



Enhancing Aid Protection Mechanisms in the Gaza Crisis: A Post-Classical Approach to Reform

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Background

Since the onset of the 7 October 2023 escalation, Israel's military operations have resulted in widespread destruction across multiple dimensions. For more than two years, Israel has used the narrative of retaliation and self-defense to justify its attacks on Gaza, leaving countless civilians and aid workers caught in the crossfire. Under such conditions, ensuring safe and timely humanitarian access is essential for protecting non-combatants, guaranteeing aid delivery to vulnerable populations, and safeguarding humanitarian actors.

Those in Gaza, however, witnessed a different scenario. Humanitarian assistance has been stripped of all protection measures, with no mechanisms in place to secure aid delivery to civilians and shield relief workers from deliberate attacks. Instead, aid efforts have faced systematic, discriminatory control and obstruction, as Israel has blocked assistance in line with policies applied since 2006, targeted aid personnel, and deliberately impeded access to relief (Tanielian, 2024; Whyte, 2024). Even interventions led by international humanitarian organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have remained limited due to Israeli-imposed restrictions (Buheji & Hasan, 2024). As a result, a severe humanitarian crisis has unfolded, displacing nearly two million Gazans and depriving them of access to essential needs such as food, water, and healthcare (Mousavi and Sani, 2025).

The repeated paralysis of civilian and aid worker protection for over two years reflects a systemic failure in humanitarian protection. The existing humanitarian system adheres to the so-called classical Dunantist paradigm, in which humanitarian space is guided by the fundamental humanitarian principles and international organizations, primarily the United Nations (UN) (Hilhorst, 2018). By placing humanitarian ethics and agencies at the center of protection mechanisms, this approach has failed to provide enforceable tools, diminishing the role of legal and political dimensions as well as crisis-specific realities.

This policy brief focuses on Gaza's recent crisis to emphasize the importance of reforming fragile protection frameworks and replacing ineffective mechanisms embedded in the current humanitarian structure. First, it diagnoses the key drivers of the protection collapse and identifies priority gaps. Second, it advances practical, context sensitive solutions to address shortcomings rooted in the classical approach. The objective is to propose actionable, evidence-based measures

for building a contextually competent, effective, humane, and timely protection system within the international humanitarian architecture.

In addition to desk research, this brief draws on expert insights and discussions from a webinar titled “Conventional Humanitarianism Under Siege: Rethinking Protection Mechanisms in the Case of Gaza,” hosted by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) in September 2025. The webinar was part of a series examining the failure of the international humanitarian system in Gaza. While three experts were invited as keynote speakers, over 70 humanitarian professionals participated, including scholars, practitioners, and international stakeholders, providing firsthand perspectives from the field. The recommendations section integrates perspectives gathered from the webinar alongside findings from interviews with humanitarian experts and practitioners, both within Gaza and internationally.

Contextual Understanding of Gaza: History Had Warned of the Tragic Future

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza predates the events of 7 October 2023 and stems from long-standing strategies used by Israel to maintain hegemony over the strip. In 2006, Israeli and Egyptian forces jointly enforced a siege that isolated Gaza from the outside world, stripped residents of critical resources, and severely restricted movement (Smith, 2016). When Hamas gained control over Gaza in 2007, Israel intensified the blockade and designated the strip a “hostile territory” (Bhungalia, 2010; Jaber & Bantekas, 2023). By 2013, Egyptian authorities further tightened restrictions at the Rafah crossing.

The recent conflict is not the first confrontation between the parties, but arguably the most devastating one. The Israeli military operations in Gaza in 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021 inflicted cumulative destruction and humanitarian catastrophe, affecting nearly the entire population (Farhat et al., 2023; Jaber & Bantekas, 2023).

These factors have deeply undermined humanitarian efforts and obstructed aid organizations striving to alleviate Gazans’ suffering. The siege enforced by Israel and Egypt has constrained aid delivery, since any entry of humanitarian assistance into Gaza requires Israeli approval (Farhat et al., 2023). In parallel, many aid agencies have openly supported the international boycott of the Hamas-led government (Qarmout & B-land, 2012), illustrating how politicized the humanitarian architecture had already become. Consequently, large segments of Gaza’s population lacked reliable access to basic needs. Even before 7 October, nearly 75% of Gaza’s residents were registered refugees and 80% depended on humanitarian aid for survival (Farhat et al., 2023; Oxfam International, 2018). Gaza had already become uninhabitable, exacerbated by issues like high unemployment rates, increased poverty, aid-dependency, and shortages of essential supplies (Farhat et al., 2023; ECC Palestine, 2021). These enduring conditions deepened civilian vulnerability and revealed the need for effective international protection mechanisms to reduce suffering and strengthen the safety of aid workers and agencies.

