September 2025
President of the General Assembly
Leiden Model United Nations 2025

Preventing the violation of humanitarian law in the Palestine territories

First General Assembly (GA1)

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Introduction

Since the onset of hostilities on 7 October 2023, the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories, especially in Gaza, has escalated to a level described by many international observers as catastrophic. According to the Gaza Ministry of Health, more than 65,500 Palestinians have been killed, including a large proportion of women and children, and over 167,000 injured in the period from October 2023 through September 2025.

Displacement has been massive and recurring. UNRWA and OCHA report that roughly 1.9 million people, nearly 90% of Gaza's population, have been displaced at least once during this period. Many have endured multiple displacements, some as many as ten or more, fleeing bombardment, destruction, and lack of basic safety.

The destruction of civilian infrastructure has accompanied the loss of life and displacement. A joint World Bank–UN report estimated that by the end of January 2024, damages to physical infrastructure in Gaza reached approximately US$18.5 billion, an amount equivalent to 97% of the combined GDP of the West Bank and Gaza in 2022. Housing accounted for about 73% of the cost, while public service sectors like health, water, and education made up 18%.

Movement restrictions, blockades, and breakdowns in supply routes have profoundly affected civilians' access to essentials: medical supplies, clean water, food, and electricity. Many health facilities are operating under duress or forced closure, while displacement complicates delivery of aid and undermines shelters and schools. Humanitarian agencies warn of escalating malnutrition and disease in areas where aid has been delayed or blocked.

This report seeks to address the legal framework under International Humanitarian Law that governs such actions, examine documented cases of violations, and consider how the international community might prevent further harm. The extraordinary magnitude of human suffering already inflicted—and the risk of further escalation—makes it imperative to understand not only what has occurred, but also what obligations exist and what practical measures are possible.

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Definition of key terms

International humanitarian law

The branch of international law that regulates the proper conduct of war, thereby seeking to limit the effects of armed conflict by protecting persons who are not participating in hostilities and by restricting and regulating the means and methods of warfare available to combatants.

Palestine territories

A country in West-Asia, recognized by 157 of the UN's member states, which encompasses the Gaza strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Genocide

(according to article II of the 1948 convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide)
Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

1. Killing members of the group;
2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Collective punishment

A form of sanction imposed on persons or a group of persons in response to a crime committed by one of them or a member of the group.

Human shield

A non-combatant who either volunteers or is forced to shield a legitimate military target in order to deter the enemy from attacking it.

General Overview

The structure of International Humanitarian Law

International Humanitarian Law (IHL), is designed to reach a balance between the protection of humanitarian concern and military necessity within conflict in order to limit the destructive effect of war as much as possible.

IHL is primarily built upon two pillars: the 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions, which regulate the means and methods of warfare, and the Geneva conventions, which mean to protect non-combatants in the event of war and has been ratified by all 193 UN members and both of the UN observer states.

When violations of IHL by individuals arise, the 2002 Rome Statute dictates that the first action should be for the nation in which the perpetrator resides to prosecute them accordingly within domestic courts. If said nation refuses to do so, the situation is passed on to the International Criminal Court (ICC), either by nations or the UN Security Council referring a situation to the ICC prosecutor, or by means of the prosecutor taking on the case themselves.

In the event that the accused party is not an individual but a nation, the process goes quite differently. In that case, the first step is often unilateral or multilateral action by other nations in the form of formal reprimanding or economic sanctions. If legal action is preferred, proper process as established in the UN charter is for one nation to bring another before the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Historical context

The primary source of the violations of IHL has been the ongoing conflict between the Israeli population and Arab militia groups. Starting with1922 British mandate for a 'national home for the jewish people in Palestine' and the migration by European jews following said mandate, the earlier half of the 20th century saw a lot of violence between Zionists and Palestinians. This unrest only furthered in 1948, when the establishment of the state of Israel resulted in the displacement of roughly 750.000 Palestinians, according to the 1949 UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine.

After 1948, after a series of wars, which include the 1956 Suez-canal Crisis, the 1967 Six-day war and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel gradually gained more and more territory in the region. By 1974 Israel not only controlled its current territory, but also the Palestinian territories, the Sinai peninsula in Egypt and the Golan Heights in Syria.

