

BUILDING TO STARVATION: SYSTEMATIC ATTACKS ON FISHING IN GAZA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LIVELIHOODS AND PROTECTION

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Fishing boats on the coast of Gaza (Photo: OHCHR)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thematic noteⁱ highlights the systematic attacks on fishers and fishing infrastructure in Gaza, which have had devastating consequences on local livelihoods and the fishing industry, driving expanding protection concerns and risk of famine for families across Gaza.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations ([FAO](#)), Israeli military restrictions on fishing activities in Gaza significantly intensified after 7 October 2023, and fishers reported that they have been repeatedly attacked, onshore and at sea, by the Israeli military.ⁱⁱ In parallel, the Ministry of Agriculture ([MOA](#)) in Gaza has documented the destruction of key fishing infrastructure, including Gaza's main port and several landing sites, along with extensive damage to landing sites and fishing vessels, rendering fishing operations off the coast of Gaza nearly impossible.ⁱⁱⁱ These attacks have resulted in the collapse of the fishing industry, which was once a main source of livelihoods and food for Gaza's population. Combined with the destruction of agricultural land and other food production infrastructure, and severe restrictions on the entry of humanitarian aid and commercial goods and supplies^{iv}, the targeting of Gaza's fishers and fishing infrastructure by the Israeli military has contributed directly to risk of famine and growing protection concerns for vulnerable persons, creating **conditions which threaten the survival of Gaza's population**.

FISHING IS A CRITICAL LIVELIHOOD IN GAZA

The fisheries sector in Gaza plays a vital role in sustaining local livelihoods and ensuring food security. It provides a critical source of protein for the Gazan population and contributes significantly to poverty alleviation and resilience against food insecurity. Prior to 7 October 2023, the sector demonstrated substantial productivity, with artisanal fisheries producing 4,660 tons and aquaculture contributing 750 tons of fish

annually^v. These outputs not only supported local consumption but underpinned the economic stability of a substantial portion of Gaza's coastal communities. According to the MOA, as of early October 2023, the sector employed approximately 6,117 individuals, including 4,264 fishers and boat owners, 1,475 workers in post-harvest services, and 378 individuals in public sector roles related to fisheries. In 2020, the World Bank estimated around 18,000 people in Gaza directly depended on fishing for their livelihoods, with an extended impact on over 110,000 family members. Over the past decade, the number of active fishers in Gaza has steadily increased, reflecting the sector's growing importance. Notably, the sector provided direct and indirect employment opportunities for youth and women, particularly through small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in both formal and informal settings.

As a result of hostilities following October 2023, the sector has experienced a catastrophic collapse, operating at just 7.3% of its pre-escalation production capacity. This dramatic decline is having a devastating impact on food security, income generation, and community resilience across Gaza, triggering negative coping strategies and risks to fishers.

ATTACKS ON CIVILIAN FISHERS

After 7 October 2023, the Israeli military changed its conduct toward Gaza's fishers. While prior to 7 October 2023 fishers were restricted to operating within limited and fluctuating zones offshore of the Gaza coast, since the escalation of hostilities fishers have faced blocked access to the sea and their livelihoods through systematic attacks by the Israeli military, all *without the sea being designated as a combat zone*. Israeli Naval Forces (INF) used to issue warnings to the fishers by firing beside them or attempting to stop their boats by causing high waves, before detaining them for interrogation and confiscating their boats, but since the escalation the Israeli military has used **lethal force against fishers** without warning, or feasible precautions^{vi}, frequently resulting in their death or injury.

Since the escalation, OHCHR monitoring has found a **consistent pattern of Israeli military attacks on fishers** in Gaza which includes firing upon fishers at sea by INF, as well as targeting them by Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) at sea and on land. According to the [MOA](#), as of 11 December 2024, the Israeli military had killed 200 fishers and their associates out of approximately 6,000 individuals engaged in the fishing profession before 7 October 2023. This number includes all fishers killed whether at sea, at their homes, or in other circumstances. Of the 28 attacks on fishers and fishing sites between 7



Fishing boats damaged in Rafah (Photo: Dr. Wael Aldaya, FAO)

October 2023 and 31 December 2024 recorded by OHCHR, the majority were reportedly conducted by INF, while some were carried out by Israeli Air Forces (IAF) aircraft, UAVs, Israeli Ground Forces (IGF) shelling, and one case involving IGF bulldozing.

Multiple cases documented by OHCHR indicate **fishers were targeted generally without warning**, while fishing using paddling boats posing no discernible threats to INF^{vii}, resulting in their death or injury. In other incidents,

INF opened fire towards the fishers or others nearby. While some attacks have targeted single fishers, other incidents have resulted in mass casualties, including one attack which killed approximately 30 Palestinians and injured 100 others, including non-fishers, women and children by the seaside.

