

# The threshold of intent

## Closing in on a ‘final solution’ in Gaza?

[Derek Sayer](#) / March 25, 2024 / 11 min read

MIDDLE EASTWAR ZONESHUMAN RIGHTS



Medic carrying a wounded Palestinian child in Gaza. Photo courtesy Fars Media Corporation/[Wikimedia Commons](#).

On March 18, the world’s [famine watchdog](#) the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), whose “main goal ... is to provide decision-makers with a

rigorous, evidence- and consensus-based analysis of food insecurity and acute malnutrition situations,” [reported](#) that:

*The entire population in the Gaza Strip (2.23 million) is facing high levels of acute food insecurity. Between mid-March and mid-July, in the most likely scenario and under the assumption of an escalation of the conflict including a ground offensive in Rafah, half of the population of the Gaza Strip (1.11 million people) is expected to face catastrophic conditions (IPC Phase 5), the most severe level in the IPC Acute Food Insecurity scale ...*

*It is vital to note that the projected Famine can be prevented or alleviated. All evidence points towards a major acceleration of death and malnutrition. The actions needed to prevent Famine require an immediate political decision for a ceasefire together with a significant and immediate increase in humanitarian and commercial access to the entire population of Gaza. All efforts must be made to ensure the provision of food, water, medicines, and protection of civilians, as well as to restore and provide health, water, and sanitation services, and energy (electricity, diesel, and other fuel).*

The IPC’s warning and demand for a ceasefire were echoed by the [World Health Organization](#), the [UN Committee on the Rights of the Child](#), [Refugees International](#), the [International Rescue Committee](#) (whose president, former UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband, [called it](#) “a failure of humanity”), and other NGOs. UN Secretary General António Guterres [described](#) the report as an “appalling indictment,” adding, “This is the highest number of people facing catastrophic hunger ever recorded by the Integrated Food Security Classification system—anywhere, anytime.” He continued:

*I call on the Israeli authorities to ensure complete and unfettered access for humanitarian goods throughout Gaza and for the international community to fully support our humanitarian efforts. We must act now to prevent the unthinkable, the unacceptable and the unjustifiable.*

## **The Israeli response**

During the month after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Israel must “take immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions of life faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip”—a 16-to-one decision in which the judge ad hoc appointed by Israel, Aharon Barak, concurred—aid deliveries to Gaza [fell by a half](#). In February the number of aid trucks crossing

into Gaza fell from an [average](#) of 170 per day in January to 98 per day. An average of 159 aid trucks per day crossed in the first 20 days of March, as compared with 500 a day before the war.

Responding to (since suspended) Israeli spokesman Eylon Levy's outrageous [claim](#) that "there are NO limits on the entry of food, water, medicine, or shelter equipment into Gaza, and in fact the crossings have EXCESS capacity," British Foreign Secretary David Cameron [expressed](#) his "enormous frustration" that UK aid has been routinely held up waiting for Israeli permissions:

*For instance, I am aware of some UK-funded aid being stuck at the border just under three weeks waiting for approval. The main blockers remain arbitrary denials by the government of Israel and lengthy clearance procedures, including multiple screenings and narrow opening windows in daylight hours.*

Trucks containing medical supplies have been turned back because they contain scissors, which could be used as weapons. Other items rejected as "dual use" include generators, tent poles, and pipes to restore water and sanitation infrastructure.

In David Miliband's view, the [key issues](#)—on all of which Israel has been less than helpful—are the number of crossing points into Gaza, the number of trucks Israel allows through the crossings, what aid, above all food aid, the trucks are permitted to carry, and the transit of trucks inside Gaza, "so you've got a series of impediments, blockages, restrictions being put in place on lorries carrying the most basic humanitarian aid."

Since the ICJ ruling, Israel has allowed protestors to repeatedly [block](#) the Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza, at one point, grotesquely in the circumstances, with a gigantic bouncy castle; [refused](#) to renew visas of scores of senior and experienced international aid workers; and variously [impeded](#) WHO missions to supply medical essentials to Gaza's "overwhelmed and overflowing and undersupplied" hospitals (which the IDF continues to assault, the latest being [al-Shifa](#), the strip's largest hospital before the present conflict began).

Israel has denied many requests from UNRWA and other agencies to send aid convoys to the devastated north, which has the worst food security situation, two of them [in the last week](#). It has killed Gazan [police convoy escorts](#) and [assassinated](#) Brigadier General Faye al-Mabhouh, the police

commander in charge of coordinating relief distribution with UNRWA. In several cases, beginning with the “[Flour Massacre](#)” of February 29 in which over 100 Palestinians were killed, IDF troops have fired on civilians lining up for food.