Further contributing to the unrest in the region were the uprisings by Palestinian armed groups around the turn of the millennium, known as the First Intifada (1987-1993) and the Second Intifada (2000-2005). These resulted in tens of thousands of casualties on both sides and intensified militarization and occupation policies

Effords were made to de-escalate the situation, namely the 1993 and 1995 Oslo accords, which were bilateral agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). These resulted in the recognition of Israel by the PLO and the recognition of the authority of the PLO as a representative for the Palestinian people by Israel. Furthermore, they sought to create frameworks for partial self-governance of the Palestinian people.

The most recent escalation in the conflict came on October 7th, 2023, when terrorist group Hamas launched a terrorist attack into Israel, killing 1200 individuals, both civilians and soldiers, and abducting 240 more. The reaction by Israel was a full-scale military operation in the Gaza strip, which has been going on ever since.

Attacks on civilian infrastructure

Since the beginning of Israel's military operation in Gaza, the destruction of civilian buildings, such as hospitals and schools, has been a regular and almost daily news item. Furthermore, many cities in Gaza have suffered extensive bombing operations by the Israeli military, which has resulted in roughly 70% of all structures in the Gaza strip having been destroyed, including roughly 92% of housing units. The primary reasoning behind this from Israel has been the fact that members of Hamas use civilian buildings as shelter and thus it is necessary to carry out the bombing of civilian buildings in order to eliminate the threat of Hamas.

According to article 52 of the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Convention (1977), civilian objects are not to be attacked and military action is to be limited exclusively to military objectives. The protocol further clarifies that when civilian buildings are used for military purposes, the attacking party must do everything in its power to minimize civilian harm. Lastly, some buildings, such as medical facilities, schools and religious sites have special protection and must never be subjected to military action.

Blockades of humanitarian aid

In June 2007, after Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip, Israel and Egypt initiated a full blockade of the Strip, including land, sea and air. This blockade was intensified after the October 7th attacks, with Israel stopping all admissions of food, electricity and water into the Gaza Strip. The given objective for this by the Israeli government has been to weaken Hamas by cutting off their essential supplies. During the Gaza ceasefire between January and March 2025, the blockade was temporarily lifted until March 2nd. Starting on May 26th, Israel and its Gaza Humanitarian Foundation started handing out aid. However, this distribution has been plagued by violence and has so far resulted in roughly 1400 Palestinian deaths.

According to articles 23 and 55-59 of the fourth Geneva convention, occupying powers must ensure that civilians have sufficient access to food, medical supplies and other essential services. The intentional prohibition of receivement of said supplies can be seen as collective punishment and the starvation of civilians is seen as a war crime according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Illegal settlements

Ever since the 6-day war, Israeli citizens have continuously been building settlements in Palestine territories, primarily in the West Bank, as well as the Golan Heights in Syria. As of January 2023, there were 144 illegal settlements in the West Bank, including 12 in East Jerusalem. Together with the 196 outposts not sanctioned by the Israeli government, they make for roughly 500.000 Israelis living in the West Bank outside East Jerusalem, with 220.000 living in East Jerusalem. Though 126 representatives from different nations at the Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions in 2014 declared the settlements illegal, as did a ruling by the ICJ in 2024, Israel has continued to dispute the illegality of the settlements.

Human shields

Another horrifying and frequent type of war crime throughout this conflict has been the use of civilians as human shields. On one hand, we have the terrorist group of Hamas making frequent use of human shields, perhaps most famously by means of using civilian buildings as hiding spots and military bases of operation. On the other hand, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has also been accused multiple times of using human shields, most recently in 2024, when the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories reported on Israeli soldiers allegedly forcing Palestinian boys to go in front of them into possibly hazardous buildings.

IHl is very clear on the illegality of the use of human shields. Both the 1977 additional protocol I to the Geneva Convention in its article 51(7) and the Rome Statute in its article 8(2)(b) that using civilians to shield military objectives is not to be done, with the Rome Statute even explicitly naming it a war crime.