On 8 November 2024, a 16-year-old fisher boy, Mohammed Attif Al Bardaweel, and three other boys were retrieving their fishing net from a paddling fishing boat off the coast of Rafah. According to Mohammed's father, INF started shelling the boys, so "they got out of the water and fled." Once the boys reached the shore, they split into two groups while running home. However, a drone pursued them and struck the two boys running in the rear group, where Mohammed was killed and another boy was seriously injured, losing one of his eyes. The drone then followed and struck the two other boys, injuring both.

"We were in need of food, so he was going to get fish for the family and children. He never came back."

- Brother of a fisher killed

Testimonies provided by FAO indicate that the number of fishers killed has increased over time, particularly in July and August 2024. The situation has intensified into 2025, when on 18 January the [Israeli military](#) declared Gaza's waters a "no-go zone," banning fishing, swimming, and sea access. Between 1 January and 16 May 2025, OHCHR recorded an additional 28 incidents against Gaza's fishers, resulting in the killing of 11 fishers, the injury of 34 others, and the brief detention and subsequent release of 2 fishers.

Despite significant risks, Palestinian fishers from Gaza have continued to access the sea to attempt to carry out their livelihoods as it is an essential means of securing food, particularly critical following the full blockade, impeded distribution of humanitarian assistance and food insecurity crisis. Mohammed, the boy killed on 8 November 2024, was the oldest son and breadwinner of the family, and relied on fishing to feed his family.

DESTRUCTION OF FISHING INFRASTRUCTURE

Gaza has one seaport located in western Gaza City and at least three landing sites along its coast. According to [MOA](#), as of 11 December 2024, the Israeli military has attacked and destroyed Gaza's Seaportⁱⁱⁱ and three landing sites, in addition to 270 out of 300 fishers' stations. According to OHCHR monitoring, during October 2023, helicopters and drones set fire to fishing boats at the Rafah landing site, destroying more than 150 small fishing boats and damaging The Mawasi Association for Fishers. As of April 2024, 70 per cent of fishing assets and infrastructure in Gaza had been



Fishing boats damaged in Deir al Balah (Photo: Dr. Wael Aldaya, FAO)

damaged, along with 73 per cent of aquaculture assets and infrastructure. FAO estimates that the destroyed and lost vessels in Gaza include 94 per cent of trawlers, 100 per cent of big purse seiners, 62 per cent of small purse seiners, 71 percent of long-line and fixed-net vessels, and 70 percent of feluccas. During June 2024, fishers attempted to protect their boats by burying them in the sand in Rafah, but IGF bulldozers unearthed and destroyed them. Remaining boats and equipment at the Rafah landing site were largely destroyed in January 2025 when the Israeli military razed the site in the week prior to the temporary ceasefire.



As a result of the attacks, according to [MOA](#), the fish production in Gaza has lost 4,600 tons annually, while production from fish farms which used to yield 600 tons annually has completely ceased, with FAO confirming that Gaza has lost 94% of its fishery catch and the average [daily](#) catch dropped to 7.3 per cent of 2022 levels. FAO also noted that the laboratories responsible for fish health assessments in Gaza City were damaged, rendering MOA unable to conduct fish health examinations. Consequently, the fish sold in the markets of Gaza does not get health inspections and pose significant health risks to Gaza's population. Moreover, according to FAO, the destruction of the Department of Fishers, which oversaw the regulation of the fishing industry, has further severely crippled the operations of the fishing sector. The destruction of fishing infrastructure by the Israeli military has severely limited fishers' ability to resume their activities, while the cost of replacing a basic paddling boat has increased from 1,300 ISL to 20,000 ISL, placing it far beyond the reach of most fishers.

IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY AND PROTECTION

The attacks on Gaza's fishers and fishing infrastructure have taken place as the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis indicated accelerating food insecurity and deteriorating acute malnutrition levels across Gaza.^{ix} The destruction of fishing infrastructure further reduced access to sustainable livelihoods and local food sources for Gaza's population, expanding and perpetuating people's reliance on humanitarian aid, while Israeli authorities have in parallel obstructed and restricted the entry of critical and lifesaving humanitarian aid including food assistance. While a temporary surge of humanitarian assistance and commercial supply between May and August 2024 partly alleviated acute food insecurity and malnutrition conditions, the period from September to December 2024 saw the lowest volume of humanitarian and commercial supplies entering Gaza since 2024, profoundly limiting food availability and access while expanding risk of famine.^x IPC analysis for Gaza from April to September 2025 projects the entire population of Gaza facing IPC Phase 3 (Crisis) or above, including 470,000 people in IPC Phase 5 (Catastrophe) – marking a significant deterioration compared to the previous period – and is being driven by food system collapse, including the fishing industry.^{xi} As food insecurity and acute malnutrition steadily deteriorate across the Gaza Strip, the protection of domestic food production and access to local livelihoods remain essential to ward off the growing risk of famine.