Unpacking the Web of Protection Hurdles in Gaza's Aid Efforts

Throughout the 2023 crisis in Gaza, several challenges have posed critical threats to humanitarian protection by obstructing civilians' access to humanitarian assistance and endangering the lives of relief workers. These challenges span psychosocial factors, operational barriers such as unsafe working environments and the dominance of international actors with limited contextual competence, and structural collapse driven by the politicization of aid.

- **Psychosocial strain and discrimination-induced vulnerability**

The devastating crisis has forced aid workers and civilians to struggle on every level, eroding their psychological resilience. They have endured deliberate attacks by Israel, comprehensive aid blockades, and repeated forced displacement affecting nearly two million Gazans (Mousavi & Sani, 2025). These stressors have persistently undermined aid delivery while increasing communities' reliance on assistance for survival.

The inaction and complicity of major global actors in paralyzing protection standards have fostered the perception that the lives of aid workers in Gaza hold minimal value, despite the risks they willingly face. A member of the Palestinian Red Crescent in Gaza expressed this sentiment by stating, "we, as citizens and humanitarian workers, feel like insects, like reptiles. They can destroy us at any moment."¹ The discrimination toward aid workers is further reflected in the global reluctance to use the term genocide to describe war crimes in Gaza. After two years of war, the UN concluded that Israel has committed genocide in Gaza (UN, 2025a). Two days later, the United States (US) vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza (UN, 2025b). Such inconsistencies reinforce the belief that international humanitarian, human rights, and protection frameworks were designed for certain crises like Rwanda but not for Palestine. This not only harms the psychosocial wellbeing of humanitarian workers but also weakens their motivation and ability to sustain relief efforts, ultimately affecting civilians' access to aid.

Meanwhile, the loss of income among 90 percent of the population, coupled with the destruction of critical lifelines such as food sources, has further increased Gazans' dependence on aid. This implies a drastic rise from the already high 80 percent dependency on international aid for survival (Farhat et al., 2023). Given their reliance on humanitarian aid and the inadequacy of supply, civilians have resorted to coping strategies, such as stealing aid or competing violently for essential supplies, which in turn strain the social fabric. This is highly significant, given the crucial role social cohesion has played in the survival and resilience of Gazans during the crisis (Hamamra & Mahamid, 2026). Moreover, continuous displacement and the lack of reliable protection mechanisms have weakened their resilience to survive, particularly among civilians. This has diminished their willingness to seek aid, especially as aid provision in Gaza adheres to a bottom-up model in which individuals must physically access distribution sites rather than receive assistance through top-down mechanisms.

- **Humanitarian operations between unsafe environments and misguided expertise**

Due to the asymmetric nature of the war in Gaza, humanitarian workers have lacked the certainty and safety needed to sustain aid activities. While humanitarian action has been severely restrained, Israel's military campaign has persisted at maximum intensity and demolished

¹ A keynote speaker referring to a conversation with a humanitarian worker in Gaza during a webinar titled "Conventional Humanitarianism Under Siege: Rethinking Protection Mechanisms in the Case of Gaza," hosted by CHS in September 2025

civilian infrastructure, controlling almost 75 percent of the Gaza Strip by July 2025 (OHCHR, 2025). The issue of unsafe humanitarian space has persisted even when prior arrangements were made with Israeli authorities, with continuous bombardment undermining the notion of protected humanitarian space by directly targeting relief workers and civilians.

Israel has identified aid personnel as legitimate military targets and launched attacks against them (Teitt, 2025; Tanielian, 2024). Consequently, humanitarian operations have been obstructed and civilians' access to aid denied in the absence of enforceable protection mechanisms. The adverse treatment of humanitarians has not been restricted to deliberate attacks. Israel has ordered aid agencies and civil society organizations to evacuate, placing them in a dilemma, whether to stay under attack and risk their lives or abandon communities in desperate need for assistance. International aid agencies complied with these orders and left entire populations behind, and despite such steps, 80 international staff members were killed.