Philippe Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA, is [clear that](#) “This is an artificially man-made situation that we can easily reverse if we want to. We know what needs to be done.” But Israel has [declared war](#) on UNRWA, which it has long sought to close down because it believes having a dedicated Palestinian refugee agency serves only to legitimate Palestinian grievances.

Israel’s claims that thirteen (out of 30,000) UNRWA employees were involved in Hamas’s October 7 attack and the agency is “perforated with Hamas”—which were presented, no doubt by pure coincidence, on the day the ICJ released its judgment on Israel’s “plausible genocide”—led 16 nations, including the US, UK, Germany, and Japan, to pause or strip funding from UNRWA. But Israel has so far failed to produce any [convincing evidence](#) to back up these allegations, and several states including Canada, Australia, and Sweden, as well as the EU commission, have since restored their funding.

On March 18, Philippe Lazzarini posted the following statement on X:

On the day new data is out on famine in #GAZA, the Israeli Authorities deny my entry to Gaza.

—Famine is imminent in the northern Gaza Strip, expected to arrive between now and May.

—Two million people = the entire population of Gaza is facing crisis levels of food insecurity or worse.

—Half the population has completely exhausted food supplies and coping capacities. They are struggling with catastrophic hunger (IPC Phase 5) and starvation.

—This is the highest number of people ever recorded as facing catastrophic hunger by the IPC system and double the number just three months ago.

—Earlier, UNICEF warned that the # of children under two years old suffering from acute malnutrition has doubled in one month.

—Children are now dying of dehydration & hunger.

@UNRWA has by far the largest presence among all humanitarian organisations in Gaza.

My visit today was supposed to coordinate & improve the humanitarian response.

This man-made starvation under our watch is a stain on our collective humanity. Too much time was wasted, all land crossings must open now. Famine can be averted with political will.

On March 24 Lazzarini had news of further devastating Israeli restrictions on UNRWA's ability to provide aid to Gaza's starving population:

Gaza: as of today, @UNRWA, the main lifeline for #Palestine Refugees, is denied from providing lifesaving assistance to northern Gaza.

Despite the tragedy unfolding under our watch, the Israeli Authorities informed the UN that they will no longer approve any @UNRWA food convoys to the north.

This is outrageous & makes it intentional to obstruct lifesaving assistance during a man made famine.

These restrictions must be lifted.

UNRWA is the largest organisation with the highest reach to displaced communities in Gaza.

By preventing UNRWA to fulfill its mandate in Gaza, the clock will tick faster towards famine & many more will die of hunger, dehydration + lack of shelter.

This cannot happen, it would only stain our collective humanity.

Israel seems to have taken the IPC warning of impending famine in Gaza as an invitation to bring it on.

## The US response

Under pressure from foreign allies, who were beginning to get cold feet about supporting what the world's highest court had determined is a plausible genocide, and rattled by discontent within his own party and from voters who checked the "uncommitted" box in Michigan, Minnesota, and elsewhere in Democratic primaries, Joe Biden adopted a [sharper tone](#)—though not much more—toward Israel in February, which culminated in his proclamation in his March 7 State of the Union address that:

*Israel must allow more aid into Gaza and ensure that humanitarian workers aren't caught in the crossfire. Humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip. Protecting and saving innocent lives has to be a priority.*

Asked in an interview the same evening whether Israel's threatened invasion of Rafah, where over a million desperate Palestinians had taken refuge, would constitute a "red line," Biden [answered](#): "It is a red line, but I'm never going to leave Israel. The defense of Israel is still critical, so there's no red line where I'm going to cut off all weapons so they don't have the Iron Dome to protect them."

He added: "But there's redlines that if he [Netanyahu] crosses them ... They cannot have 30,000 more Palestinians dead as a consequence of going after ... there's other ways to deal with the trauma caused by Hamas." Some saw in this [a hint](#) that the US might condition future supplies of (at least) offensive weapons on Israel reining in its assault and allowing aid into Gaza.

One who explicitly suggested doing so was Chuck Schumer, the majority leader in the Senate and highest-ranking Jewish politician in the US. Rising in the Senate on March 14 to speak, [he said](#), "for so many mainstream Jewish Americans—a silent majority—whose nuanced views on the matter have never been well represented in this country's discussions about the war in Gaza," he called for Israel to make "some significant course corrections":

*We should not let the complexities of this conflict stop us from stating the plain truth: Palestinian civilians do not deserve to suffer for the sins of*



*Hamas, and Israel has a moral obligation to do better. The United States has an obligation to do better.*

*I believe the United States must provide robust humanitarian aid to Gaza, and pressure the Israelis to let more of it get through to the people who need it.*

He went on to argue that Israelis' rejection of "the idea of Palestinian statehood and sovereignty ... a negotiated two-state solution" was "a grave mistake"; denounced far-right Israeli ministers Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich and the settler violence they have supported in the occupied territories; and charged that Netanyahu has "lost his way by allowing his political survival to take precedence over the best interests of Israel":

*He has put himself in coalition with far-right extremists like Ministers Smotrich and Ben Gvir, and as a result, he has been too willing to tolerate the civilian toll in Gaza, which is pushing support for Israel worldwide to historic lows. Israel cannot survive if it becomes a pariah.*

He concluded:

*The United States' bond with Israel is unbreakable, but if extremists continue to unduly influence Israeli policy, then the Administration should use the tools at its disposal to make sure our support for Israel is aligned with our broader goal of achieving long-term peace and stability in the region.*

## **The final solution?**

Will there be any "significant course corrections"?