According to Protection Cluster monitoring data, food insecurity during this period has driven additional protection risks, including increased exposure to psychosocial and emotional distress, gender-based violence, and violence against children, including neglect, abuse, and the most hazardous forms of child labour, while the risk of starvation has contributed to a breakdown in social cohesion and community networks that would otherwise provide community-based protective capacity for vulnerable individuals and households. As food scarcity grows and livelihood options reduce, protection concerns are expected to compound, with rising multidimensional and complex protection risks for vulnerable families across Gaza.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Fishers, fishing infrastructure, and access to food are protected through both international human rights law and international humanitarian law.



Killings of civilians constitute grave violations of international human rights law. The deliberate use of unnecessary lethal force against civilian fishers, who posed no threat to life, constitutes an arbitrary deprivation of life^{xii}, and in the context of the occupation, amounts to wilful killings.^{xiii}

The Israeli military is required under international humanitarian law to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives. The deliberate targeting of civilian fishers at sea, the use of drone strikes against them on land, and attacks on their homes would violate the principle of distinction, and may amount to a war crime.^{xiv} The destruction of fishing infrastructure, which includes ports, landing sites, and boats, may also violate the principle of distinction if they did not constitute military objectives.^{xv} If they did amount to lawful targets, the attacks on them would nevertheless raise concerns of the violation of the principle of proportionality, especially considering the reverberating harm of attacks on fishing infrastructure.

International humanitarian law explicitly prohibits the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare.^{xvi} It also prohibits attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including food and agricultural systems.^{xvii} Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, starvation of civilians is considered a war crime when intentionally used to deprive them of objects indispensable to their survival.^{xviii}

Israel has the obligation, including in its capacity as the occupying power^{xix} and under the extraterritorial application of international human rights law,^{xx} to ensure, to the fullest of means available, the basic needs of the civilian population of Gaza, including access to food and other essentials of life. This includes the responsibility to allow and facilitate Gaza's population's access to livelihood sources including fishing.^{xxi} The repeated and apparently systematic attacks on fishers at sea and on land, combined with the blockade of Gaza and the destruction of boats, ports, and landing sites, have eliminated one of the main sources of food and livelihood for thousands of Palestinian families in Gaza. Attacks were accompanied by the destruction and damage of agricultural land, other sources of food, water infrastructure, as well as severe restrictions on the entry and distribution of humanitarian aid and other necessities of life that at times amounted to a complete siege, collectively deprived Gaza's population of access to food and essential livelihood.^{xxii}

RECOMMENDATIONS

The attacks on fishers and fishing infrastructure by the Israeli military have had a severe impact on the fishing industry as a main source of livelihoods in Gaza and contributed to acute food insecurity and growing protection risks. The situation underscores the urgent need for coordinated recovery efforts, including the restoration of fishing infrastructure, support for affected workers, and sustainable investment to rebuild the sector and protect the livelihoods it sustains.

The Protection Cluster calls for the following actions to improve protection of civilians in Gaza:

- Urges the Israeli military to immediately cease attacks on Gaza's fishers, and to allow them to freely fish off the coast of Gaza without risk of harm.
- Calls for immediate measures to allow and facilitate the import of tools and equipment necessary for the rehabilitation of fishing infrastructure, including boats and spare parts.
- Calls for the unimpeded entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza to alleviate the humanitarian crisis that Gaza's population is facing and uphold their fundamental right to food.



ENDNOTES

ⁱ The briefing note is based on emblematic cases supported by fieldwork, victim and witness statements, satellite imagery, and open-source investigations, applying OHCHR's global monitoring methodology. Additionally, it incorporates statistics on attacks on fishers and the fishing industry, as well as their impact, as provided by relevant entities, including UN organizations. Data collected covers the period from 7 October 2023 to 31 December 2024.

ⁱⁱ Israeli attacks on Palestinian fishers and fishing boats along the coast of Gaza, including injuries, detentions, and confiscations, were reported before 7 October 2023, with OHCHR indicating that the use of force and detentions appeared arbitrary. See: [A/HRC/52/75](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ According to [UNOSAT](#), between 7 October 2023 and 26 September 2024, 102.9 km² out of 150.5 km² (68.37% of Gaza's agricultural land), were damaged due to Israeli military activities, including razing, heavy vehicle activity, bombing, and shelling. This has included orchards, field crops, and vegetables, with a wide damage to agricultural infrastructure. Based on UNOSAT satellite imagery analysis between 7 October 2023 and 1 September 2024, [FAQ](#) announced the destruction of 606 home barns, 538 broiler farms, 427 sheep farms, 292 agricultural warehouses, 214 ponds, 213 animal shelters, 160 farm storages, 80 other bird farms, 59 dairy farms, 28 agricultural suppliers, 28 rabbit farms, 15 turkey farms, and 11 cattle farms. Additionally, according to the [Gaza Coastal Municipalities Water Utility](#), as of October 2024, 80% of Gaza's water wells are not functional, which reduced the daily domestic water production in Gaza to only 20% of its capacity before 7 October 2023.