Local humanitarian actors endured the unsafe environment. Over 600 local aid workers were killed in Gaza, figures that closely align with UN reports citing 562 humanitarian staff victims (Turan, 2025). More than 1,000 personnel from the Ministry of Health and 95 from the Civil Defense were also killed. Beyond human losses, Israel targeted 7080- percent of headquarters, warehouses, and facilities of humanitarian organizations, causing complete destruction or massive damage. These figures reflect the devastating absence of protection, halting access to the resources needed to continue aid provision and highlighting the erosion of respect by Israel and its supporting states for humanitarian missions, emblems, slogans, and the inherent value of Palestinians' lives. The use of social media and paid campaigns to distort narratives about humanitarian agencies and justify attacks further exacerbated the environment in which these organizations operate.²

Furthermore, misguided practices have weakened local protection sources, even as local actors led remarkable efforts to address gaps in international aid activities. The critical role of local knowledge and engagement in understanding people's needs and cultural context and enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian response has been overlooked (Hamarsha, 2025). The Western-centric model imposed by the classical humanitarian approach paved the way for the leadership of foreign institutions and Global North actors during the early phases of Gaza's crisis. Yet their influence continued through donor-funded institutions and humanitarian projects backed by Western actors.

This dynamic has allowed some organizations with limited cultural competence and contextual awareness to replace local responders and marginalize community-based aid initiatives, resulting in chaos, weakened social cohesion, and deeper vulnerability. For example, a foreign institution with experience in Central Africa distributed aid to certain populations in Rafah while neglecting others. This led to a crisis between affected communities and prompted a municipal action to block aid caravans. Such exclusion-induced sensitivities not only deny essential supplies to extremely vulnerable populations but also create tensions with aid actors. This hinders cooperation between affected populations and humanitarian organizations, undermining relief workers' safety and the access of civilians to aid.

² A keynote speaker explaining the experience and struggle of humanitarian workers and aid agencies during a webinar titled "Conventional Humanitarianism Under Siege: Rethinking Protection Mechanisms in the Case of Gaza," hosted by CHS in September 2025

- **Paralysis of protection amid aid politicization**

Contrary to the classical approach's notion that politics must be separated from humanitarian action (Hilhorst, 2018), Gaza's case has exposed how this perception deprived aid workers and civilians of basic protection. Israel has operated above international law, where the "might is right" logic replaced humanitarian principles in determining the fate of humanitarian protection, allowing those in power to dictate legitimacy and norms.

The collapse of protection mechanisms stems from the politicization of aid, in which humanitarian assistance has been instrumentalized and obstructed to serve Israel's political goals. This politicization is reflected in double standards in implementing international law and human rights norms, leading to the international community's failure to achieve justice through meaningful accountability. For instance, the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), a US-backed agency, has been accused of concealing abuses (Sullivan, 2025), while seeking to replace the humanitarian system's standards with a security and military model for aid distribution. Cutting funds to established humanitarian organizations and elevating new actors like GHF advanced the creation of a politically driven system. Israel used GHF as a mercenary force under a humanitarian banner, serving its political and military interests. Within just three months of beginning operations, GHF killed over 1,000 civilians while trying to get food from the four distribution sites it had arranged (Reidy & Worley, 2025). This not only created distrust and reduced willingness among local aid workers to collaborate with foreign institutions but also significantly worsened Gazans' access to aid.

Even when major state actors publicly express their intention to safeguard aid workers and secure aid delivery to civilians, their actions amount to hypocrisy. They aim to create new coalitions to replace key institutions such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). For instance, US-imposed sanctions on human rights agencies in Palestine, coupled with statements from European ministers justifying the killing of civilians and bombing UNRWA centers and hospitals, signal tacit approval of continued attacks on aid workers, further hampering people's access to aid. Other states have continued financing, arming, and diplomatically defending Israeli actions in Gaza. In turn, Israel has strategized aid denial and the erosion of protection mechanisms as deliberate tools of war rather than collateral outcomes, not any different from tanks or missiles.³

Reforming the Existing Approaches for Better Protection

This section outlines evidence-based policy recommendations designed to enhance protection mechanisms in humanitarian action. The proposed measures aim to ensure affected population's access to aid while safeguarding the lives of humanitarian personnel.

I. Strengthen global humanitarian governance in complex crises

- *Organizational reform of UN agencies and international humanitarian bodies:* This includes re-defining the mandates, rights, and protection guarantees of humanitarian actors within international frameworks. This would reshape how aid agencies function and bolster their operational security.