Accusations of genocide

Perhaps one of the most emotionally loaded IHL violation of all, and rightfully so, is the act of genocide. The unimaginable suffering that comes with the attempt at extermination on a population level is so grave that it hits people right to the core. Since a few months after the start of Israels military operation in Gaza, the amount of people and institutions that have accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza has grown larger and larger. Throughout late 2023 and 2024 and even up to today, protests are held in all major cities of the world, sometimes most of them at the same time, calling for international action against Israel. The first major legal step came in December 2023, when South Africa filed a case with the ICJ, officially accusing Israel of genocide. Since then, a significant number of nations have echoed South Africa's clamor and joined them in calling for an end to Israels alleged genocide on the Palestinian people in Gaza.

Another significant moment occurred on September 16th 2025, when the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory published a report stating that they had found sufficient evidence to state that Israel has committed four of the five genocidal acts as defined in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and the Punishment for the Crime of Genocide, namely killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of the Palestinians in whole or in part, and imposing measures intended to prevent births

Major parties involved

Israel and the Israeli Defence Force (IDF)

The perpetrator of the military operation in Gaza since October 7th, 2023. Accused by many of numerous IHL violations.

Hamas

A terrorist organization active in and from the Gaza strip, the perpetrators of the October 7th attack.

The Palestinian Authority (PA)

The de jure authority in the Palestine Territories, the president of which is elected by the Palestinian people.

The United Nations

The primary body responsible for reports on the humanitarian situation in Palestine.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) & The International Court of Criminality (ICC)

The primary international bodies for prosecuting those who stand accused of IHL violations.

South Africa

A frontrunner in the international community when it comes to accusing Israel of IHL violations. In December of 2023 they filed a case against Israel with the ICJ for genocide.

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Timeline of events

1917, November 2nd	The UK signed the Balfour Declaration, affirming its support and willingness for a 'Jewish national home' in the Palestine territories
1948, may 14th	The nation of Israel is established
1973, October 25th	The Yom Kippur war between Israel and the Arab coalition comes to an end, solidifying Israel's control over the Sinai peninsula, the Golan Heights and the Palestine territories
1987-1993	The Palestinian uprising known as the First Intifada results in about 2000 deaths
1993, September 13th	The Oslo I accord marks the end of the First Intifada and results in the mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO, as well as the creation of the PA.
1995, September 24th	The Oslo II accord results in partial self-governance by the Palestinian Authority and a permanent settlement for Palestinians within 5 years, aiming at peaceful coexistence between Israel and the Palestinians
2000-2005	The Second Intifada claims around 4400 deaths, resulting in Israel's military departure from the Gaza strip and the construction of the West Bank barrier
2007, June	Israel and Egypt initiate a full blockade of the Gaza strip after Hamas seized the strip
October 7th, 2023	Hamas launches a terrorist attack on Israel, killing 1200 Israelis and abducting 240 more, resulting in a full-scale military operation in Gaza by Israel
December 29th, 2023	South Africa launches a case against Israel with the ICJ, accusing the nation of genocide in the Gaza strip
September 16th, 2025	The UN independent Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territories publishes a report, stating that Israel has committed four of the five genocidal acts in the Gaza Strip

Possible solutions

Empowering monitoring and documentation institutions

When talking about potential violations of IHL, proper documentation of events is vital for clear assessment of whether or not war crimes have been committed. A possible solution for this could be to try and ensure that documentation institutions like media outlets and international commissions have the safety and freedom of movement required to carry out the task of gathering potential evidence for violations of IHL.

Supporting the safe deliverance of humanitarian aid

The Israel-Palestine conflict has caused grave humanitarian harm to the people living there. In order to help the Palestinians get back on track, they need essential goods, like food, water and medical supplies. The international community could play a vital role in helping deliver said goods safely and equally, for instance through the use of intergovernmental organizations like the UN, or through the use of NGOs.

Diplomatic pressure

IHL is very clear on the obligations of third-party nations to promote compliance with IHL at all times, through means of diplomacy. Setting aside the question of whether or not war crimes have actually been committed, if it is the belief of a nation that they have, they carry the responsibility not to just stand by and watch. There are, of course, a couple of different approaches that could be taken when talking about diplomatic pressure. The first could be verbal acknowledgement of IHL violations by countries or intergovernmental and supranational institutions. Another option could be sanctions, which could mean simply economic sanctions or the withdrawal of support on other fronts. Furthermore, delegates should keep in mind that UN organizations like the Security Council can also be requested to take measures themselves when it comes to matters of international security.

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