violations against the people of Gaza.

These documented testimonies paint a shocking picture of the total collapse of food security, confirming that starvation policies are not practiced randomly but are part of a systematic framework that constitutes a blatant violation of international humanitarian law, particularly Article 54 of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva

Conventions, which prohibits the use of starvation against civilians as a method of warfare.

Documenting these voices is not merely an act of recording suffering; it is an act of resistance against international silence and an urgent call for accountability for those responsible for these crimes that rise to the level of crimes against humanity.

## Recommendations

In conclusion, Maat emphasizes that Israel's use of starvation as a weapon of war constitutes a blatant violation of international humanitarian law, particularly Article 54 of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, which prohibits "starvation of civilians as a method of combat." This behavior represents a pattern of collective punishment against civilian populations, which may rise to the level of a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Maat warns that the deliberate starvation of the population in Gaza cannot be separated from the overarching policy pursued by Israeli authorities since the onset of hostilities, which aims to "deprive the population of the means of life in order to weaken their resilience." This systematic policy necessitates an independent international investigation and legal accountability for the perpetrators.

It is essential for international parties to assume their legal and ethical responsibilities and to exert genuine pressure to ensure full and unconditional access to humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip, while putting an end to the use of blockade and starvation as tools of warfare. The international community must work towards effective accountability for these grave violations and ensure that perpetrators do not escape punishment.

### **Therefore, Maat recommends the following:**

- Call on international community to assume its legal and ethical responsibilities towards civilians in Gaza, and to apply actual pressure for an immediate and unconditional cessation of Israeli attacks targeting civilian infrastructure that threaten the daily lives of the population.

- Demand that Israel, as the occupying power, fully comply with its obligations under international humanitarian law, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention, to ensure the protection of civilians and to facilitate unhindered access to humanitarian aid.
- Urge the Human Rights Council and the relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, to open independent and transparent investigations into the serious violations committed against civilians in Gaza, including crimes of starvation, indiscriminate killing, and deprivation of healthcare.
- Encourage International Criminal Court to expedite its proceedings regarding the situation in Palestine, including examining the use of starvation as a weapon of war and the targeting of civilians as potential crimes against humanity and war crimes.
- Call on states parties to the Geneva Conventions to fulfill their collective obligations under Article 1 of the Conventions by taking immediate steps to stop the serious violations that amount to international crimes.
- Demand the establishment of a permanent and neutral international mechanism to coordinate and facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, free from the political or military constraints imposed by the occupying authority, while ensuring monitoring of its distribution and actual delivery to the most vulnerable populations.
- Encourage donor countries and international humanitarian organizations to increase funding and support directed towards the health and food sectors in Gaza, and to rebuild the systems that have collapsed due to repeated attacks.
- Call on media outlets and international human rights organizations to continuously highlight the suffering of civilian populations and expose the policies that lead to a "slow and collective death," especially in light of concerning international silence.