^{iv} For example, see: [Famine Imminent in Gaza, Humanitarian Officials Tell Security Council, Calling for Immediate Ceasefire | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases](#), [Gaza: the Israeli Authorities continue to deny humanitarian missions | UNRWA](#), and [UNRWA Situation Report #145 on the Humanitarian Crisis in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem | UNRWA](#).

^v Baseline data of FAO verified with MOA

^{vi} [Customary IHL - Rule 15. Principle of Precautions in Attack](#)

^{vii} OHCHR monitoring indicates Israeli military attacked and destroyed motorized boats at landing sites in Gaza City and Rafah during the initial months of the escalation. Due to the destruction of motor boats, the high cost of their replacement, and to the perceived risk by fisher of their use, fishers have primarily used non-motorized paddling boats.

^{viii} According to [Forensic Architecture](#), a research agency based at the University of London, they conducted satellite imagery analysis on Gaza Seaport, stating that IAF struck the port on 11, 15 and 28 October 2023, causing a wide damage, and making access to parts of the port including vessels and boats docked area impossible, while Israeli military encampments and earth berms were established around the port by 14 November 2023. They also provided that, by 21 November 2024, none of the fishing vessels in the port were operational, as they were either destroyed, disappeared, or completely or partially sunk.

^{ix} According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis from October 2024, Between September and October 2024, the entire Gaza Strip was classified in IPC Phase 4 (Emergency). About 1.84 million people across the Gaza Strip were experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity classified in IPC Phase 3 (Crisis) or above, including nearly 133,000 people facing catastrophic food insecurity (IPC Phase 5) and 664,000, in IPC Phase 4 (Emergency). Acute Malnutrition was at serious levels (IPC AMN Phase 3), ten times higher than before the escalation of the hostilities.

^x See: [GAZA STRIP: Risk of Famine persists amidst recent surge in hostilities | IPC - Integrated Food Security Phase Classification](#)

^{xi} See: [The Gaza Strip is still confronted with a critical risk of Famine amid ongoing conflict, aid blockade | IPC - Integrated Food Security Phase Classification](#)

^{xii} See for example A/78/502 para 19.

^{xiii} A/76/333 para 16, A/78/502 para 24.

^{xiv} ICC Statute, Article 8(2)(a)(i) or 8(2)(b)(i) or 8(2)(c)(i) or 8(2)(d)(i), ICRC Rule 156.

^{xv} The Israeli military stated that Palestinian armed groups used Gaza's port and landing sites to carry out attacks against Israel, mentioning incidents on 8 October and 11 October 2023. On 8 October, the Israeli military stated that it had struck five "Hamas" vessels attempting to infiltrate Israeli waters, in addition to striking vessels of the "Islamic Jihad" which were docked in Gaza, claiming that they were "designated" for attacks against Israel. On 11 October, the Israeli military stated that it had struck "Hamas naval targets," including "Khan Yunis and Gaza docks," adding that they were "used by the Hamas terrorist organization to carry out terror attacks on the Israeli coastline." However, the Israeli allegations of Palestinian armed groups using Gaza's port and landing sites for conducting attacks against Israel were not supported with material evidence. See: <https://t.me/idfofficial/3690> and <https://t.me/idfofficial/3941>. There is also no evidence that after 7 and 8 October 2023, any attacks were conducted by Palestinian armed groups from boats launched from Gaza's port or landing sites.

^{xvi} Article 54(1) of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions and article 14 of Additional Protocol II, (reflective of customary international law). and ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law Database, rule 53. See also A/HRC/58/28 para 26

^{xvii} Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, art. 54(1).

^{xviii} ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law Database, rule 156 and Rome Statute, art. 8 (2) (b) (xxv).

^{xix} See for example GCIV articles 55 and 56.

^{xx} See ICJ, Legal Consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024 para 97-101, Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo v. Uganda), Judgment, I.C.J. Reports 2005, p. 243, para. 216; Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Advisory Opinion, I.C.J. Reports 2004 (I), pp. 178-181, paras. 107-113

^{xxi} See for example, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 12, paragraph 15.

^{xxii} See for example <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/opt/20241106-Gaza-Update-Report-OPT.pdf> para paras 10 and 34.