³ As discussed by a keynote speaker on the complicity of global powers in the Israeli war on Gaza during a webinar titled "Conventional Humanitarianism Under Siege: Rethinking Protection Mechanisms in the Case of Gaza," hosted by CHS in September 2025

- *Reinforced hegemony of international courts and legal rulings:* Ensure that all states respect international legal mechanisms both in principle and in practice, through existing or revised frameworks. This requires strict compliance with the decisions and standards of international courts, such as protection of aid emblems, vehicles, and equipment, while preventing political interference in humanitarian rulings.
- *Preserve and sustain essential humanitarian organizations:* Organizations such as UNRWA hold a unique position in international humanitarianism and perform crucial tasks in responding to the crisis in Gaza. Ensuring their continuity through uninterrupted funding and unambiguous protection for staff and headquarters must be non-negotiable.

II. Adopt flexible and context-sensitive humanitarian operations

- *Acknowledge and integrate contextual factors:* Identify and understand the crisis-affected context to avoid causing collateral harm to civilians and aid workers and prevent fueling community-level sensitivities.
- *Prioritize the protection of civilians and relief workers:* Move away from rigid practices toward unconventional, innovative approaches and methods for establishing safe humanitarian corridors and aid delivery mechanisms.
- *Foster regional and international solidarity across state and societal levels:* Mobilize governments, aid agencies, human rights activists, and humanitarians around the world, particularly those neighboring Gaza. This includes coordinating continuous aid shipments, deploying security forces (ideally under the framework of humanitarian intervention), sending cadres of relief workers for rotation, and imposing sanctions and arms embargoes on Israel.
- *Unify local humanitarian actors through a cluster-based system:* Form a network of local humanitarian actors to act as a single humanitarian entity that pools expertise, information, resources, and influence. Such a platform would strengthen local resilience by enhancing social cohesion, enable joint decision-making, and alleviate the risks of duplication in aid efforts.

III. Navigate the political-ethical dilemma in humanitarian action

- *Embed humanitarian accountability across states, donors, and institutions:* Institutionalize accountability as a fifth core humanitarian principle to emphasize its significance in humanitarian practice and limit aid politicization.
- *Shift from a soft to a harder model of ethical governance:* Establish a decentralized UN-led body in coordination with major agencies, to monitor and report on the actions of Israel and other warring parties. Rather than merely promoting ethics through reports and advocacy, this body should be granted full protection by global actors to hold violators accountable and apply sanctions through judicial mechanisms.

- *Revise the global humanitarian charter:* Take Gaza as a reference case to amend the humanitarian charter and address structural deficiencies in the system. Reforms should include eliminating veto powers that block UN Security Council's resolutions in cases of atrocities and war crimes, such as the US veto that impeded a ceasefire in Gaza.
- *Use politics as a practical instrument rather than an obstacle:* Recognize the influence and resources of states in enabling aid access and protecting humanitarian workers through diplomacy and political pressure. This necessitates humanitarian actors to establish horizontal relationships with states and engage in negotiations as equal partners rather than proxies.

IV. Lead structural change beyond the humanitarian classical approach

- *Amplify the Arab and Gazan point of view in global discourse:* Confront narratives that justify the humanitarian blockade in Gaza and reshape how Western states and organizations perceive civilians and aid workers in Gaza and the broader Global South. This must prioritize circulating, advocating for, and imposing affected communities' narratives through social media, news platforms, research and academic forums, and policy dialogues with international actors.
- *Invest in Global South research centers and humanitarian institutions:* Bridge research with humanitarian work in the Global South, including the Arab region, where most crises occur, by producing evidence-based academic articles, books, and reports. Contextualized and tailored research provides Global South humanitarian actors with guidance to better reach affected populations and protect themselves in contexts similar to Gaza.
- *Advance localized and decentralized aid for stronger protection:* Transfer decision-making power to local actors, including affected populations, aid agencies, municipalities, community-based organizations, and civil society organizations. This requires dismantling politically driven institutions, such as the GHF, and restoring leadership to local actors who understand protection priorities, work on the ground, and bear the consequences of war.

Conclusion

The case of Gaza has exposed the deficiencies of the classical humanitarian approach in protecting civilians and aid workers. The collapse of existing mechanisms, driven by psychosocial strain, the absence of safe humanitarian space, and the politicization and militarization of protection, has produced an irreversible paralysis. Addressing these failures and supporting resilience among Gazans and relief workers demands serious efforts, grounded in the political willingness of major powers, to strengthen global humanitarian governance, particularly at organizational and legal levels. In complex contexts, the humanitarian system must rely on flexible strategies, local knowledge, and awareness of affected contexts. Confronting the tension between politics and aid ethics is essential, but reform must also include structural transformations within the existing humanitarian architecture, extending beyond the dominant classical approach toward localized paradigms capable of delivering meaningful protection.

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