



PALESTINE COUNTRY REPORT

THE STATE OF THE
HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM 2026

2. GAZA'S CRISIS CONTEXT AND STRUCTURAL DRIVERS

2.1 Cycles of conflict

The Gaza Strip has experienced recurrent cycles of armed hostilities for more than a decade. This has led to a protracted humanitarian crisis and repeated destruction of civilian infrastructure. Although Israel withdrew its settlers from Gaza in 2005, the UN still regards the territory as occupied due to the control Israel maintains over Gaza's borders, airspace, territorial waters, and the movement of people and goods (HRW, 2004).

Violence has escalated repeatedly in Gaza since 2007, when Hamas took control of the territory and Israel imposed a land, air and sea blockade. Major hostilities occurred in 2008–2009, 2012 and the seven-week war of 2014, as well as during border protests in 2018 and further confrontations in May 2021. These episodes caused significant civilian casualties and widespread destruction across the Strip (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Gaza spans only 365 km², yet in 2023 it was home to approximately 2.1 million people, making it one of the most densely populated areas globally with an average of 6,085 people per km². Restrictions on land access have intensified these pressures – areas along the perimeter fence that represent roughly 24% of the territory are largely inaccessible to Palestinians, limiting agriculture, economic activity and development (UNCTAD, 2024).

These conditions have progressively weakened Gaza's infrastructure, economy and social systems. Consequently, communities were increasingly vulnerable and dependent on humanitarian assistance even before the latest escalation in October 2023.



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2.2 Gaza under blockade before October 2023

Any assessment of the humanitarian system in Gaza must be grounded in the long-standing blockade. All other operational challenges are secondary to the

constraints imposed on access, movement, and the flow of goods and people.

Before October 2023, Gaza was already experiencing a severe and protracted humanitarian crisis from 16 years of blockade and longstanding movement restrictions. Since the early 1990s, Palestinians in Gaza have faced strict limitations on movement in and out of the Strip, alongside policies separating Gaza from the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem (ibid.). Israel has controlled exports and imports, limiting or prohibiting essential production inputs and technologies under 'dual-use' classifications (ibid.). Therefore, most international organisations reported being unable to import materials critical for shelter and infrastructure development. Gaza has also been prevented from operating or constructing airports and seaports, which has deepened its economic isolation and limited long-term development prospects.

That said, Gaza maintained elements of everyday urban life prior to the 2023 war. Markets, restaurants and hotels still operated, and households relied on small-scale agriculture, fishing and local businesses to sustain their livelihoods. Poverty and unemployment were widespread though, with 80% of the population depending on international humanitarian assistance (UNCTAD, 2023). Public services were under sustained pressure too: infrastructure and service delivery systems were weak, causing chronic shortages in electricity, safe drinking water and healthcare.

Combined with the psychological impact of repeated conflicts, this environment meant the humanitarian system was chronically vulnerable even before October 2023.

2.3 The October 2023 war and its humanitarian impact

The escalation that began on 7 October 2023 represents the longest and deadliest period of hostilities in Gaza (Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre, 2023). It has caused unprecedented deaths, destruction and displacement and has dramatically worsened an already fragile humanitarian situation. As of early December 2025, more than 70,000 Palestinians had been killed and over 170,000 injured, including at least 10,427 women, 4,813 older persons and 20,179 children (Gaza Ministry of Health, cited in OCHA, 2025a).

The violence has also driven mass and repeated displacement. By October 2025, nearly the entire population of Gaza had been displaced multiple times due to ongoing hostilities and successive displacement orders. Many families now live in overcrowded tents and makeshift shelters across the Strip (ibid.).

Critical infrastructure and essential services have been devastated. Approximately 81% of structures in Gaza have been damaged and more than 77% of roads destroyed, generating 60 million tons of debris (ibid.). This contains unexploded ordnance, hazardous materials and human remains, complicating recovery and reconstruction efforts. Gaza's development has been set back by an estimated 69 years (ibid.).

The collapse of public services has further intensified humanitarian needs. Severe

shortages of shelter, food, healthcare, clean water, education and livelihood opportunities have left civilians facing conditions incompatible with human survival. For much of the current conflict, there has been no safe place within Gaza and extremely limited opportunity for civilians to leave.

2.4 Humanitarian access

Humanitarian access has been the primary constraint shaping the response since October 2023. The complete closure of all entry points over March–October 2025 effectively halted aid delivery. Despite available supplies and funding at the borders, humanitarian actors reported being deliberately prevented from reaching affected populations. This contributed directly to widespread famine conditions because communities faced empty markets and acute shortages.

New registration requirements imposed by Israel were widely rejected by international NGOs (INGOs) due to risks to local staff, including potential targeting (MSF, 2026). Threats then made by Israel to revoke operating licences further constrained humanitarian presence. Large volumes of aid remained stranded at borders and significant funding went unused, underscoring how administrative measures restricted the scale and delivery of assistance.

The ceasefire announced on 10 October 2025 improved market availability, movement and public order to a degree. However, structural access constraints were largely unchanged. Organisations still faced severe restrictions on imports, registration and operational clarity, preventing any meaningful scale-up of assistance.



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