Canada, to its credit—even if the details remain murky—has announced that it is cutting off future arms supplies to Israel. This has provoked fury in Tel Aviv, leading Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer to **fume**: "you saw the Canadians announced no more arms sales, it's going to be a badge of shame for Canada and it's going to last for a really long time ... That in Israel's darkest moment they abandon it. That's what they just did and frankly I think it's shameful."

This Canadian thinks otherwise: for the first time in a long while, I feel proud of my country. And I remember when Canada provided a haven for US draft dodgers during the Vietnam War; when Brian Mulroney **faced down** Margaret Thatcher at the 1986 Commonwealth Conference over sanctions against

apartheid South Africa; and when Jean Chrétien [refused](#) to follow the US-led “coalition of the willing” into the mire of the Second Iraq War unless the invasion was authorized by the UN. When we had an independent foreign policy.

And the US? The omnibus 1.2 trillion dollar spending bill passed on March 22 and signed into law by Joe Biden suggests any course correction is at best cosmetic.

While the bill’s main purpose is to keep the US government funded through September, it bans all funding of UNRWA till at least 2025. Last year US contributions totaled \$422 million, about 30 percent of UNRWA’s budget. This is a slap in the face to Canada and other countries that have resumed their contributions, but was [greeted](#) by Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz as a “historic ban” that “demonstrates what we knew all along: UNRWA is part of the problem and cannot be part of the solution.”

The bill also contains an [odious provision](#) cutting US aid to the Palestinian Authority if “the Palestinians initiate an International Criminal Court (ICC) judicially authorized investigation, or actively supports such an investigation, that subjects Israeli nationals to an investigation for alleged crimes against Palestinians.” So much for US respect for the rule of law.

In a remarkable [speech](#) to the House of Representatives opposing the bill—you can watch it [here](#)—Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio Cortez for the first time declared Israel’s actions in Gaza to be a genocide. She was aware of the “gravity” of using this term (which she had hitherto avoided).

*As we speak, in this moment, 1.1 million innocents in Gaza are at famine’s door. A famine that is being intentionally precipitated through the blocking of food and global humanitarian assistance by leaders in the Israeli government.*

*This is a mass starvation of people, engineered and orchestrated following the killing of another 30,000, 70 percent of whom were women and children killed.*

*There is hardly a single hospital left. And this was all accomplished, much of this accomplished, with U.S. resources and weapons. If you want to know what an unfolding genocide looks like, open your eyes. It looks like the forced famine of 1.1 million innocents. It looks like thousands of children eating grass as their bodies consume themselves, while trucks of food are slowed*



*and halted just miles away. It looks like good and decent people who do nothing. Or too little. Too late.*

Interviewed on March 24 on CNN, she [defended](#) her use of the term genocide, telling Jake Tapper “I believe we have crossed the threshold of intent.”

AOC is right. The impending famine in Gaza is the result of deliberate, conscious, informed choices, and nobody in the Israeli or American governments can be in any doubt as to where they are leading. We are on the threshold of a ‘final solution’ to the Palestinian problem. Ladies and gentlemen, this way for your [ambient genocide](#).

*Derek Sayer is professor emeritus at the University of Alberta and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. His most recent book, [Postcards from Absurdistan: Prague at the End of History](#), won the 2023 Canadian Jewish Literary Award for Scholarship and was a finalist for the Association of American Publishers PROSE Award in European History.*

---

## Addendum

The *Times of Israel* (March 25) has just [reported](#) that “The US has deemed Israel to be in compliance with a new national security memorandum after it received a written assurance from Jerusalem that it is using American weapons in line with international law and is not blocking humanitarian assistance in Gaza.”

In the words of State Department spokesman Matthew Miller:

*We’ve had ongoing assessments of Israel’s compliance with international humanitarian law. We have not found them to be in violation, either when it comes to the conduct of the war or the provision of humanitarian assistance. We view those assurances through that ongoing work we have done.*

Had the US not certified this, the flow of American weapons to Israel would have had to stop.

As I said, choices are being made. The US choice remains to facilitate Israel’s genocide.

—Derek Sayer, March 25, 2025

